








	CONSERVATION	1
	FARMING	2
	WOODLANDS	3
	FISHFARMING & FISHERIES	4
	MARINE	5
	POLITICS & PARLIAMENT	6
	GENERAL ENVIRONMENT	6
	ENERGY	7
	TOURISM & RECREATION	8
	NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS	8

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CONSERVATION

UPLANDS

The Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) and Mountaineering Scotland (MS) have written a joint letter to Environment Minister Roseanna Cunningham MSP, concerned at the potential impacts fragmented policy may have on Scotland's internationally rare open landscapes. The letter said: "While Scotland's open landscapes and upland moors are classed as rare in global terms, there is currently no policy position safeguarding them. Some areas are designated as of special ecological or scenic interest but most are unprotected and disregarded ... [there is] a failure to join up what is required from the land to meet forestry targets and what we might want to keep in terms of internationally rare and valuable landscapes and ecosystems."

The organisations said that successive Scottish administrations have published detailed forestry strategies and targets, with 10,000 hectares of new planting planned each year until 2022. Neither organisation oppose well sited, planned tree planting but both question whether enough weight is being given to the significant changes this will have on the landscape and access. In particular, open views and vistas, regarded as iconic of Scotland, may disappear. Both bodies welcome Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)'s scoping work on a strategic vision for the uplands; without such a vision, key areas may be given up to agriculture, energy and afforestation, with insufficient attention paid to what is being lost.

Mike Watson, of MS, said: "The SGA and ourselves have different views on a number of issues, but we have a common interest in the development of a Land Use policy that will protect the landscapes that we both value. MS will continue working to ensure access to mountain areas for our members, and it is imperative that the landscape of these areas is protected from inappropriate development. We hope that a joint approach to the Scottish Government from our two organisations will demonstrate the wide ranging concern over this issue, and the need for development of a coherent policy that takes into account the views of all interested parties."

Alex Hogg, of SGA, said: "Recent dialogue between both organisations established a great deal of common ground when it came to the pride our respective memberships have in the land, but also their worries about upland landscapes and how different they may look, in the not too distant future, if we don't have a landscape policy which gives them the emphasis required. We have lost so much open moorland since the 1940s and a narrow view, now, may fail what we have left."

The *BBC News* website reported that Neil Reid, of MS, told BBC Scotland: "It is a serious issue for both of us and that's why we have come together in this way. There are many things we do disagree about, and will continue to disagree about, but the key thing is that we both need a coherent policy and an overall vision for the landscape of Scotland. [Tourists] talk about this landscape, they don't talk about going for miles long wanders through woods. You can see the hills around you, you see the shape of the landscape and it's also relatively benign for walking across."

Dr James Fenton, author of *A Future for Moorland in Scotland*, a report commissioned by the SGA

[Dec 15], said: "[Moorland] is disparaged rather than being recognised as important ... We lose it by attrition; one bit is lost to trees here or a dam there or a windfarm there and we are just losing our wild, wide open spaces which characterise Scotland, and that concerns me."

A Scottish Government spokesman said: "The increased woodland creation targets announced by the Scottish government as part of its Climate Change Plan will be taken forward in a sustainable way, including working closely with a range of stakeholders. This will include appropriate consideration of Scotland's distinctive upland landscapes."

Writing in the *Thunderer* comment column in *The Times*, Carol Evans of Woodland Trust Scotland said: "Woodland Trust is in agreement with these organisations that it is essential we get the right trees in the right places. However, some of their assumptions are more problematic. The fears MS and SGA are expressing seem rooted in an outdated image of forestry in this country operates. They raise the spectre of mass monoculture Sitka spruce, a model left behind last century. Modern design is much more sympathetic to species diversity... there should be a proper balance between moorland and woodland but at present much moorland is being artificially maintained at the expense of native woods. The tree-line, where woodland gives way to shrub and then moor, should be determined by altitude. Too often burning and overgrazing drive the line well down ... Yes, it is sensible to lay down a marker that these [tree planting] targets must be pursued strategically. Nobody wants to see important habitats replaced. We can have woods and moors, but we are in far more need of more trees than we are of more woodland."

The *BBC News* website said that 'considerable controversy' has arisen since the joint letter was sent, with MS being criticised for a perceived hostility to tree planting and for allying with the SGA.

Following the initial news release, MS said that it would like to clarify several points:

- Our priority is to seek urgent government action on developing a Scottish upland landscape vision and policy, a process through which stakeholders can come together to influence priorities for Scotland's uplands. We see the risk of not doing this being fragmented decision-making at a local and national level which fails to protect and respect Scotland's mountain landscapes and wildlife. If an example of an uncoordinated approach to planning is needed, look no further than the proliferation of windfarms in mountain and wild land areas, where Scottish Government policy on spatial planning has been sadly lacking.

- In calling for an upland landscape vision and policy, we have highlighted one aspect of land use that we feel needs consideration at a strategic or policy level – the growth of commercial forestry. This does not mean we are against new planting, and we are in favour of native species. This reflects the views of our members as 94% who responded to a survey said we should campaign for the growth of native woodland and conservation of Scotland's iconic Caledonian pine forests. However, 65% of Mountaineering Scotland members who responded felt there

was a need to reduce the impact of commercial forestry. With government targets for 10,000 new hectares of planting each year by 2022, we think this needs detailed consideration of the impact it may have on landscape and access by relevant stakeholders.

• Comment has been made on our cooperation with the SGA. We adopted this approach because both organisations felt that collaboration on a single issue by organisations who are usually perceived as having opposing views would emphasise to the Scottish Government that there is significant support for the development of a holistic landscape policy. We disagree with the SGA on a number of issues, but both our organisations are completely in agreement that a Scottish upland landscape vision and policy is needed. We will continue to reflect the opinions of our members in future exchanges with them and believe that our present dialogue will enable us to promote our members views on a more direct basis.

• This summer we will be launching a consultation with our members and a spectrum of interested organisations, on the development of a new conservation policy which will set out MS's priorities on a range of landscape and conservation themes, and our strategy for campaigning and achieving progress on these matters.

David Gibson, of MS, said: "MS welcomes the passion shown by our members and others but regrets that our position has been substantially misunderstood and has caused concern to members. MS believes that planting native tree species enhances the landscape – as evidenced through our responses to forestry consultations where we have pressed for replanting using native species. The feedback has strengthened our resolve to take a stronger stance on conservation issues, including hill tracks and land management practices. This will complement our existing policy document *Respecting Scotland's Mountains* by bringing forward to the spring planned consultation with our members.

"Our overriding vision is that Scotland's mountains and wild lands should be treated as an irreplaceable natural, cultural and economic asset – respected and safeguarded for the benefit of all. Our collaboration with the SGA was on a single issue and does not indicate agreement with them on any other policy or issue. In addition, we will seek to influence them as we would with any organisation whose views we disagree. We also have a number of long-standing relationships with environmental and conservation organisations with which we share a common purpose.

"Our key desire from this letter is and was always limited to seeking a meeting with the minister to get agreement to formulate an overarching upland landscape policy. There has been significant media coverage of this issue and we hope the minister will respond by inviting us to a meeting."

The *BBC News* website reported that outdoor writer Chris Townsend said: "Having read the clarification, I have to say as a member and an ex-president of MS I think it's pathetic, disappointing and naive."

Cameron McNeish, the outdoors writer and presenter, wrote on Twitter: "Disagree with #Mountaineering Scotland over [the] issue of woodlands. Shocked they have got into bed with moorland owners. My own preference would be for reducing deer and sheep numbers to allow natural regeneration, not planting. Growth can be incredibly fast."

A spokesman for Reforesting Scotland said: "Scotland's upland landscape is largely a man-

made construct caused by deforestation and maintained that way through excessive grazing and burning for the benefit of a few. There is a need to protect areas of valuable moorland but not at the level it exists at present. The balance is wrong and we need to bring all interested parties together to decide where that new balance should lie."

Professor Dominick Spracklen, of the University of Leeds, said: "The distinction between plantation forestry and native woodlands is absolutely critical to this discussion – open, patchy native woodlands do not have the impact on 'grand vistas' that dense plantation forestry does ... [Glen Affric, Glen Strathfarrar, Glen Feshie and Beinn Eighe] are iconic landscapes – a mix of native trees, moorland and mountain – that are much more interesting than they would be if they had no trees. The clarification from the Mountaineering Council (sic) recognises this."

CANNA GULLS

Gull numbers and breeding success on the island of Canna are influenced by the amount of fish discarded in the area. Data on gull breeding numbers, breeding success and diet was studied at Canna from 1969 to 2014, and data on fish landings at Mallaig for 1985 to 2014. Correlations were studied between herring gull *Larus argentatus* numbers and the demersal fish catch (the latter as a proxy for discard volumes). Gulls fed extensively on discards. Gull breeding numbers declined at Canna, especially between 2000 and 2006, the decline being more pronounced than seen in national totals and it was shown that gull breeding numbers correlated with demersal landings.

See: Foster S, Swann RL & Furness RW. Can changes in fishery landings explain long-term population trends in gulls? *Bird Study Vol 64. 2017 Issue 1, pp 90-97*

RIVER SPEY

A 500m side channel of the River Spey is being reconnected to the river to restore vital habitat for globally-rare freshwater pearl mussels and salmon. The channel was blocked off around 50 years ago to reduce the risk of flood and erosion damage to nearby properties. Flow only enters the channel during spate conditions when the main stem of the Spey overtops the bank. Blocking water of the flow also led to a loss of habitat for freshwater pearl mussels and fish.

The work is being done as part of the Pearls in Peril LIFE+ project, led by SNH, working in partnership with the Spey Fishery Board and the Spey Foundation. This is the final piece of river restoration work by the Pearls in Peril project after more than four years of improving freshwater biodiversity throughout the north of Scotland.

DUNDREGGAN

The 2016 survey season at Trees for Life's Dundreggan Conservation Estate near Invermoriston, Inverness-shire recorded a non-biting midge, *Chironomus vallenduuki*, never before recorded in the UK. A gnat, *Sciophila varia*, was found which is known from four other UK sites only. A second gnat, *Mycomya nigricornis*, is only known in the UK from a handful of Scottish sites and had not been seen since 1990. 11 UK biodiversity firsts have been found at the estate in total. Two parasitic wasps, *Homotropus pallipes* and *Diphys salicatorius*, for which there are very few Scottish records and a pseudoscorpion, *Lamprochernes nodosus*, were also found, the latter being first sighting north of the River Tay. A micro-moth, *Adela croesella*, only documented at three other locations in Scotland, and never before this far north – was recorded on the estate. More than 3,300 species have now been recorded

at the forest restoration site. At least 68 of these are priority species for conservation.

RED SQUIRRELS

The Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels (SSRS) community action project has been awarded £2.46m from the Heritage Lottery Fund to help train volunteers to ensure the long-term survival of Scottish red squirrel populations. Sites in and around Aberdeen, in the central lowlands and in southern Scotland will be targeted over the next five years.

Dr Mel Tonkin, of SSRS, said: "Our work since 2009 shows that through targeted control of grey squirrels it is possible to reverse the decline of our native reds and help them to return to former territories. Thanks to National Lottery players we will be able to empower communities to help protect not just their local red squirrels, but major populations of the species in Scotland, and ensure that future generations can continue to see these special animals."

The work in the three key areas includes continuing efforts in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire towards making the area a grey-squirrel free zone by developing a rapid response system to 'detect and remove' any remaining greys. In the central lowlands, the northern spread of greys beyond the Highland Line, will be stopped and eight key conservation areas in southern Scotland will be the focus to help stop greys ousting reds.

MOUNTAIN HARES

The *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald* reported that gamekeepers on the Glenloch, Glenlivet and Dorback estates are working with the James Hutton Institute to assess the most reliable way of monitoring numbers of mountain hares so that they can be managed sustainably. SNH and the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust are also involved in the three year scheme. The estates have agreed to halt culling around the study area to allow surveyors to count the same ground in daytime and by night.



FARMING

GREENING

The Scottish Government has announced plans to introduce changes to 'greening' rules, which improve the impact farming has on the environment [Oct 16]. The planned changes for 2018 include:

- Hedges will be able to count as a separate type of Ecological Focus Area (EFA)
- Agro-forestry supported under the Forestry Grant Scheme and located on temporary grassland will be able to count as EFA
- The government will attempt to shorten period during which maintenance of field drains is prohibited on EFA fallow

The Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, said: "Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) greening provides an important opportunity to reward and incentivise sustainable farming practices but the arrangements must be practical for farmers. The changes we are announcing will help provide increased flexibility for farmers, while maintaining their contribution to the Scottish Government's climate change, biodiversity and water quality commitments."

John Kinnaird, the Scottish Government's agricultural sustainability champion, said: "This is a start, albeit a small one within the constraints of current regulations, with hopefully more to come. They show the Scottish Government has been listening. But it is also important to acknowledge that many farmers and crofters are very often undertaking environmental measures that go beyond greening. We need to get to a position that allows

the good work undertaken all over Scotland to be acknowledged and supported appropriately.”

Under CAP rules, farmers are required to meet greening requirements in return for the greening element of their Pillar 1 payment. The total greening payment is 30% of the Pillar 1 budget, around €158 million in Scotland.

Detailed implementation rules for each of the planned changes to greening rules will follow ‘shortly.’ An analysis of the impacts of the changes to greening rules requested by farmers will also be published.

The European Commission is undertaking a Simplification Review of greening. The proposals under consideration include a ban on the use of plant protection products on productive EFA areas, including fallow, nitrogen-fixing crops, catch crops and green cover. Further changes to Scottish greening rules will be considered once this review has concluded in April 2017.

• First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has appointed Professor Russel Griggs to chair a group to review of the ‘greening’ farm subsidy system.

AGRICULTURE & BREXIT

Scottish agriculture is more heavily reliant than the rest of the UK on EU funding. Between 2014-20, Scotland expects to receive €4.6 billion from the EU – some £500m *per annum*.

Rural Secretary, Fergus Ewing, said: “Agreement on the Scottish budget means I can confirm that rural Scotland will receive over £640m of support in the coming year. Much of that goes directly to farm businesses and crofters, but significant sums will also continue to be invested in grants for environmental measures, tree planting, food processing and maritime development. It helps to support jobs, businesses, infrastructure and livelihoods.

“Brexit puts this all at risk. While the UK government has offered some assurances on funding over the short-term, which we have committed to pass on in full, there are still more questions than answers in the longer-term. For example, there are still no guarantees for the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme from 2019. The continued uncertainty could have a devastating impact on our farming and food sectors. Any moves to ‘Barnetise’ CAP payments could see Scotland lose up to half of the current CAP allocation, which has been tailored to meet our specific needs. Agriculture is fully devolved; the Scottish Government must retain powers to manage rural policy and determine funding levels.”

AVIAN INFLUENZA

The Avian Influenza Prevention Zone for all poultry and captive birds will remain in force until the end of April [Jan 17]. While the current Prevention Zone remains in place until 28 February, the requirements of the zone will be amended after that point, meaning that keepers will have the option of letting their birds outside, provided that they put in place enhanced biosecurity to minimise the risk of infection from wild birds. Measures in the renewed zone will continue to apply across all of Scotland, with no targeting of specific areas.

Scotland’s Chief Veterinary Officer, Sheila Voas, said: “The risk level from Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza remains at ‘high’ for wild birds, and ‘low to medium’ for domestic birds. It is essential that keepers continue to ensure that their birds are protected from infection by practicing the highest levels of biosecurity. Keepers should start to think about steps they can take now to provide the best biosecurity that they can to protect birds let out on 28 February. This could include keeping your range clear of wild birds,

and where possible decontaminating the range. You should also discuss your arrangements with your private vet, who will be best placed to provide specific practical advice on reducing the risk of infection.”

HARE COURSING

The *BBC News* website reported that six arrests have been made this month in connection with the illegal practice of hare coursing. Coursing involves chasing hares with large dogs.

Ian Wilson, of NFU Scotland, said: “Not only are they disturbing hares but they could potentially be disturbing livestock too. Also there’s any damage that’s been done when they’re in the fields and the crops. Some of them they’ll take vehicles anywhere, not necessarily keeping them on the road.”

PC Daniel Sutherland said: “The hare, it suffers a torturous death. It’s chased around the field for several minutes, sometimes up to five minutes. It’s exhausted and at the end it’s torn apart by a chasing dog. It’s not nice. It’s a barbaric sport that’s been banned for good reason. Although farmers may suspect hare coursing is going on in their areas, it can be difficult to tackle those involved.”

AECS

The *Scottish Farming Leader* reported that the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) 2017 has been launched by the Scottish Government. Rural businesses can apply for funding aimed at promoting low-carbon farming and enhancing Scotland’s environment. The AECS funding promotes land management practices which protect, mitigate and adapt to climate change. The funding will help to protect vulnerable and iconic species and habitats; reduce greenhouse emissions from agricultural enterprises; secure carbon stores in peatlands and other organic soils; improve water quality by reducing diffuse pollution; control flooding through natural flood risk management; support organic farming; preserve the historic environment and improve public access.

Rates for retaining winter stubbles have been reduced from £299 *per* hectare to £96 *per* hectare. The rates for cutting rush pasture have been cut to £8.45 *per* hectare from £35 *per* hectare. NFU Scotland said that, if these measures are delivering significant environmental benefits, then there is a case for directing greater resources towards them rather than reducing them.

The scheme is jointly delivered by the Scottish Government’s Rural Payments & Inspections Division, and Scottish Natural Heritage.

See: <http://bit.ly/2kN6uRX>

ORGANIC FARMING

The Herald reported that the Soil Association’s 2017 Market Report said that there has been an 11.7% increase in organic food production in Scotland over the last year, outperforming the rest of the UK. The Scottish Government has invited applications for organic conversion funding, in parallel with Soil Association Scotland offering support to farmers considering conversion. In the past, the Scottish organic market has grown more slowly than the rest of the UK, but research by SAC suggests that Scottish consumers are increasingly conscious of organic principals. Nearly 60% of Soil Association certification licencees in Scotland expect their sales to stay steady in 2017.

OILSEED RAPE

The Scottish Government has published the results of a survey of Scottish winter oilseed rape cultivation in 2015/16. This survey was conducted

by staff at Science & Advice for Scottish Agriculture to inform the Scottish Government about the impact of the second year of EU restrictions on the use of neonicotinoid seed treatments on Scottish oilseed rape cultivation.

Data were collected from a sample of Scottish farmers collectively growing 18% of the 2016 winter oilseed rape crop. This report corroborates the findings of the previous survey that the neonicotinoid restrictions have introduced additional challenges for some Scottish growers. However, the evidence to date suggests that the impact of the restrictions is less severe in Scotland than in other regions of the UK. See: www.gov.scot/ISBN/9781786527981



WOODLANDS

PLANTING TARGETS

The Scottish Government has announced that tree planting targets are to be raised on a stepped basis from the current 10,000 hectares a year to 15,000 hectares a year by 2025. The delivery plan contains a package of measures to drive forward and speed up the tree planting process [Dec 16].

• Forestry Commission (FC) Scotland has approved 96 woodland proposals, covering 1,300 ha of new woodland creation and totalling £5.5m. This is the largest area of woodland creation to be approved in a single clearing round since the Forestry Grants Scheme opened in October 2015.

TIMBER TRANSPORT

The 2017 Strategic Timber Transport Fund, managed by FC Scotland, offers £7.85m of co-funding support to projects that strengthen public roads and reduce disruption by timber haulage on the rural road network. The Scottish Government has awarded £5m to the fund. The fund also supports projects that move timber by sea or rail, as well as those diverting timber lorries onto in-forest haul routes.

A Preparatory Project Grant is also being piloted to facilitate good project proposals for large scale, complex projects, including those seeking to enable modal shift of timber haulage onto rail or sea.

BROADLEAF TOOL

FC Scotland has funded a £30,000 upgrade to the Establishment & Management Information System (EMIS), an online tool that helps get the right tree in the right place. It now includes key productive broadleaved species as well as conifers. FC Scotland funding reflects that most hardwood is grown on private sector land, but Forest Enterprise Scotland is looking to play an increasing role in that market.

The tool was developed by Forest Research to help the Productive Broadleaves programme, which aims to increase the quality and quantity of productive broadleaved species being planted and managed on the national forest estate. The upgraded version of EMIS will help resolve many of the restrictions, concerns and fears identified by forest managers in growing productive broadleaved species.

Assessments of site quality and species selection will be available, together with planting advice, preparing restock sites, brash and stump management and other establishment operations. Where possible, it will also highlight site or species specific issues.

Contact: andrew.hunt@forestry.gsi.gov.uk



FISHFARMING & FISHERIES

FISHFARM POLLUTION

The *Sunday Herald* reported that Don Staniford, of the Global Alliance Against Industrial Aquaculture (GAAIA), obtained spreadsheets from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) under the Freedom of Information legislation. These showed the results of over 1,200 sampling operations at about 280 fish farms. Between 2006 and 2016 levels of anti-sea lice pesticides found in sediment 100 metres away from salmon cages exceeded environmental quality standards in 45 sea lochs and inshore waters. They included 15 in Highland region, 11 in Argyll & Bute, 11 voes and firths around the Shetland islands, seven in the Western isles and Lamlash Bay in North Ayrshire. The main pesticide detected was emamectin benzoate, a neurotoxin. According to SEPA, it is 'toxic to birds, mammals, fish and other aquatic organisms, particularly those living on the sea bed ... Exposure to emamectin benzoate may cause irritation of the respiratory tract, eyes and skin in humans. Animal studies suggest that exposure to emamectin benzoate may also cause tremors.' Teflubenzuron, another fishfarm pesticide that breached environmental quality standards in lochs, can harm shrimps, crabs and lobsters, and may affect the human liver.

Environmental safety limits have been breached more than a hundred times in the last ten years. The chemicals have been discharged by 70 fish farms run by seven companies.

Dr Richard Luxmoore, of The National Trust for Scotland, said: "The environmental standards have been put there for a good reason. It is highly worrying that they have been breached so many times. This is yet more evidence that the chemical warfare waged by fishfarms against sea-lice has essentially been lost and the application of toxins to kill them is spiralling out of control."

Dr Sam Collin, of the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), said: "It's worrying that there have been so many breaches of the standards for [emamectin] use. This particular chemical stays in the marine environment for a long time and is capable of causing harm to a wide variety of sea life, in particular invertebrates such as shellfish."

Don Staniford said: "SEPA is permitting salmon farmers across Scotland to pollute with impunity. Breaches of environmental standards for chemical pollution under salmon farms are now becoming standard practice as SEPA shamefully turns a blind eye. Toxic chemicals from salmon farms have flooded Scottish lochs for over three decades contaminating shellfish and the seabed. Scottish salmon farming is a toxic time-bomb."

Guy Linley-Adams, of Salmon & Trout Conservation (Scotland) (STCS), is referring the emamectin breaches to the European Commission in the belief that they contravene environmental law. He said: "It appears that SEPA has been looking the other way and allowing excessive treatment chemicals to be used, which will have damaged the ecology of the sea lochs. SEPA must use its statutory powers to order a reduction in the number of farmed fish allowed in the cages to a level at which the fish-farmers can control sea lice and, at the same time, stay within their pollution control licences."

Scott Landsburgh, of the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO), said: "Our members at all times endeavour to operate within the terms of their consents."

A SEPA spokesman said that contamination

found 100 metres from salmon cages was unlikely to spread a significant distance. Sampling was timed to give a 'worst case' in terms of the levels of pesticide in the sediment. He said: "SEPA's enforcement philosophy is to use the minimum amount of formal regulation necessary to secure compliance. An exceedance of an environmental quality standard is not in itself indicative of non-compliant or illegal activity on the part of the operator and thus a breach would not necessarily precipitate significant enforcement action."

He said that there were currently two instances in which fishfarm licences had been changed because of pesticide pollution.

MEGA FISHFARM

The *Sunday Herald* reported that a Freedom of Information request, made by Don Staniford of GAAIA, showed that, in 2015 and 2016, SEPA considered proposals for a 6,000-8,000 tonne caged fishfarm. This would be the world's biggest salmon farm; Orkney and Shetland were suggested as locations but following discussions with SEPA and Marine Scotland no application was made. SEPA's limit on fishfarms is currently 2,500 tonnes. One SEPA report estimated that the amount of waste from the 'innovation' fishfarm, containing two million fish, would be equivalent to the sewage from between 400,000 and 800,000 people.

An internal SEPA briefing in May 2016 stated: "The best available predictive models suggest it will be utterly unsustainable."

Douglas Sinclair, of SEPA, said: "SEPA has been supportive of such a proposal in the past. [It may be possible] to set aside the concerns and authorise a site that does not comply with existing policy requirements. This might especially be the case where the proposal was in some sense experimental." He said that, if it were to be approved and was found to fail pollution standards, then 'SEPA's credibility would suffer.' In a memo to Marine Scotland in November 2015, Mr Sinclair said: "A site of the scale of that discussed or even some substantial fraction of that tonnage would likely abjectly fail to meet seabed quality standards. Establishing a site on a deploy and monitor basis with a biomass of 6,000 tonnes when sites around 1,000 tonnes are often seen to fail would make fools of us all but in particular SEPA."

Don Staniford said: "If SEPA sanctions such stupidity in Scotland's already overcrowded coastal waters they would lose all credibility. Faced with increasing problems of sea-lice infestation, chemical pollution and infectious diseases, common sense would dictate that salmon farming production decreases not increases. Sadly, common sense is not a currency SEPA or the Scottish Government is used to dealing with when it comes to their unflinching support for salmon farming."

Dr Sam Collin, of SWT, said: "It is hard to imagine anywhere on our coast where an 8,000 tonne installation could be placed without having an acute impact on the local environment."

Guy Linley-Adams, of STCS, said: "Our primary concern would be the risk that such huge farms produce billions of parasitic sea-lice, which then infect and seriously compromise the survival chances of wild salmon and sea trout."

Scott Landsburgh, of SSPO, said: "If broad ranging discussions to look at new ideas and innovations are constantly viewed with suspicion then it will be extremely difficult for Scottish salmon to develop any further."

Jim Gallagher, of Scottish Sea Farms, said that it had proposed a site location that 'could be used to demonstrate an alternative approach to how

fishfarms are regulated and operated today.' The idea was to invest in new technology to allow the industry to become more competitive and improve sustainability. He said: "The prize for Scotland was increased jobs, further investment with suppliers in Scotland and the development of modelling to inform improved environmental performance and regulation."

Steve Bracken, of Marine Harvest, confirmed that it had been in discussions with SEPA to lift the 2,500 tonne limit on fishfarms. He said: "We outlined our aim to develop a number of larger farms in more exposed locations where there is a strong water flow. Ultimately decisions on the size of salmon farms will rest with SEPA."

Anne Anderson, of SEPA, stressed that, so far, SEPA's assessment was that the environment could not be adequately protected from mega-farm pollution. "SEPA has therefore been unable to approve such proposals to date. There has been some discussion about the development of truly innovative techniques to substantially reduce the environmental impact of cage fishfarms ... If a future proposal included such breakthrough techniques, SEPA would always be willing to assess it."

A SEPA statement said: "SEPA has been asked to take part in discussions around the possibility of establishing a large fishfarm (described as an Innovation, Concept or Demonstration site) in Scottish coastal waters on a number of occasions in recent years. SEPA has a scientifically robust and well-tested method for assessing the capacity of the environment to cope with the polluting impacts of cage fishfarms and so far, our assessments of these proposals have not assured us that the environment, or the interests of neighbouring marine-based businesses could be adequately protected. As long as the rearing of farmed fish in cages relies wholly on the marine environment's capacity to break-down its wastes, the scale of sea farm units will always be limited by this. SEPA has therefore been unable to approve such proposals to date. There has been some discussion about the development of truly innovative techniques to substantially reduce the environmental impact of cage fishfarms. One example is new techniques that intercept the waste and allow it to be treated and possibly usefully recycled which would help to reduce the impact on marine ecosystems. If a future proposal included such breakthrough techniques, SEPA would always be willing to assess it. In any industry, we are always encouraging of the development of innovation that can reduce environmental impact. However, we are clear that, until and unless such larger cage fishfarm proposals can demonstrate compliance with environmental standards, we will continue to reject them. SEPA will continue to regulate this important Scottish industry to ensure it uses sustainable practices to protect Scotland's marine environment and the long-term viability of the industry."

SEA-LICE

The *BBC News* website reported that the Scottish salmon farming industry is facing major problems from sea-lice, which have led to a cut in output, fast rising costs and a rise in prices. The problem is not new, but it has burgeoned during this decade. Chemicals have been extensively used, but lice are becoming increasingly resistant. Bathing the salmon in warm water, thermolicer, is an expensive treatment, but it led to the accidental slaughter of 95,000 fish in one incident last year [Nov 16].

The industry has admitted it has a serious problem, and is spending at least £30m a year on measures to respond to it.

Marine Harvest, the largest producer of Scottish salmon, says it is losing around 1,500 tonnes of fish *per* year, out of nearly 40,000 tonnes produced.

Marine Harvest's figures show that Scotland has by far the highest incidence of sea-lice. 49% of sites were affected in 2015, an increase from 28% in 2014. In contrast, Norwegian levels were 5% and in Irish fishfarms it was 18%.

The amount of bleach (hydrogen peroxide), to combat sea-lice, rose 15 times between 2011 and 2015, reaching 42 litres of bleach per tonne of fish produced.

Marine Harvest said that the problem was affected by rising water temperatures, rough weather, too few fish available that eat sea-lice, and limited access to warm or fresh water treatments.

Use of antibiotics, to combat other fish diseases, rose in Scotland to 24 grammes *per* tonne of fish produced in 2014.

The Scottish Salmon Company reported exceptional mortality of fish in the July to September quarter for 2016, with 1,300 tonnes destroyed. It said production costs *per* kilo of fish produced rose by nearly 30% in a year.

Steve Bracken, of Marine Harvest, said that there is a need to develop more effective ways to combat lice. "We've had a mortality problem here in 2016 which, for us, is not acceptable. We reckon lice and associated poor growth could be in the region of 1,500 tonnes of fish that we've lost because of sea-lice." He disputed reports that the fish lost following thermolicer treatment had been accidentally cooked, saying the water temperature was 34°C. Salmon usually swim in temperatures of between 4 and 15°C, and the thermolicer device is designed to pump them through the warm water for only around 20 seconds.

Scott Landsburgh, of SSPO, said: "Sea-lice is a natural phenomenon, albeit that it's made more odd because it's in a farming environment. All livestock on farms, terrestrial or marine, are encountering some kind of parasite or a tick, and they're dealt with. And that's part of livestock farming. If you go to any of our fishfarms or processing units in Scotland, you'll see fantastic fish – really high-quality shiny, fantastically healthy-looking fish. We make fantastic quality, the best farmed salmon in the world, and we should be proud of it."

ARGYLL FISHFARM

Kames Fish Farming Ltd is planning a rainbow trout fishfarm at Dounie, on the Sound of Jura, just south of Crinan [Jan 17]. Mike Russell MSP has written to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy & Connectivity, Fergus Ewing, saying: "I have never experienced the weight of objections to a fishfarm proposal that I have seen in this proposal." He said that it would require 'very special and very careful consideration.'

The proposed fishfarm would be in a Marine Protected Area (MPA) specifically designated to conserve common skate in local waters. Sea-lice, chemicals and escaping fish are seen as threats to the species as well as to wild salmon and trout from a local river. There is also the issue of increasing visual impact, with a number of fishfarms already in the wider area which is within Knapdale National Scenic Area.

The *Herald* reported that Stuart Cannon, of Kames Fish Farming Ltd, said that the Scottish Association of Marine Science was being employed to assess the environmental risks. He said: "We have been in production for 45 years, and are not going to suddenly pollute the whole of the Sound of Jura ... Sea-lice are not nearly the same problem for rainbow trout as salmon. We have a small Scottish family business which we would like to expand."

A letter in the *Argyllshire Advertiser*, however, said that the application to SEPA was for salmon

OR rainbow trout. Research has shown that rainbow trout are only slightly less susceptible to sea-lice infestation than salmon; a rainbow trout farm in Loch Etive is already having problems with sea-lice.

WILD FISHERIES

Following a consultation on draft provisions for a Wild Fisheries (Scotland) Bill and draft Wild Fisheries Strategy, the Scottish Government has ruled out proposals to introduce rod licences and a new wild fisheries levy. It has also decided not to criminalise freshwater fishing without written permission or to overhaul the structure and remit of District Salmon Fishery Boards. The government will develop a fishery management plan to trial any changes with boards and will also explore potential freshwater conservation provisions ahead of the introduction of a bill to parliament.

The analysis of the consultation can be seen on: <http://bit.ly/2kxC1dR>

SHELLFISH TOXINS

Argyll & Bute Council's Environmental Health team, working with Food Standards Scotland, has issued a warning on raised levels of shellfish toxins in Loch Striven. These are naturally occurring toxins which can accumulate in molluscs such as mussels, oysters, cockles and razor clams. When the toxins breach statutory limits, harvesting of affected species is not allowed.

FISHERIES FUNDING

EU and Scottish Government funding is to be allocated to sea fisheries, aquaculture and processing businesses. The latest round of the European & Maritime Fisheries Fund will deliver 41 projects which will contribute to the sustainable management of fisheries and marine ecosystems and help businesses upgrade or modernise their equipment, and move into new markets.

The Scottish Fishermen's Federation will receive £1.8m for its independent on-board observer scheme, which supports initiatives to address potential problems related to discard bans.

Of the £8m total funding, £6m will come from the EU, £1.5m from the Scottish Government and £0.5m from other public sources.

See: <http://bit.ly/2kYUCfX>



MARINE

MARINE LITTER

The *Sunday Post* reported that The Fishing For Litter scheme has recently reached the milestone of pulling 1,000 tonnes of refuse from the sea. Fishing boats once dumped rubbish hauled up in their nets back overboard. Now the refuse is bagged and taken to port to be disposed of.

It has been estimated that marine litter costs the Scottish fishing industry around £10m a year. Anything caught in a trawl net closes up the meshes. Silt starts to build up rapidly and the geometry and weight of the net is changed. Eventually it stops the fishing.

The Fishing For Litter project was introduced to Scottish waters by KIMO UK, an organisation linking local authorities around the coast of the North Sea, in 2005. The scheme has funding until 2020; over 200 boats take part.

It is argued that the fish caught are of higher quality as disturbed hauls, with silt and mud, affect the quality of the fish

Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change & Land Reform, Roseanna Cunningham, said: "Marine litter is shown to harm wildlife and the natural environment while impacting on our

marine industries through damage to subsea and coastal infrastructure, vessels and fishing gear."

CROMARTY FIRTH

More than 81,500 people have signed a petition calling on Chris Grayling, UK Secretary of State for Transport, to block the Cromarty Firth Port Authority's plan to transfer up to nine million tonnes of crude oil per year between tankers lying at anchor in open water [Jan 17].

The Maritime & Coastguard Agency, which comes under the Department for Transport, will have to decide whether to support an application for the oil transfers from the port authority.

Another petition has also been lodged in the Scottish Parliament calling on MSPs to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that environmental legislation in Scotland is sufficient to prevent ship-to-ship transfers of crude oil in environmentally sensitive locations.

WILD SEAWEED HARVEST

Marine Scotland has carried out a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of wild seaweed harvesting to investigate the sustainability and potential environmental and cumulative impacts of large scale mechanical extraction of wild seaweed, in particular kelp forests. The key to the success of seaweed harvesting at this scale (and therefore of the industry) is sustainability of the resource.

Seaweed is a significant resource for Scotland, very important environmentally and historically but harvested at a small scale at present. There is considerable potential for growth and development of its exploitation and use. The UK currently has no large-scale harvesting of seaweed, but in Scotland there are businesses harvesting seaweed at a small scale. The seaweed harvesting sector has recently indicated aspirations to develop large-scale wild seaweed harvesting around the coasts of Scotland.

BLUE CARBON

Commissioned Report 957: Assessment of blue carbon resources in Scotland's inshore Marine Protected Area Network has been published by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The report estimated that amount of carbon stored within Scotland's inshore MPA network is equivalent to four years of Scotland's total greenhouse gas emissions. The world's oceans and coastal ecosystems play a vital role in trapping and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere that would otherwise contribute to climate change. 'Blue carbon' is captured and stored across a range of marine habitats and seabed types. The majority is stored in seabed sediment, accumulated over many years. When damaged or destroyed, the greenhouse gas is released back into the atmosphere.

It is estimated that about 90% of the blue carbon within Scotland's MPA network, primarily designated for biodiversity, is stored in seabed sediments and relatively stable. The living habitats, however, such as maerl and flame shell beds, are more sensitive to physical disturbance and many of these are protected features in the MPA network.

The report estimates the stores of blue carbon in each of Scotland's inshore Nature Conservation MPAs, which cover around 20% of Scottish seas, and Special Areas of Conservation. See: <http://bit.ly/2l8wdE6>

DOLPHINS

Record numbers of three dolphin species off Scotland's west coast were recorded by Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust (HWDT) in 2016. 2,303 individual common dolphins, 42 bottlenose dolphins and 94 Risso's dolphins were monitored. Figures for all three species are the highest ever recorded in 14 annual survey seasons from the research yacht *Silurian*. Average annual figures documented over the previous 14 years were 463

individual common dolphins, 14 bottlenose dolphins and 12 Risso's dolphins. For common dolphins, these records range from 0 individuals encountered during two field seasons to 1,862 during the 2007 season.

The reasons for the high number of sightings of these dolphin species remain unclear. HWDT now holds data from more than 95,000 km of survey effort. See: www.hwdt.org

PILOT WHALE DEATHS

The *BBC News* website reported that the Scottish Marine Animal Strandings Scheme studied the inner ears of dead whales to learn how underwater man-made noises affect marine mammals. Samples taken from long finned pilot whales that died in mass strandings in Fife in 2012 and on Skye in 2015 were examined.

The team said there was an urgent need to develop methods for assessing the impact of high-intensity sonar and other sounds on whales and dolphins. Scanning electron microscopy had proved to be a useful method for detecting such damage.

See: www.nature.com/articles/srep41848

SEA OF HEBRIDES MPA

The University of Exeter and SNH satellite-tracked 36 basking sharks from 2012 to 2014 and found that 86% showed 'some degree of residency' in the proposed Sea of the Hebrides MPA. Sharks also returned year after year; the area is thought to provide conditions for key activities such as foraging and possibly breeding.

Scottish Government ministers are currently considering proposals for an MPA in the Sea of the Hebrides, from Skye to Mull, to protect the basking sharks and minke whales. An MPA would give additional protection to habitats that are key for basking sharks and ensure their activities within these areas are not disrupted.

Dr Matthew Witt, of the University of Exeter, said: "These sharks migrate over large distances, so using MPAs to protect them throughout their range is problematic; however, we can protect them in locations where they spend extended periods of time."

See: <http://bit.ly/2IMKdoV>



POLITICS & PARLIAMENT

BREXIT & AGRICULTURE

The *BBC News* website reported that Scotland's Place in Europe paper of proposals for the Brexit process includes calls for new devolved powers over areas including agriculture and fishing [Dec 16]. The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, told NFU Scotland that it is vital for farming powers to be transferred from the European Union direct to Holyrood, bypassing Westminster. She said that agriculture was more important to the Scottish economy than that of the UK and that future decisions must reflect 'Scotland's distinct priorities' and that Brexit 'presents the biggest challenge to farming in Scotland in our generation.' She said: "It is the best way of ensuring that future decisions on farming reflect Scotland's distinct priorities."

The UK government's white paper on Brexit has suggested there could be fresh devolution of repatriated powers, highlighting agriculture as a potential example.

Ruth Davidson MSP said: "I think it would be foolhardy for us to place barriers within our own UK domestic market. I don't see the up side in leaving one complex regulatory regime in Brussels, only to burden farmers with two

regulatory regimes within the UK. At the same time, I think it is vital that the distinctive needs of Scottish farmers are heard and that the welcome moves towards regionalisation within the EU over recent years are not stymied. There will, I am sure, be an almighty political row over the coming months about whether Holyrood or Westminster should be running agriculture. I don't see it as a binary choice. Increasingly, we are moving towards a system of shared power in the UK – as we will soon see with welfare provision in Scotland."

BREXIT & FISHERIES

The *West Highland Free Press* reported that Alasdair Allan MSP raised concerns about the future of the Scottish fishing industry, following the publication of the UK government's White Paper on Brexit. The 77 page document contains only one paragraph on fishing, which speaks of the 'heavy reliance on UK waters of the EU fishing industry' and the need to 'reach a mutually beneficial deal.'

Dr Allan said: "... the UK government's own White Paper on Brexit has given the clearest sign yet that the Prime Minister is preparing to use Scottish fishing stocks as an expendable bargaining chip. There is no doubt that the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) has been disastrous to the Scottish fishing industry. During the EU referendum, the leave campaign told us that voting to leave the EU would result in leaving the CFP. It would be ironic to say the least if the only aspect of our relationship with Europe to survive Brexit was the least popular bit – the CFP. The UK government urgently needs to provide assurances that Scotland's fishermen's interests will not be put to the bottom of the UK's list of negotiating priorities again."

CLIMATE CHANGE

The Herald reported that Transform Scotland said in evidence to Holyrood committees that the Scottish Government's latest climate change strategy 'largely ignores' the need to promote walking, cycling or public transport and focuses instead on vehicle technology [Jan 17].



GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

GAME BIRD LICENSING

A Scottish Government review, commissioned in 2014, of game bird hunting regulations in other European countries has been published [May 14]. The Scottish Parliament's Environment, Climate Change & Land Reform (ECCLR) Committee is presently considering the Scottish Raptor Study Group's petition calling for the introduction of a licensing system for all game bird hunting in Scotland [Jan 17]. The report reviews game bird hunting regulations in 14 European countries.

In Scotland (and the rest of the UK), game bird hunting is only partially and lightly regulated by (a) having an open and closed season, restricting the time of year when game birds may be shot, and (b) firearms legislation which places restrictions on who may have access to guns. The open season varies according to the species. Other legislation covers the use of traps, snares etc. General Licences may be removed for alleged raptor persecution.

In the other European countries, game bird hunting is regulated by legislation which includes individual licenses for hunters and the ability for regulators to revoke a licence if the legislation is contravened. In some countries the legislation includes strict harvest quotas and bag reporting and in many countries, would-be hunters have to

pass a two-part practical and theoretical examination to qualify for a hunting licence.

Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Roseanna Cunningham, said: "[This report] shows that there is more regulation of game bird hunting in many other countries than we have in Scotland. We will be looking very carefully at these different management approaches to see whether they offer the means to address issues such as raptor persecution. Already we have committed to a number of new measures to tackle wildlife crime within Scotland including increases in criminal penalties, a prevention review and the creation of a dedicated investigative support unit within Police Scotland. These measures clearly demonstrate our resolve to tackle raptor persecution. This report, and the forthcoming review of satellite tagging data, will help determine our next steps."

Duncan Orr-Ewing, of RSPB Scotland, said: "We welcome the publication of this Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) report which will contribute to current discussions in the Scottish Parliament about potential options for licensing of intensive gamebird management practices in Scotland, such as 'driven' grouse shooting. We are clear that the failure by grouse moor owners over decades to self regulate and put a stop to the illegal killing of raptors and the carrying out of other unsustainable land management practices has led us to this point. We support the licensing of 'driven' grouse shooting, with clear sanctions to remove such licences on individual landholdings if there is evidence of illegal practice. As the SNH report suggests, such regulation is commonplace in other European countries and those landowners who operate legally and comply with the terms and conditions of the licence should have nothing to fear from such a system."

A spokesman for Scottish Land & Estates said: "The research demonstrates that although a licensing system may be in operation, the nature of what that licensing regime entails varies significantly from country to country, and is frequently determined by historical traditions and government structures. We have and continue to support tougher sentences for wildlife crime in Scotland, but what this research also makes clear is that wildlife crime remains a concern in many countries that have licensing regulation."

See: Pillai, A. & Turner, A. 2017. A Review of Game Bird Law and Licensing in Selected European Countries. *SNH Commissioned Report No. 942*; <http://bit.ly/2lR8BYU>

• Alex Hogg, of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA), writing in the *Shooting Times*, said: "The Scottish Raptor Study Group, along with the RSPB, has launched a petition calling for the licensing of Scottish shooting estates. This group has been publicly funded since inception and has taken access on estates for years without even having to inform the keeper or landowner. In this regard it is unaccountable as it can log whatever it wishes, with little or no checks or balances on the process or the effects of its monitoring. It seems strange that a group lacking in accountability is calling for shoots to be licensed. We will not stand by and allow double standards to drive wives, children and grandchildren from their homes. Everybody who works and lives in the countryside must now be wary that compliance with such organisations, sadly, is compliance with people who are attacking our jobs and way of life. It should never have got to this stage. If the SGA had not been formed 20 years ago, what we live for would have been swallowed up different government bodies. Some people hate the truth, but we will always tell it. It is that honesty which has gained us the respect that we have."

WILDLIFE CRIME

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog reported that RSPB has published the 2015 UK Birdcrime report. 29%

of all confirmed persecution reports were in Scotland. 39 reports came from the Highlands and 23 from Aberdeenshire.

However, Appendix 3 (a table of confirmed and probable bird of prey and owl persecution during 2015), stated: "The details of some confirmed bird of prey persecution incidents cannot be shown, as requested by Police Scotland."

The same statement appears in relation to Appendix 4 (a table of confirmed poison abuse incidents during 2015) and again in relation to the UK map of birdcrime incidents 2015. No other police force in the UK has applied such restrictions to the publication of incident data.

Police Scotland withheld the month, species, poison and county of four confirmed poisoning crimes, and also the name of the poison used in every single Scottish poisoning crime (except one) in 2015.

See: <http://bit.ly/2lfpMQF>; <http://arccg.is/2jTyOFV>

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog reported that Police Scotland had withheld information from the RSPB's 2015 Birdcrime report [see above], PAW Scotland 2015 raptor persecution report [Mar 16] and the Scottish Government's 2015 annual wildlife crime report [Jan 17].

Police Scotland was contacted by a blog reader to ask why information about raptor persecution crimes (a national UK police priority) was being withheld. Police Scotland replied: "Primarily, the Police Scotland concern is about specialist knowledge becoming public knowledge in these cases. Police Scotland actually withholds the data from publication in relatively few cases and only after consideration against the agreed investigative strategy for a particular case.

"If Police Scotland is to make an appeal for information about a bird of prey killing and has chosen not to identify the substance as part of the strategy (or even identify that poisoning was the cause of death) this would be undermined by the identification of the chemical used in a public document. It would not take too much initiative to put the two together and that specialist knowledge tool is lost. A similar argument is equally as legitimate where other *modus operandi* (MO) are used in this form of raptor persecution.

"On occasions, the decision is made not to make an investigation public at all for a variety of reasons (time of year, other ongoing investigations etc.) Publication of pesticide data or MO by the Health & Safety Executive, RSPB or whoever else would ensure that Police Scotland loses control over this tool.

"Differences in the legal system in Scotland is also another issue. The time bar for bringing wildlife crimes to court in Scotland is (in most cases) three years from the date of the offence. Police Scotland therefore expect to be able to legitimately withhold information relating to cases for that time period. This argument was supported by a specialist prosecutor from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service's Wildlife & Environmental Crime Unit who also thought that this was particularly relevant in Scotland because we still have a requirement for corroboration.

"Police Scotland cannot speak for the approach taken by forces in England and Wales but our commitment to wildlife crime ensures that we must ensure that we use every tool available and therefore on occasions this will include withholding information about a crime."

The *Raptor Persecution UK* blog said that public safety is being put at risk with this stance, and that Police Scotland is also demolishing public confidence in their ability to effectively tackle wildlife crime.

• The *Press & Journal* reported that Lewis Macdonald MSP has written to Chief Constable Philip Gormley, highlighting concerns that people walking in Scotland's hills could accidentally come into contact with toxic substances used to kill raptors illegally. In his letter, Mr Macdonald highlighted that police forces in England make the public aware of the details of such cases. He also argued that some forces, south of the border, erect signs to let the public know poison is suspected to have been used in certain areas. However, officers in Scotland can choose not to take such measures, due to fears it could compromise investigations into the crimes. He said: "Of course, Police Scotland officers have a duty to do whatever they can to identify and catch those responsible for these crimes, and they may well believe that giving the public too much information about these incidents would hinder their investigation."

Detective Chief Superintendent Sean Scott said: "Police Scotland balances public safety against any investigative strategy very carefully, and withholds information in only a very few cases. It does so where the release of such information could potentially compromise an ongoing investigation."

However, the *Raptor Persecution UK* blog said that, far from Police Scotland 'withholding information in only a very few cases,' "it deliberately withheld the name of the poison used in every single poisoning crime except one in the RSPB's 2015 Birdcrime report [see above]. That's nine cases with withheld information. In four of those cases, Police Scotland has withheld information about the month the offence was committed, the affected species, and the county where the offence took place."

GILLIES HILL

The *BBC News* website reported that, following a public inquiry, a Scottish Government reporter has refused planning permission for a quarry at Gillies Hill at Cambusbarron near Stirling [Dec 16]. Patersons Quarries, of Coatbridge, wanted to resume operations at the site, last quarried 20 years ago. Much of the quarry has existing planning permission valid until 2042, but the application included an area outside the existing workings.

The reporter said that he had taken into account the 'economic benefits' offered by the proposal but believed they were outweighed by its adverse impacts. He said that the proposal was contrary to planning policy, and there was serious doubt whether local roads could accommodate the increase in heavy traffic that the proposed development was likely to generate. He said: "In respect of the Battle of Bannockburn there is considerable doubt about the role of Gillies Hill. However, even if the hill played a more central role... I do not consider that the development would have a significant impact on the understanding and interpretation of the battle."

The application attracted 1,077 objections, including from Torbrex, Kings Park and Cambusbarron community councils, the Stirling Civic Trust, Stirling High School Parent Council and other local and national organisations. Patersons appealed to the Scottish Government after Stirling Council failed to determine a planning application.

FLOOD WARNINGS

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) has launched its Flood Warning Development Framework for 2017 – 2021.

A number of actions are set out in the framework which SEPA plans to take in partnerships with others to maintain and develop this service over the coming years:

• A total of 14 new flood warning schemes will be added to SEPA's Floodline service over the next five years.

• Six of these flood warning schemes will be launched later this year, along Loch Lomond, River Leven and River Garnock in Ayrshire, River Cree, Esk and Upper Nith in Dumfries & Galloway, and in Airth and Alloa along the River Forth.

• SEPA will review and develop existing flood warning products and services, including the introduction of a public version of the daily Flood Guidance Statement which is delivered in partnership with the Met Office and is currently issued to over 500 civil contingency responders.

• SEPA will continue to engage with partner organisations including local authorities and work with the public to improve understanding and use of its flood warning products and services.

HABITAT MAPPING

The *BBC News* website reported that SNH commissioned an investigation into the use of false colour infrared stereo aerial imagery interpretation. The small trial looked at an area of Glenfeshie in the Cairngorms with supporting fieldwork as a method for mapping unsurveyed upland areas. The imagery involves using different colours, textures, layers and other indicators to show habitat such as woodland and also geology. The method of interpreting landscapes is new to the UK. The report recommends that the potential for a large scale pilot of the technique be examined.

See: <http://bit.ly/2kQ3ff5>

• SNH is adopting the EUNIS (European Nature Information System) habitat classification for terrestrial habitat data and mapping. A commissioned report interprets and adapts the EUNIS classification for use in Scotland. It also correlates EUNIS habitats with habitat types listed in Annex I of the Habitats Directive. Correspondence tables are included to support translation between EUNIS and the key national habitat classifications and lists, including the National Vegetation Classification (NVC), UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) Priority Habitat types, Phase 1 categories and habitat features on Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). SNH aims to produce a Habitat Map of Scotland according to the EC Habitats Directive Annex I and EUNIS classifications. See: <http://bit.ly/2ldODqT>

PEAT MONITORING

The *BBC News* website reported that satellites and drones are being used to monitor the state of Scotland's peatlands. The Scottish Government is working with SEPA and SNH to use Earth Observation data to monitor the bogs' recovery.

AIR POLLUTION

The European Commission has sent a final warning for repeated breaches of legal limits of nitrogen dioxide in parts of the UK, including Glasgow. If the UK fails to take action within two months, the commission said it may take the matter to the European Court of Justice. Legal levels of nitrogen dioxide, which allow hourly limits to be breached only 18 times a year, should have been met by 2010. The UK government said that it could be 2020 before air quality levels are compliant for some areas.



ENERGY

POWERLINE UPGRADE

SSE said that plans to upgrade the existing powerline between Beauly in the Highlands and Kintore in Aberdeenshire were not needed at this time, following an annual review of infrastructure projects. SSE said that the 'preferred corridor'

could be proposed again in the future [May 16]. The National Trust for Scotland had raised concerns about the line being routed close to Culloden Battlefield and the Clava Cairns.

WINDFARMS & LANDSCAPE

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has updated guidance on siting and designing windfarms in the landscape. It has been updated to include new advice on wind turbine lighting; updated advice on turbine colour; additional advice on wind turbines in woodland; revised links to other publications and updated guidance on small turbines of between 15 and 50 metres in height. Advice on the visual representation of windfarms has also been published. See: <http://bit.ly/2liKAsr>

WINDFARM UPDATES

Aberdeenshire: Vattenfall is consulting on a 16 turbine extension to Clashindarroch Wind Farm, which has been operational since 2015. The scheme is on the edge of the Cairngorm National Park near Gartly.

Dumfries & Galloway: A Scottish Government reporter has refused planning permission for the 12 turbine Shennanton windfarm north of Kirkcowan. He ruled that the windfarm would have a 'significant adverse impact' on the landscape. Brookfield Renewable had appealed over Dumfries & Galloway Council's failure to determine its application; planning officers had recommended refusal due to concerns over the impact on the landscape.

Highlands: The Scottish Government has granted planning consent to Falck Renewables Wind Ltd for Millennium South, a ten turbine, 35 MW windfarm 8 km west of Fort Augustus. Reporters recommended consent following a Public Local Inquiry. The windfarm is an extension to the operational Millennium Wind Farm [Dec 14].

Scottish Borders: Banks Renewables is planning a 15 turbine, 51 MW windfarm at Birneyknowe, near Hawick. Banks said that it was on the cusp of launching 'a unique, industry leading proposal aimed at increasing the level of social and economic benefits from the development and operation' for people living near onshore windfarms in the Borders called Connect2Renewables.

Rob Armstrong, a tourism provider in the Borders, said that the proposed Birneyknowe windfarm would impact on hopes for the creation of a new national park in the Borders. He said: "We are in one of the most unspoilt areas of Scotland in the Teviot Valley. Since the closure of the area's main industry, the mills, and the job losses what we are left with is tourism and small businesses. There are about 13 or 14 fairly sizeable windfarms including 150-170 metre high turbines planned. These are some of the biggest turbines in Scotland. Tourists come here from all over the world because it's unspoiled."

• Gilston Hill Wind Farm Ltd has submitted an application to erect seven turbines north west of Gilston Farm, near Heriot. A 16 turbine project in the same area, straddling the boundary with Midlothian, was turned down after an appeal to the Scottish Government in 2013. Developers said that the new proposals had a much smaller layout footprint', which would 'dramatically' reduce the landscape impact.

Western Isles: The *West Highland Free Press* reported that a community windfarm near Locheport in North Uist was given planning permission in 2013 by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. However, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) opposed the plans because of possible interference with the radar at the missile testing facility in Benbecula. The MoD has now said that

it is happy with the mitigation measures proposed by the North Uist Development Company. The windfarm now needs to go through the planning process again. However, the consequent reduction in Feed-in-Tariff means an up-to-date assessment of the viability of the £3m project is required.

FLOATING WINDFARM

The *BBC News* website reported that Hexicon AB is seeking permission from the Scottish Government, Highland Council and Orkney Islands Council for the installation of two floating wind turbines off the north Caithness coast. The proposed site is about three miles out to sea from Dounreay. Melvich Community Council opposed the proposal because of concerns that the demonstration project would ruin views across to Orkney, and impact on house prices. Dounreay Tri Ltd has been set up to develop the project, which would also involve laying a subsea cable and building a substation. *The Herald* reported that Highland Council, as statutory consultee, decided against raising an objection.

OIL & GAS

The *BBC News* website reported that Aberdeen and Heriot Watt Universities have been studying rock formations around Rockall, 300 miles off the Western Isles. Very little oil exploration has taken place there; only 12 wells have been drilled in the Rockall Basin. A small amount of gas was found in one well but the rest were unsuccessful.

Dr Nick Schofield said: "The Rockall Basin is one of the most challenging environments on earth when it comes to hydrocarbon explorations, but our analysis has revealed that one of the barriers to success may have been a misunderstanding of the subsurface geology. By analysing seismic data, and using what we have learned through our work in the Faroe-Shetland Basin, we found that the character of areas where operators hoped to find oil may have been misleading."

The new data has come from a series of seismic surveys carried out for the Oil & Gas Authority to try to stimulate the sector; the Rockall basin is thought to be worth further exploration. However, with current oil prices low, and with the hostile nature of that part of the Atlantic, it is unlikely that new wells will be drilled immediately.



TOURISM & RECREATION

ILLEGAL ACCESS

Sites of Special Scientific Interest at Loch Fleet near Golspie and Ben Wyvis, north of Dingwall, also designated as National Nature Reserves (NNR), have been damaged by illegal quad bike and motorbike access. Access rights, under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, do not extend to motorised vehicles.

Adam Rose, of Loch Fleet NNR, said: "Sand dune habitats are sensitive to damage from vehicle use and damaged areas can take a long time to recover, particularly where the sand and soil are exposed to the elements. Large ruts, doughnuts and long skid-marks, as we have had recently Loch Fleet, are particularly damaging as they take longer to restore. Of course, this takes even longer where there has been repeated damage to one area. As well as the physical damage to the site, internationally important populations of birds that overwinter at Loch Fleet may be disturbed."

Dan Sutherland, of Police Scotland, said: "The use of off-road vehicles on protected sites such as Loch Fleet and Ben Wyvis is not only damaging to habitats and wildlife, but may also pose a hazard to members of the public who are responsibly accessing these sites for recreation. The use of

motorised vehicles on any land without permission is an offence, and other offences may be committed against wildlife legislation."

LOCH LOMOND PARK

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park has introduced new byelaws which establish a camping-free zone around almost all of the west side of Loch Lomond and other parts of the National Park [Dec 16]. Four Camping Management Zones, in place from March to September, have been created; visitors will need to have a valid permit to camp in a permit area, or stay over in a campsite. The Park Authority has provided over 300 camping and motorhome places in the byelaw zones. The park authority said that the byelaws cover less than 4% of the National Park and are designed to protect against antisocial behaviour, including littering and fireraising.

Brendan Paddy, of Ramblers Scotland, said: "[This] undermines Scottish access rights by providing too few tent pitches to cope with demand and by charging to camp in previously-free areas."



NEWS OF ORGANISATIONS

CROFTING COMMISSION

The Crofting Commission Governance Review highlighted a range of areas that need urgent action including: Governance standards, procedures and other arrangements, at both executive and non-executive levels, to underpin effective decision-making, particularly in relation to the Bohuntin, Upper Coll and Mangersta Common Grazings cases; the review did not look at the regulatory decisions themselves [Oct 16].

Rural Economy Secretary, Fergus Ewing, has asked the Crofting Commission to take urgent action to improve performance in crucial areas. A full action plan including prioritising work to deliver the necessary improvements in the way regulatory cases and board proceedings are managed will be delivered in response to the findings of the Governance Review.

Mr Ewing said: "Crofting is an integral part of Scottish rural life and it is essential that it has an effective regulator. This review, and the action plan which will follow, must help to deliver the necessary changes and ensure the commission is able to lead the crofting industry forward."

See: <http://bit.ly/2l1n6Zl>

HIE

Phase two of a review of the governance of Scotland's enterprise and skills agencies was chaired by Professor Lorne Crerar. The review suggested that Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE) and other enterprise bodies should have their own board. The first phase recommended that a new national board co-ordinate the activities of HIE, Scottish Enterprise and other bodies [Jan 17]. It was suggested that a new national strategic board would oversee the organisations' activities.

NFU SCOTLAND

Andrew McCornick has been elected as the president of NFU Scotland. Gary Mitchell and Martin Kennedy were elected as vice presidents.

RSPB SCOTLAND

RSPB Scotland has been successful in its appeal to buy 112 hectares adjacent to the Mersehead reserve on the Solway Firth [Oct 16]. Two separate parts of the reserve are now linked. Over the next two years RSPB Scotland will be working to restore the saltmarsh and sand dune habitats on the newest part of the reserve. Scrub and non-native plant species will be removed and more wetland areas and access trails constructed.