

Trip to Scottish Parliament

Introduction

The Lochaber Monitor Farm Business Group (BG) has a membership of eleven businesses. Ten members attended the sixth meeting on 7th March 2019 - a trip to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood for a meeting with MSP's and Fergus Ewing, Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy.

Aims of meeting

To meet with MSP's at Holyrood to put forward the group's main concerns and thoughts about the future of farming in Lochaber.

Holyrood

The background arrangements had been made by Dan McCroskrie who is Donald Camerons MSP's Head of Office. Dan welcomed the group to Holyrood and gave us a tour of the building and some great inside knowledge of how the parliament functions.

Dan had obtained tickets to General Questions and the First Ministers Questions in the main chamber. The latter in particular was fascinating, watching the sparing between Scotland major politicians live in action. As you might expect the main clashes were about Brexit with the deadline looming where there was much table thumping and heckling by the MSP's.



*Photo 1: The group in the main debating
Chamber, just before First Ministers Questions*

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MSP Meeting

The main purpose of the trip was to take forward discussions that had started from within the business group. Over the last three years, the group have been benchmarking their physical and financial performance, with worrying trends around profitability developing. Last year, through the Monitor Farm Programme, A 'Vision From The Hills' conference was held, throwing this question out to the wider agricultural and rural community in Lochaber. The next stage was taking this question, and the discussion to policy makers and key decision makers in Holyrood. The group made contact with their local MSP, and managed to secure an audience with:

- Fergus Ewing MSP - Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy
- Donald Cameron MSP - Shadow Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy
- Kate Forbes MSP - Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy

Also present were:

John Kerr – Scottish Governments Head of Agriculture Policy Division,

Duncan Waldman - Policy Manager at The Scottish Government

Sarah Millar the new Head of Industry Development for QMS.

The group had a wide-ranging discussion with the MSP's. The key points being raised were:

Malcom and Chris Cameron explained how beneficial the Monitor Farm programme had been to them and their business. The key for them, was that the Monitor Farm programme had brought the local farming community together and given them and the community access to experts and knowledge that they could use to take their farming businesses forward. They explained that through the programme, they had made a range of changes to their farming business, including changing their grassland and reseeding policy, and trailing finishing some lambs to give greater flexibility in their lamb marketing. Despite these changes making a positive difference to the business, Chris and Malcom still felt uncertain about the long-term viability of hill and mountain farming and were keen to hear Fergus Ewing's vision for the future.

Fergus Ewing gave the group a background to CAP and where we are currently with LFASS. The consensus was that hill farming is important and should be supported in future. Fergus Ewing preferred to use the word support however – not subsidy. Farms and farmers are important for the production of food, but also for maintaining the landscape, managing biodiversity, keeping rural community viable and maintaining the history and heritage of rural areas. John Kerr stated that work is being done now to look at post Brexit support payment policy.

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Photo 2: the group with Donald Cameron MSP in the Scottish Parliament

When looking at LFASS in greater detail, Fergus Ewing stated an aim to keep LFASS up at 100% of its existing level, despite a reduction required through current scheme legislation. It is recognised as an important scheme, Mr Ewing expressed his long term desire to design a new fit for purpose scheme to support hill and mountain farmers.

Sea Eagle Predation was highlighted as a major economic issue for farmers in the Lochaber area. John MacAulay had produced figures as part of the briefing to demonstrate the impact of sea eagle predation on his 500-ewe flock and this topic was discussed. Kate Forbes MSP is also currently involved in high level discussion about this issue.

One of the key elements to profitability that the business group had identified over the last years was the rising cost of inputs and availability of some feed stuffs. **The impact of distillery by-products being burnt for energy production - increasing the price of this valuable source of animal feed was raised which generated extensive discussion. It was explained that by-products are currently classed as a waste product by the energy industry,

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so they get support to purchase and burn. They are not a waste product as far as agriculture is concerned. Fergus Ewing felt there was a need for a cross-party approach and agreed to go back and have another look at this issue.

The group felt strongly about the impact that inspections and penalties have on businesses and individuals. We discussed the complexity of schemes, the minute detail required for inspection and severity of penalties within a fragile business environment. We advocated simplicity in future.

The group are very passionate about hill farming and what it provides for the Scottish economy, including the pictures and unique selling points of the Scottish brand, which other parts of Scottish industry use in their marketing campaigns. The value of hill farming to the wider Scottish economy should not be forgotten.

Conclusion

This was a great trip. Not only did the group get an insight into the workings of the Scottish parliament, but we also had the chance to plant seeds of information and influence key decision makers. Hopefully, we restated the case for the importance of hill farming in the West of Scotland.

A huge thanks must go to Donald Cameron MSP for hosting us and Dan McCroskrie for setting up the meetings and tour. Sarah Millar of QMS was also invaluable in the background organisation of the day including preparing the important MSP briefing note.

Niall Campbell & George Gauley (Facilitators) SAC Consulting Oban 8th March 2019

**Following the meeting, Scottish Government offered the following additional information on distillery by-products:

“In answer to the particular issue around distillery by-products, that while policy responsibility for renewable projects lie with the UK Government, ‘The Scottish Energy Strategy’ includes a commitment on the Scottish Government to develop a ‘Bioenergy Action Plan’ to set out a strategic pathway for developing bioenergy within the Scottish energy system.

This will provide clearer scope for the development of bioenergy in the Scottish energy system. Our approach to developing the action plan will apply the following guiding principles:

- Policies to support bioenergy will be consistent with the ambitions laid out in the energy strategy, climate change plan and land use strategy;

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- Bioenergy schemes should deliver greenhouse gas emission reductions;
- These schemes should represent good value for money, deliver benefits for communities, and help tackle fuel poverty;
- Biomass should be produced and managed sustainably and should be only used in heat-only or combined heat and power schemes to support heat and local supply needs;
- **This plan will ensure demands on land for food, energy crops and other non-food crops are managed equitably.”**

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