

Scottish Natural Heritage

# Protecting Scotland's red squirrels

The consultation response



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# Protecting Scotland's red squirrels

## The consultation response



Grey squirrel

### 1 Introduction

Scotland's red squirrels are under threat. One of the primary reasons for this is the spread of the non-native grey squirrel which was first introduced to the UK in the 1800s. The subsequent spread of this species, and the disease they harbour, poses a significant threat to red squirrels which, if not addressed, risks the loss of red squirrels from Scotland within the next 100 years.

To address this, SNH launched a public consultation in June 2009 requesting views on targeting grey squirrel control across Scotland for the purpose of red squirrel conservation. The consultation included a draft of the full strategy, along with the identification of locations at which grey squirrel control would be supported by public funds. The strategy included a proposal to fund control under the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) and raised four specific questions:

1. Do the aims cover all necessary actions to protect red squirrels? If not, why not?
2. Do you think the strategy can be adequately managed using this structure? If not, why not?
3. Do you think the Scottish Rural Development Programme is the best way to pay for the work involved in controlling grey squirrels under this strategy? If not, why not?
4. Does the strategy identify appropriate locations for controlling grey squirrels to protect red squirrels? If not, why not?



## 2 Consultation process

The consultation was launched on the SNH website and stakeholders were notified. Hard copies of the proposal were also made available on request. Stakeholders were identified using lists of organisations and individuals who have participated in, or have shown and interest in, red squirrel conservation action, including land owners, NGOs, Government organisations, local squirrel groups, animal welfare organisations and interested individuals. The consultation was also publicised through the media to raise wider awareness.

A total of 20 responses were received. Respondents were asked if they gave permission to make their response public and the list of those who agreed is provided in Appendix 1.

The responses represented 13 groups or organisations (including one joint response) plus seven individual responses. These could be broken down as follows:

Local squirrel groups	4
NGOs	5
Private sector representatives	2
Government sector	2
Individuals	7

### 3 Responses

The consultation set four key questions about the grey squirrel control strategy (see 1 Introduction). In addition, most responses included individual comments and information to provide context for the answers. Some responses contained only comments and were not structured around the key questions. All responses were considered and the information extracted for inclusion in the analysis. However, given the amount of information received, it is not possible to present all the details of each response in this report.

The following presents a synopsis of the responses. These are presented as:

1. Key points – those which were iterated by a number of correspondents; and
2. Question responses – points which were specifically made in response to the questions posed.

#### 3.1 Key points

Grey squirrels pose a threat to the red squirrel in Scotland and action is needed to address this. However, targeted grey squirrel control is not a sustainable solution and should be considered only as a temporary measure until more permanent options are developed. Long term measures which were mentioned were habitat management to favour red squirrels over grey squirrels, development of a vaccine against squirrelpox virus and immuno-contraception for grey squirrels.

The strategy must include wider monitoring of grey squirrels. Urgent locations for control can be identified on the basis of current grey squirrel distribution but this needs to be accompanied by a method of detecting any significant changes in distribution which require the approach to be modified. In particular, this includes surveillance for the encroachment of grey squirrels into Highland region.

The grey squirrel control strategy must be developed in conjunction with the management of red squirrel strongholds. Grey squirrel control to defend strongholds should be the top priority in order to maintain viable core populations of red squirrels as a basis for widespread red squirrel conservation.

The strategy needs to be managed at both local and national level. This should involve short lines of responsibility to ensure a capacity to respond flexibly and rapidly. Devolved delivery to the local level will carry resource implications which must be addressed to support effective action.

The Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) is the only mechanism currently available which can be used to fund widespread grey squirrel control. However the aims of the strategy will not be achieved within the current lifetime of this programme (scheduled for review in 2013) and there remains some uncertainty about financial opportunities which will be available following this. Red squirrel conservation requires a long-term commitment to grey squirrel control and alternative funding options must be pursued.

Further work is required to refine the target locations but the principles of preventing i) the spread of the squirrelpox virus and ii) further spread of grey squirrels, are a rational basis for this.

## 3.2 Question responses

**Q 1** Do the aims cover all the necessary actions to protect red squirrels? If not, why not?

Fourteen respondents provided a clear 'yes' or 'no' answer. The remaining six respondents did not express a definitive view, setting out key points only. Of the 14 clear responses, three agreed that the aims covered the necessary actions, four gave qualified agreement and seven disagreed.

A main theme in responses was the suggestion that, although grey squirrel control is important, other action is also required for effective red squirrel conservation. This includes: development of disease monitoring; vaccination; immuno-contraception techniques; habitat improvement, creation and management; public awareness and education, and communication. Two responses stated that grey squirrel control should be considered a temporary strategy whilst more sustainable approaches were developed. These two respondents were also opposed to killing healthy grey squirrels. One of these suggested that the primary approach to their control should be non-lethal with a secondary aim of to avoid any suffering to grey squirrels. This would include the approval of Standard Operating Procedures for grey squirrel control and avoiding killing lactating females.

The importance of grey squirrel control in the context of long-term management planning was noted. This included the suggestion that Arran should be prioritised as an island refuge and provided with protection against grey squirrel incursion.

Some correspondents were concerned about the implications of prioritising resources according to squirrel distribution. There were concerns that significant areas of Scotland where there are healthy populations of red squirrels but no grey squirrels may be disregarded for public support. Support for vigilance and monitoring for grey squirrel presence and dispersal into new areas is necessary under these circumstances.

Control of squirrelpox virus was raised as an issue which needed to be considered more fully within the strategy. It was generally agreed that this poses the main threat to red squirrels and a few respondents called for a centrally-funded, or heavily subsidised, monitoring scheme to maintain vigilance on the prevalence and spread of the virus.

Two respondents highlighted that Local Councils have a role in grey squirrel control through their responsibilities for pest control in urban areas. It was suggested that this responsibility needed to be promoted more clearly.

**Q 2** Do you think the strategy can be adequately managed using this structure? If not, why not?

This question related to a system of regional steering groups to oversee local delivery of appropriate grey squirrel control. A national steering group, comprising statutory and non-statutory representatives, would oversee the delivery of the strategy.

Thirteen respondents gave a definitive answer to this question with the remaining seven providing only comments. Only one respondent stated explicitly that there was insufficient information on which to answer this question.

Of the 13 definitive answers, all agreed that the structure was adequate. Of these, three qualified this with the suggestion that steering groups needed to be extended to ensure animal welfare, land manager or adequate local volunteer representation. These included groups from areas either not covered by the current Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project (also supported by Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland) or in areas not currently identified as priority for grey squirrel control. Other organisations suggested for inclusion in steering groups were Scottish Rural Properties and Business Association (SRPBA), British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), Royal Scottish Forestry Society (RSFS) and the Red Squirrel Survival Trust, the latter which could provide a 'strategic overview' in relation to activity in North England.

One respondent suggested that the management structure should follow the approach taken for Local Goose Schemes, with local steering groups chaired by SEARS agency representatives (Government partners). They argued that this was necessary to support consistent delivery, monitoring and reporting at a National scale.

One respondent, although agreeing with the importance of local delivery, noted that local volunteer groups often have finite resources and there are limitations on what they can be expected to deliver. Under these circumstances, the respondent stated that the strategy is a national agency/Government-led initiative and, as such, these bodies should "shoulder responsibility for its success or failure".

Several respondents commented on the need for adequate liaison, both between areas and with other, similar projects. The Cairngorm Water Vole project was heralded as a successful initiative which could provide considerable experience of area-based species management. Similarly, there were calls for regular liaison with North England to ensure a 'joined up' approach. The need for a project officer to help deliver the strategy in West Scotland was noted.

**Q 3** Do you think the SRDP is the best way to pay for the work involved in controlling grey squirrels under this strategy? If not, why not?

The response to this question was mixed. A total of 14 respondents gave a definite answer to this. Of these, five agreed that SRDP was an appropriate funding mechanism, but four were qualified agreements (see below). Nine respondents disagreed. Comments were received from the other six but these did not express a definitive view either way.

Four respondents offered qualified agreement on the use of SRDP. The qualifications included: i) the need to police the benefits to red squirrels accrued from public funding; ii) making sure there was a contingency in case the level of priority given to grey squirrel control was reduced under SRDP; and iii) the need for additional funding to supplement potential limits on funding available through SRDP.

Two main concerns were raised in answer to this question. Firstly, the SRDP is a time-limited funding mechanism due for review in 2013. Given the need for sustained grey squirrel control, and the unlikely event that the aims will be achieved within the current lifetime of the scheme, several respondents felt the strategy required a more independent and committed funding mechanism, possibly ring-fencing Government funding specifically for this purpose. Secondly, some respondents noted that areas not identified as priority within SRDP may be excluded from public funding of grey squirrel control.

One respondent stated that SRDP a very complex system and that the application process is “tortuously bureaucratic”. The same respondent intimated that the system requires the landowner to “take the risk”, carrying out the actions and seeking funds retrospectively.

A common comment was that SRDP is most effective for large estates but was not suitable for small estates: a) where they operate only a few traps; b) where the population of grey squirrels is small or dispersed; c) where land managers or tenant farmers manage small areas; and d) for urban grey squirrel control. Trap loan schemes were suggested as a more suitable approach in these situations.

One respondent suggested that the award of public funding should be subject to being able to demonstrate that equivalent non-lethal conservation measures, eg habitat management, were also in place. The level of grey squirrel control necessary to suppress the population to an appropriate level for conservation purposes should be identified and demonstrating a commitment to this would provide leverage to qualify them for public funds for grey squirrel control. This respondent re-iterated that the resultant strategy should also avoid killing lactating females.

**Q 4** Does the strategy identify appropriate locations for controlling grey squirrels to protect red squirrels? If not, why not?

This question related to the locations identified in maps 1 and 2 which appear in Appendix 2 on page 10.

Fifteen respondents gave a definitive answer to this question. Of these, ten agreed and five disagreed. Of the ten that agreed, five qualified this with the need to be responsive and flexible to accommodate change to targeted areas if grey squirrels were detected in new areas or if squirrelpox virus was detected beyond the current area.

A few respondents drew attention to the need to integrate the strategy with the red squirrel strongholds currently being developed by the Forestry Commission Scotland. Action around strongholds needs to be identified more explicitly and as an integral part of the final strategy.

There was a suggestion that, if public support for grey squirrel control is targeted in this way, some clarification is required on the 'official' position beyond the priority areas. This includes concern about the eligibility of SRDP applications for financial support in areas away from those identified within the strategy.

Two respondents suggested that the strategy should target 'source' populations, including urban grey squirrels, rather than focusing support on the margins of their dispersion. This was viewed as a more sustainable approach, stemming the flow of immigrants from the main breeding centre and lessening the pressure on the dispersal front. However, it was also suggested that this may need to take into account public engagement which may wane after a period and may affect the delivery of a long-term approach. Under these circumstances, it may be expedient to identify areas for control which did not rely on urban control for long-term success.

There were several comments on the precise locations at which grey squirrel control should be targeted. In principle, there was agreement that preventing the spread of squirrelpox virus and preventing further spread of grey squirrels were a robust basis from which to identify locations. One respondent stated explicitly that they opposed killing of grey squirrels where there is no squirrelpox virus present. Other respondents requested further clarification on the objectives in North East Scotland, whether this was for ongoing control or eradication. Another respondent specifically stated that the only sustainable objective for Aberdeen City is eradication.

There was general acceptance that further work is required to refine precisely the locations for targeted control, including the preparation of detailed maps. Several respondents offered detailed suggestions including:

- extending the target area to the East Coast in South Scotland, particularly if squirrelpox was detected in this area;
- consider widening the Central Scotland control zone from 5km as necessary to accommodate habitat which may encourage grey squirrels;
- move the central line west along the Forth valley between Campsie Fells and the Ochil Hills towards Stirling and across the South shore of Loch Lomond and Helensburgh;
- extend the boundary in North East Scotland to Braemar;
- include high biodiversity value woodlands in areas of South Scotland beyond the current locations identified for squirrelpox virus, for example, the Cree Valley;
- Review the 'buffer' on the west side of Loch Lomond and the East side of Loch Long and control grey squirrels moving eastwards along Loch Earn;
- Include Ayrshire and Lanarkshire.

#### 4 Next steps

- i. Responses to the consultation signified a high level of support for targeted grey squirrel control Scotland. Consequently, the Grey Squirrel Control strategy will be published in April 2010 as the guiding policy for Government support of grey squirrel control for red squirrel conservation.
- ii. Scottish Natural Heritage will continue to support delivery of grey squirrel control in key locations through the Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project (SSRS) and the Red Squirrels in South Scotland (RSSS) Project. These projects are the main routes through which we will collate evidence of the effectiveness and cost of grey squirrel control for red squirrel conservation. This will be used to underpin decisions on the feasibility of widespread grey squirrel control for long-term conservation action. Progress under the both projects will be reviewed in 2012 to inform these decisions.
- iii. We will continue to work with the RSSS project to develop a strategic surveillance scheme for squirrelpox virus in South Scotland. We will continue to contribute to funding squirrelpox surveillance monitoring in the region and will work with RSSS to establish a system of reporting to inform effective targeting of grey squirrel control in the region.
- iv. We will continue to support the See Red Highland (Feoragan Ruadh Na Gaidhealtachd) project to continue vigilance for grey squirrels beyond the current known spread in North Scotland.
- v. The Grey Squirrel Control Strategy will be integrated with other policies being developed for red squirrel conservation to provide a summary of Government's action for red squirrel conservation in Scotland. Grey squirrel control to support the maintenance of red squirrel strongholds will be a priority within the national strategy. Wider action will include continued support for the development of some of the other measures identified within the consultation responses, for example the development of squirrelpox vaccine and immuno-contraceptives. The summary document will be published by April 2010.
- vi. Work will capitalise on existing resources to put in place the elements necessary for delivery of the strategy at both national and local levels. This will include setting up regional steering groups, identifying any new resources required to support effective delivery of the strategy through these and clarifying the process of communication and reporting between these and the national Group. A flexible approach will be taken to enable modifications in the location of grey squirrel control where this is identified as necessary by regional Local steering groups. National co-ordination of the strategy will work alongside other groups, notably the Scottish Squirrel Group and UK Red Squirrel Group, to avoid duplication in overseeing and reporting action. Discussions will begin to develop this structure through the Scottish Squirrel Group in March 2010, with the intention of having a working structure in place by September 2010.
- vii. The strategy will provide the main Government guidance for funding under the Scottish Rural Development Programme. Information on locations for initial targeted grey squirrel control will be submitted to Government for inclusion in programme guidance as a matter of priority and will be reviewed on a six-monthly basis. Information from the SSRS and RSSS project reviews in 2012 will be used to inform any re-development of this funding mechanism following the scheduled review in 2013. This will include recommendations for revising the application process which may assist with uptake of grants.

## Appendix 1: List of respondents

The following respondents provided permission for their details to be published:

### **Organisations or groups:**

Advocates for Animals  
Ayrshire Red Squirrel Group  
Borders Squirrel Management Group  
European Squirrel Initiative  
Forest Research  
Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park Authority/Cairngorm National Park Authority (joint response)  
Perth & Kinross Squirrel Group  
Red Squirrels in South Scotland  
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
Scottish Estates Business Group  
Scottish Rural Property and Business Association

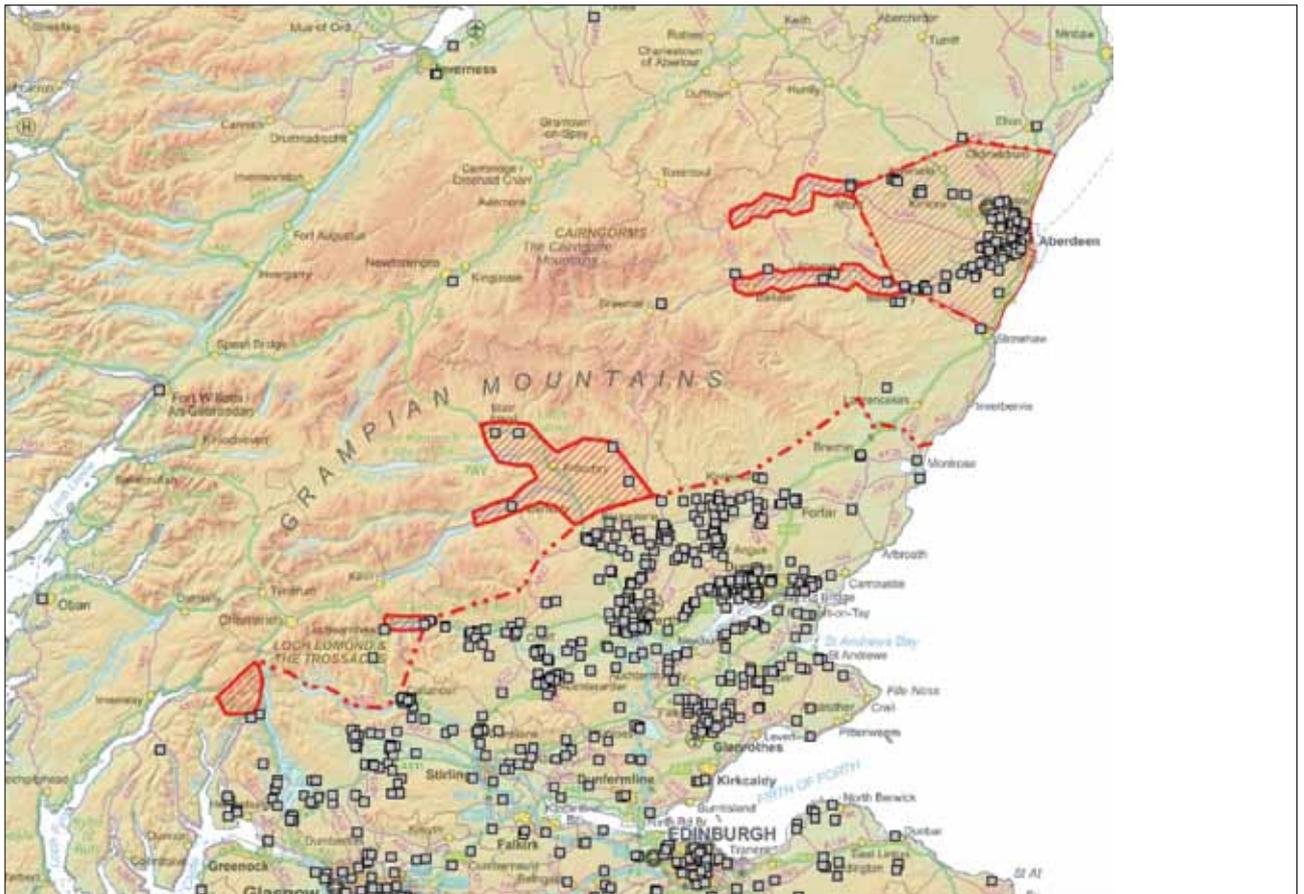
### **Individuals**

Gordon Berry, Ayr  
James Pringle, Torwoodlee & Buckholm Estate Co Ltd

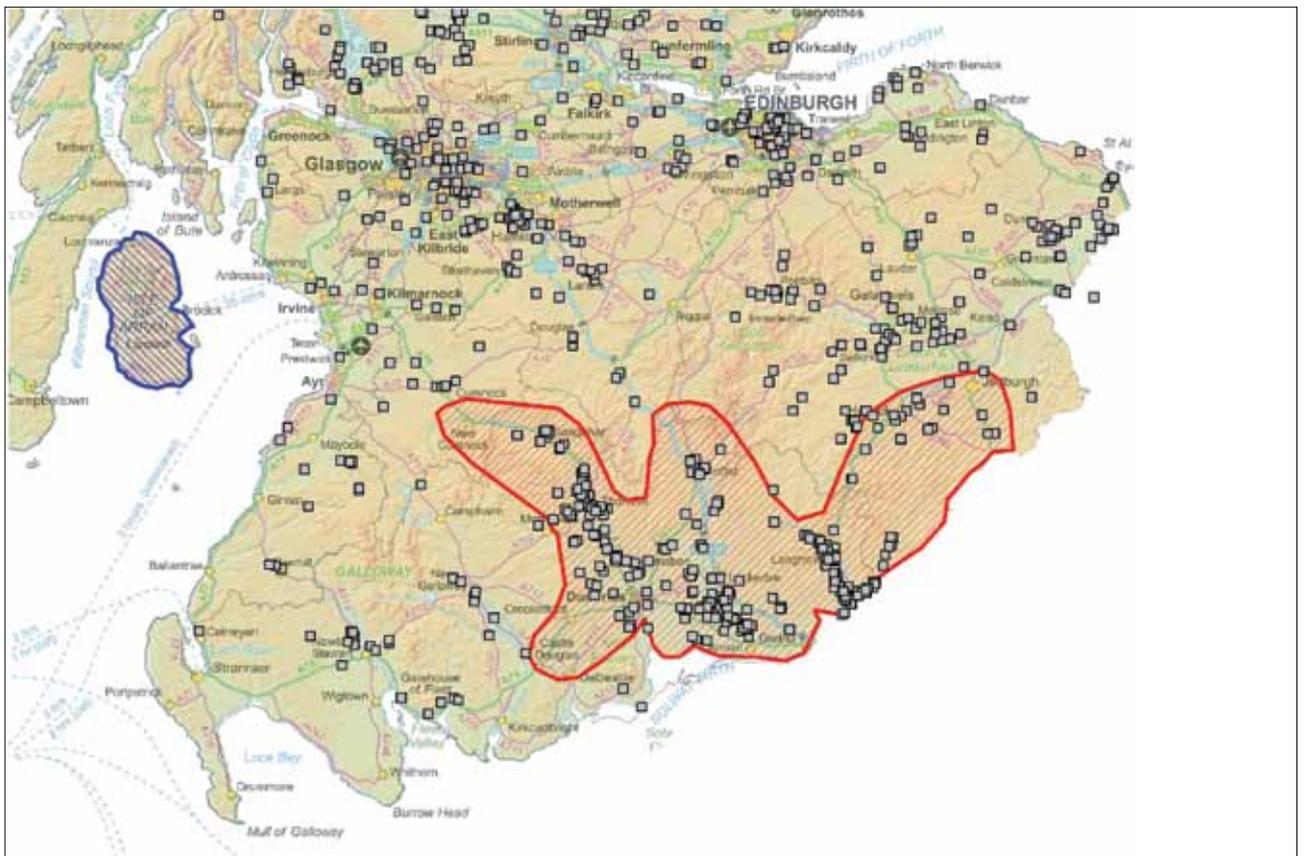
Correspondence was received from a further two organisations and five individuals. These correspondents did not express their permission to publish their details or their responses

## Appendix 2: Maps

Map 1: Grey Squirrel Control Strategy - North and Central



Map 2: Grey Squirrel Control Strategy - South



### Key

 Priority Grey Squirrel Control

 Grey Squirrel Record

 Priority Monitoring Site

 Line of Grey squirrel control

## SNH commitment to customers

- We will ask customers for their views
- We will put things right if they go wrong
- We will give high standards of customer care
- We will publish our customer care performance

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