

## **Report of the pre-consultation stakeholder workshop held on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2017 on the draft grey squirrel management action plan for Wales**

### **Background**

The Welsh Government's Woodlands for Wales Strategy outlines a commitment to develop a strategic and targeted approach to help tackle threats from non-native invasive species, including grey squirrel. Additionally, article 19 of the EU IAS Regulation<sup>1</sup> requires Member States to put in place effective and proportionate management measures for the eradication, control or containment of listed species. Grey squirrel are on the first Species of Union Concern list which came into force on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2016. Member States have 18 months from this date to put in place management measures.

Welsh Government (WG) and Natural Resources Wales (NRW), with input from a working group of stakeholders, have worked to produce a draft grey squirrel management action plan for Wales to meet the above requirements.

On 6<sup>th</sup> July 2017, a stakeholder workshop event was held to update wider stakeholders and their organisations on work undertaken to date, enable further input to develop the draft plan prior to consultation in the Autumn, and explore a collaborative approach to delivery. Invitations to attend or submit written comments were sent to a total of 125 organisations, which included representatives from: the forestry sector and timber businesses; landowners and the farming sector; National parks and Welsh local authorities; conservation bodies and squirrel groups; animal rights bodies; community groups; tree and plant health research bodies; and members of the Woodland Strategy Advisory Panel (WSAP) and the Tree and Plant Health Steering group.

The workshop event was attended by a total of 20 stakeholders which included members of the original stakeholder working group, and one written response was received.

The workshop event was comprised of 3 presentations setting out the evidence of impact of grey squirrel and summarising the work on the draft action plan to date, followed by a brief Q+A session. The event was chaired by Roger Cooper, Chair of the Woodland Strategy Advisory Panel (WSAP), and presenters were:-

- Biodiversity impacts - Dr Liz Halliwell, Mammal Ecologist, NRW
- Woodland perspective - Graham Taylor, Managing Director, Pryor&Rickett
- Draft management action plan - Fiona McFarlane, Forestry Resources Policy, WG

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<sup>1</sup> Article 19 of the EU Regulation 1143/2014 on the Prevention and Management of the Introduction and Spread of Invasive Alien Species (the IAS Regulation)

Delegates undertook three facilitated workshops examining the draft actions and specific elements of the draft plan.

### **Key points from facilitated workshops/ comments by correspondence**

**Summary** – Comments received at the event relating to the draft action plan were generally positive. Those relating to amendments or additions to the text of the draft plan have been considered and incorporated where appropriate, so are not listed below. The draft actions discussed at the event are listed alongside the key points made at the event. **The draft actions have been altered since the event in consideration of feedback, and are reflected in the consultation document.**

#### **Workshop 1 – wider principles.**

*Targeting of Resources* - delegates were asked to consider the priorities for targeting action listed in the draft action plan, whether they agreed these or had others to highlight.

Key points:-

- Strong agreement that a grey squirrel management action plan was needed.
- The justification for managing grey squirrel populations was questioned. In response, the impact of grey squirrel on biodiversity and woodlands, as reflected in the WG Woodlands for Wales strategy commitment, as well as the requirement of the EU IAS regulation gave justification for developing the plan. It was unlikely that Brexit / European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will alter this at least in the short term so compliance remained necessary.
- Agreement that the priority areas/ categories listed should not be prioritised as their importance will vary from area to area.
- Agreement that collaboration and scale of action was essential for effective grey squirrel management.
- The protection of red squirrel populations was queried as it was not a globally threatened species. However it remains a priority species in Wales under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 hence the continued focus on its conservation.

*Governance* – delegates were asked to consider whether they felt a partnership approach through the Wales Squirrel Forum was an appropriate delivery path; how it might be adapted to undertake this role and on proposals for an annual update event for wider stakeholders.

Key points:-

- Agreement that a collaborative approach was necessary to deliver the plan.
- WSF seen as an appropriate mechanism provided representation is expanded and clear terms of reference developed.

- Conflicting views re: membership being open to all or identifying key members e.g. representatives from WSAP<sup>2</sup>, farmer groups, red squirrel interests, animal rights groups.
- The remit should be to promote training and best practice in relation to humane trapping by individuals. Wildlife crime enforcement sits with the police.
- Agreement re: the proposals for an annual meeting or forum.

Monitoring – delegates were asked to consider the three monitoring options identified and highlight others.

Key points:-

- Agreement that the 3 monitoring options are appropriate but NFI data would need further investigation, and monitoring red squirrel populations was problematic/ resource intensive hence annual monitoring unlikely.
- Centrally collating numbers dispatched would not provide estimates of damage or population size owing to a lack of available baseline data and inconsistency of action across Wales.

## **Workshop 2 – Draft actions 1-6 and 9**

Draft action 1– *Ensure Area Statements consider the impact of grey squirrel on the woodland resource and biodiversity.*

Draft action 2 – *Encourage the establishment and support of landscape-scale collaborative grey squirrel management partnerships.*

Draft action 9 - *Examine the feasibility of incentives for a strategic and collaborative approach to grey squirrel management in the design of future natural resource management schemes.*

Delegates were asked whether support, when available, should focus on a strategic and collaborative approach to grey squirrel management. Key points:-

- Agreement that action needs to relate to both collaborative and landscape action at different scales e.g. clusters.
- Current grants should include grey squirrel management payments, and other schemes such as the Sustainable Management Scheme should support a group approach via collective contracts.
- Explore project officer role to facilitate collaboration.
- An action in relation to Area Statements/ policy should remain in the plan but reworded to be more appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> WSAP – Woodlands Strategy Advisory Panel – a panel of forestry sector representatives who provide advice to Welsh Ministers on the development of woodlands policy in Wales and the implementation of the Welsh Government Woodlands for Wales Strategy.

*Draft action 3 - Investigate the development of a Vulnerability Analysis of Wales' woodland resource to provide a focus for a co-ordinated approach to grey squirrel management by local partnerships and landowners.*

Delegates were asked whether this tool would assist the establishment of grey squirrel management in vulnerable areas, or was there another way to focus action?

Key points:-

- General agreement that a vulnerability map would help but needs to be part of a wider approach to squirrel management including individual efforts.
- Could be used to identify priority clusters such as areas where high quality timber production is likely to be achieved.
- More information on the methodology was required and be clear about what is to be achieved through the tool.

*Draft action 4 - Where it is feasible and beneficial to do so, undertake grey squirrel management activity on the WGWE as part of a co-ordinated landscape scale partnership approach.*

*Draft action 5 - Continue to provide support on grey squirrel management for red squirrel conservation on private land through provision of advice, research and loan of equipment*

*Draft action 6 - Continue to manage grey squirrel for red squirrel conservation on the WGWE in line with the Conservation Plan for Red Squirrels in Wales through a partnership approach.*

Delegates were asked to consider whether action on the Welsh Government Woodland Estate should be focused on areas where it is feasible/there is a partnership approach with other woodland owners. They were also whether NRW activity to support red squirrel conservation should continue. Key points:-

- General agreement that action on the WGWE to manage grey squirrel should take place. Guidance needed to set out how/ when this would work.
- Consideration in allowing non NRW staff to undertake grey squirrel management.
- Agreement that NRW work to support red squirrel conservation should continue.

### **Workshop 3 – Draft actions 7,8 and 10-14**

*Draft action 7 – Work with squirrel partnerships/ initiatives to improve the dissemination of information, and the co-ordination of red squirrel conservation and grey squirrel management efforts.*

*Draft action 8 - Participate in the Wales Squirrel Forum and contribute to the delivery of both the Conservation Plan for Red Squirrels in Wales and the Wales Grey Squirrel Management Action Plan.*

Delegates were asked to consider what was needed to enable sharing of information to be done more effectively. Key points:-

- A communication strategy that links the action plans for both red and grey squirrels would help target the relevant information to those audiences, as well as sharing information between groups.
- Sharing information via mechanisms such as Farming Connect should be explored.
- Create a directory/map of all activity to share information and undertake research.

*Draft action 10 - Raise awareness of the impacts of grey squirrel on woodland and wider biodiversity, and the need to assess the risk of damage and implement a plan of management.*

*Draft action 11 - Promote best practice, ensuring information is up to date, and encourage the continuation of grey squirrel management training through a range of partners.*

Delegates were asked to consider what mechanisms could be used to achieve these actions. Mechanisms included:-

- A communication strategy needed – see above. Raising public awareness of the impact of grey squirrel on woodland, red squirrel and biodiversity was essential to the perception and delivery of the management action plan.
- Raise awareness via all media e.g. Tweets, Facebook, campaigns and common messages via partners.
- Explore the Farming Connect mechanism – both to raise awareness and as a training provider.
- Explore a central point of information/ dissemination – potentially the UK Squirrel Accord.
- Develop a decision making tool to help foresters identify when action is needed, possibly based on the levels of damage/ chewing developed by Charles Dutton.
- Grey squirrel management should be a standard part of woodland management / woodland business plan and included in woodland management training and literature.

*Draft action 12 - Continue to support research into improvements in management methods through the Defra England and Wales wildlife and biodiversity research and development budget.*

*Draft action 13 - Maintain an overview of grey squirrel management research in the UK and identify research gaps that would better inform grey squirrel management. Flag to research organisations.*

*Draft action 14 - Further develop methods to monitor the impact of grey squirrel management measures; minimising the impact on biodiversity, non-targeted species, related ecosystem services and economy.*

Delegates were asked whether the above actions should continue. Key points:-

- Agreement that the actions are sound.
- WSF should identify research gaps and monitoring needs but this should be fed into the UK Squirrel Accord to flag to researchers.
- WG should consider funding additional research where gaps identified.

*Other comments on the draft plan*

- Global picture/ sustainable woodland management outlined in G.Taylor's presentation should be included in the draft plan – as part of productive woodland, tree health and economic impacts. Links to a Well Being goal.

**List of delegates**

- Isobel Hutchinson, Animal Aid
- Ian Danby, British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)
- Gareth Davies, Coed Cymru
- Judith Webb, Environmental Consultant
- Liz Halliwell, Natural Resources Wales
- Chris Tucker, Natural Resources Wales
- Geraint Jones, Farming Connect
- Charlotte Priddy, FUW
- Rachel Evans, Countryside Alliance
- David Lort-Phillips, Private woodland owner
- Becky Hulme, Mid Wales Red Squirrel Partnership
- Ben Allen, Wildlife Trust Wales
- Chris Hughes, Mwmac Ltd
- Jack Hanbury, Pontypool Park Estate
- Graham Taylor, Pryor and Rickett
- Roger Cooper, Chair of WSAP
- Dafydd Roberts, Snowdonia National Park Authority
- Jenny MacPherson, The Vincent Wildlife Trust
- Alex Flinn, Tilhill Forestry
- John Ferguson, Tilhill Forestry