

**Minutes of the
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE
BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST**

Monday 10 January 2011

Ashdown Forest Centre at 14.30

Committee members present: Cllr R St Pierre (Chairman), Cllr N Bennett (Vice-Chairman), Mr J Francis, Mr P Glyn, Mr J Harding (Forestry Commission), Mr R Thornely-Taylor (*ex-officio*), Cllr M Hoy, Ms L Hutchby (Natural England), Mr C Marrable (Conservation Officer), Dr H Prendergast (Director). Minutes taken by Mrs T Buxton.

Also present: Cllr F Whetstone.

The Chairman opened the meeting. There was one member of the public present.

Action

01/11 Apologies.

Apologies were received from Dr K Cole, Mr M Cooper, Mr R Galley and Mr C Johnson.

02/11 Declarations of any interest by Members of a Personal or Prejudicial Nature.

There were none.

03/11 Verbal update on Wych Cross Reservoir

The Director reported the reservoir was still leaking and had been shown to contain residual chlorine. This suggested the water was from a treated part of the reservoir and not drainage. The water company were continuing with their investigations. After a short discussion it was agreed that the Director would continue to apply pressure and request regular progress updates from the water company and the matter would be reported at the next Board meeting.

HP

04/11 Verbal update on Shepherded Grazing

04.1/11 Mr Marrable reported that there were now 250 sheep at five locations (the two main locations being Charlwood and CLM land at Groombridge). The rams had been separated from the ewes. The current in-bye grazing arrangements would come to an end by mid-February at the latest. 25 sheep had been slaughtered or sold. Some of the meat was used at the Volunteers' Christmas party. The winter had, so far, been difficult and supplementary feeding has been required when the snow was very deep. However, the sheep were in good condition due to Ms FitzGerald's husbandry skills. There were now four 'lookerers' and one paid assistant as well as ad-hoc assistance from other Forest staff which allowed the temporary fences to be checked daily and batteries changed fortnightly. So far there had been two incidents of vandalism to the fences. Feed and hay supplies had incurred extra costs. The Board does not have access to storage, therefore supplies were being bought at a higher rate on an 'as and when required' basis. This was an issue that Ms Amos had raised in her report.

04.2/11 The Chairman said that there had been some discussion on LinkedIn regarding fears about fencing. Mr Marrable said that the Board could, under the Ashdown Forest Act, fence an additional 40ha (100 acres) out of 2,500ha. He said he had identified eight remote sites, away from dog walking areas, that could be temporarily fenced for summer grazing. The additional 40ha would not all be

fenced at the same time. Larger areas would require the fences to be moved less often and allow the sheep to settle and graze widely. The Chairman asked how local people would respond to additional temporary fencing. Mr Francis said that the areas identified were very good and sufficiently remote. Mr Glyn agreed the choice of areas was very good. Mr Marrable said that temporary fencing used at the Isle of Thorns, a popular dog walking area for locals had received a mixed reaction. It was sensible to ensure that any enclosures did not straddle, but where adjacent to, paths or rides. Ms Hutchby said she understood the rationale for remote areas but asked that 'momentum be kept up' and that grazing should be kept in public awareness and be visible. Mr Marrable replied that some of the sites identified had previously been grazed by Ms Amos and others were new to grazing. Ms Hutchby pointed out that HLS funding had five years more to run and that discussions regarding fencing needed to be sooner rather than later. There was a very brief discussion on public safety and electric fencing with Mr Marrable stating the fences all had safety signage and the Board's insurance company was aware.

04.3/11 Mr Marrable said that the issue of winter grazing land and hay and feed storage needed to be better addressed and longer term arrangements should be put in place. The Chairman asked if some sort of 'consortium' could be established with local smallholders etc. Mr Marrable replied that it was worth considering as was the Weald Meadows initiative but it was storage that was the main problem. The Chairman said that widespread advertising was needed regarding joint purchasing and storage of hay.

04.4/11 Mr Glyn said he recognised the logistical problems in regards to winter grazing and asked how the 10% bare ground conservation objective could be achieved without winter grazing. There followed a discussion regarding grazing/ trampling by large animals such as ponies and cattle. Mr Marrable said that there were even bigger logistical problems associated with the grazing and management of larger animals. It was agreed that, for the time being, there would be a focus on what the Board currently has and on how to proceed over the next 12 months.

04.5/11 The Chairman said that the Committee would report to the Board what was planned in regards to grazing for the next 12 months. Perimeter fencing and the grazing of larger animals would be discussed next year.

RstP

04.6/11 Mr Marrable said that a site visit to Chailey Common would be arranged for the summer. Their fencing will be constructed by then and the sheep would be out grazing.

CM

It was agreed that the plan for temporary fencing would go ahead and that the public would be informed as widely as possible.

CM

05/11 Payments to Graziers

05.1/11 Mr Marrable presented the paper and reported there was currently only one beneficiary though there had been others in the past. The rate of payment had not been altered for several years.

It was agreed to accept the recommendation in paper CON 1/11 that the payments should be increased.

CM

05.2/11 Cllr Whetstone said people were not interested in non-commercial grazing. Ms

Hutchby replied that some may want to graze for other reasons, i.e., rare breeds. Mr Glyn said the logistics of grazing and welfare issues were off-putting. Mr Marrable said that people did occasionally enquire about grazing and once the details were explained to them they lost interest. Mr Thornely-Taylor asked how numbers of grazing animals could be controlled and Mr Marrable replied that the number of animals a Commoner could graze was based on the size of the commonable land holding. Most Commoners had very low entitlement.

05.2/11 Mr Marrable said he had been instructed by the HLS panel to provide a paper explaining why Ashdown Forest Commoners were not active unlike those of the New Forest. Mr Glyn said there was no culture of graziers in the area. Cllr Whetstone agreed that there was little understanding of farming locally and there was plenty of low cost grazing available. The Chairman said that there could be more publicity regarding the increased grazing payments, encouraging Commoners to take up their rights and that the Board welcomed expressions of interest.

05.2/11 There was a further discussion on fencing. Mr Marrable said that the benefits of the current fencing need to be proven before any planning applications were made. Ms Hutchby said there has been a 'sea-change' regarding objections to fences as shown at Chailey. Mr Thornely-Taylor disagreed and said there would be a similar level of objection as when the original fencing was erected. Mr Glyn said the only way forward was to have clear evidence on the benefits of professional, fenced grazing.

06/11 Verbal report on West High Weald Deer Management Group Meeting

The Director reported that the meeting had been cancelled twice due to the weather. He confirmed that 238 deer had been killed in RTAs to date and if the fourth ranger had been able to deal with deer that number would have risen to the mid 300's. He went on to say there was no evidence of a reduction in numbers after the harsh winters of late. The Chairman said that any issues on deer should be reported to the Board if appropriate.

07/11 Financial information for the Conservation Committee responsibilities

This had been circulated. There were no comments. Mr Francis asked if the extent of the ESCC funding cut was known and the Chairman replied that it was likely to be made public in two weeks time.

08/11 Any Urgent Item of which the Clerk has notice in order to pass to the elected Chairman.

08.1/11 Mr Francis asked for an update on the progress of heathland restoration. He said he had received very positive feedback from local residents regarding work done in the vicinity of Crowborough Road. The Director replied that views had been opened up as the young scrub had been removed.

08.2/11 Mr Marrable said that a very neat job had been done in the vicinity of Ardens/Alma Cottage by the in-house team; that work had been completed at Crows/Doves Nest (despite a delay caused by hen harriers) and at the top of Wren's Warren by contractors after some quality issues had been resolved. Contractors had recently started work on the west chase and the in-house team had been tackling an area at Churlwood. On the north chase contractors had recently completed a very nice sensitive job near the Forest Centre. All work was currently on schedule. He went on to say that emphasis had shifted to maintenance rather restorative work and it was increasingly difficult to get

contractors who were able to do a subtle job. The prices for such work were the same as major restorative jobs and there were no by-products from it.

08.2/11 There was a short discussion regarding penalty clauses in contracts. Mr Marrable said it was a good idea, however, the Ranger might need contract management training.

There being no other business the meeting closed at 16.00