

Agriculture and Rural Development Committee ARD 10-02(p5)

Date: 19 June 2002

HUNTING WITH DOGS

Introduction

1. In July 2001, the ARD Committee invited views on the effect of a ban on hunting with dogs in Wales, in particular, the factors that distinguish hunting in Wales from other regions.
2. The attached draft has been prepared on the basis of the responses received and information produced in the Burns Report. Subject to agreement by the Committee, the report will be forwarded to the Minister for Rural Affairs at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to inform the wider consultation being conducted on possible future legislation in this area.

Action for the Committee

3. The Committee is invited to comment on and agree its report.

Committee Secretariat
May 2002

Background

1. On 27 June 2000, a plenary session of the National Assembly called upon the Welsh Assembly Government 'to request Her Majesty's Government at Westminster to allow the National Assembly for Wales to decide on the question of hunting with dogs in Wales by framing any Bill to provide for secondary legislative purposes to this end'.
2. On 19 December 2000, a plenary session of the National Assembly for Wales asked its Agriculture & Rural Development Committee to consider the specific impact on Wales of a ban on hunting with dogs. The Committee subsequently invited written submissions on the matter and, although the original Hunting Bill did not become law before the 2001 General Election, the Committee agreed that the

responses it received should feed into the design and parliamentary scrutiny of any future legislation. A copy of the Committee's press release inviting views is attached at Annex A.

The Committee's Report

3. It was not the request of plenary or the intention of the Committee that the desirability or otherwise of a ban should be considered, but rather to focus on issues that distinguish hunting in Wales from other regions. Consequently, this report draws on the responses to our consultation to identify some of the key features of hunting in Wales so that they can be taken into account when shaping relevant legislation. The Report also refers to information published in the report of the *Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs in England and Wales* (the Burns Inquiry).

4. Hunting generates strong feelings on all sides of the debate and it is clear from the responses we received that this is as true in Wales as anywhere. In total we received almost 900 written responses ranging from letters from individual members of the public to extremely comprehensive submissions from organised pressure and lobby groups. Only a small proportion of the submissions we received addressed the narrow remit of the Committee's investigation i.e. *to identify any factors of particular significance to Wales*, with many simply expressing a view on hunting itself and pointing to factors to support their case. The vast majority of the submissions received opposed a ban on hunting. Approximately half of these responses were proforma letters of one form or another, presumably coordinated by organised lobby groups. Also, since rural dwellers most affected by a ban are perhaps more likely to respond to an exercise of this sort, we are conscious that this cannot be seen as a reflection of the situation across Wales. Whilst the response does not give the full picture of the balance of public opinion in Wales, it does give an indication of the strength of feeling amongst many in the rural population.

5. The following sections outline some key data relating to hunting in Wales and the main points made in the consultation responses we received. Many of these points are based on the view that there is a need to control the fox as a significant agricultural pest. However, some respondents did not accept this initial premise except in the case of some 'rogue' foxes. Whilst recognising that there will be a difference between perceived and actual predation by foxes, the Committee did not consider this issue and, hence, the validity of some of the arguments put in the submissions received.

Hunting in Wales

6. There are 48 foxhunting packs registered with the Federation of Welsh Packs (FWP) but these represent only a proportion of the total number of packs in Wales. Some estimates put the number of unregistered packs in Wales at two or three times those of registered packs. Packs in Wales can be broken down into three different types:

- Mounted packs on horses – to be found in the more low-lying areas of Wales;
- Hill hounds – followed on foot due to the nature of the terrain and the wishes of landowners;

- Gunpacks – mainly in upland areas to flush foxes to guns from areas of forest or heath.

7. The table below gives some basic factual information comparing fox hunts in Wales with England and Wales as a whole:



8. Hunts

in Wales tend to be smaller than in England in terms of income, employees and followers and many are followed only on foot. On average, though, Welsh hunts kill more foxes than those in England. The income per fox killed in Wales is lower than in any region in England.

Gunpacks

9. A distinctive feature of hunting in Wales is the existence of around 50 or so gunpacks in upland areas. These are formed by groups of farmers or others contracted by the pack organisations and operate by using hounds to locate foxes in upland habitats, flushing them from forest or heath cover and driving them towards a ring of guns so that the fox can be shot at close range. In part, their existence reflects the higher level of forestation in Wales - 12% of Wales is forested compared with 8% of England. There are rarely spectators present and there is no chase or prolonged pursuit of the fox. Some gunpacks operate a call-out service to track and locate 'rogue' foxes that are verifiably causing sporadic localised damage.

10. The effectiveness and moral basis of measures taken to limit fox numbers was questioned by some responding to our inquiry. Properly regulated killing by gunpacks, though, was generally accepted as being capable of significantly reducing the fox population and as carrying a lower welfare cost than forms of hunting involving pursuit or confrontation.

Perceived need for fox control

11. In common with other upland areas, there is a greater perceived need for control of the fox population in Wales to protect sheep-rearing and game management interests and less emphasis on hunting as a sport. This is reflected in the lower income per fox killed by hunts in Wales and demonstrated by research presented to the Burns Inquiry. This showed that, of farmers in mid Wales who stated they controlled foxes, 96% said they did so for the protection of livestock compared with 44% in the Midlands and 27% in East Anglia. In the same research, 13% of such farmers in mid-Wales cited sport as a reason for killing foxes compared with 59% in the Midlands and 31% in East Anglia. The same research indicated that 61% of farmers in mid-Wales reported lambs lost to foxes, compared to 49% in the Midlands and 24% in East Anglia.

12. These figures are based on farmers' perceptions of how many lambs are lost to foxes. On the whole, such estimates are based on rudimentary measures of predation e.g. foxes seen around lambing flocks, the remains of lamb carcasses at fox dens, the absence of lambs from ewes that should have had a lamb. All of these measures do not necessarily indicate predation of viable lambs by foxes, and are therefore prone to exaggerate the true level of predation. Based on published studies, losses of lambs to foxes in upland areas are thought to be around 3% of lambs born on average, compared to the 18% perceived by farmers. In certain circumstances losses to foxes can be severe, but there are no data to determine what specifically affects such high rates of loss. Other factors known to affect losses may also be related to upland farming such as breed, weight at birth, nutritional status and climate⁵.

Reliance on dogs

13. The nature of Wales' upland terrain means that fewer alternatives are available to the use of dogs, either to flush out to guns or for digging-out. Fox hunting in Wales, therefore, relies heavily on the use of dogs rather than alternative methods such as snares, traps and rifles, which are of limited effectiveness in the upland terrain that characterises much of the Welsh landscape. Data presented in the Burns Report indicate that over 75% of foxes culled in mid-Wales are taken using methods involving dogs. Comparable figures in the Midlands and East Anglia are 28% and 17% respectively.

Stocking density

14. Of the 37 million sheep in the UK, 10 million are in Wales (27%). Average stocking rates are considerably higher in Wales than the rest of the UK. In Wales the average stocking rate is just over 7.2 sheep per hectare of pasture compared to 3.9 in England and 1.7 in Scotland. This higher rate and the general predominance of livestock farming in Wales are reflected in the perceived importance of fox predation on lambs and the higher number of foxes killed by Welsh packs.

Fallen stock

15. The fallen stock service presently provided by many hunts involves the collection from farms of unsaleable dead animals or injured or sick animals. As in other upland areas, a high proportion of lambs in Wales are born outside⁵. This, coupled with harsh environmental conditions and the size of the flock, means that farmers dispose of a relatively large number of fallen stock. Some hill farmers in Wales have arrangements with local hunt kennels to do so at costs below that which would be charged by a licensed knacker service and so would incur

additional costs if kennels were to close. European regulations on incineration and carcass burial are likely to further restrict the disposal options available to farmers.

Economic impact

16. Many of the submissions we received drew attention to the negative economic impact of a ban on hunting through the loss of directly and indirectly related employment. We are conscious that, across the rural economy of Wales as a whole, the effect of a ban would be limited and far less significant than more fundamental changes in economic structure. Some of the submissions we received drew attention to this and the likely absorption of job losses across the economy as a whole. Other respondents argued that, in the small rural communities of Wales, with limited alternative employment opportunities, the economic impact of a ban could be of disproportionate significance with several contributions highlighting the potential negative impact on specific areas or professions.

Social value

17. Many respondents also focussed on the social value of organised hunting and related events. Again, many respondents argued that this factor was of particular significance in the smaller rural communities of Wales.

National Assembly for Wales

Agriculture & Rural Development Committee

June 2002

Annex A

Public get the chance to put their view on hunting ban

The National Assembly is asking people for their views on what effect a ban on hunting would have in Wales.

The Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, is giving the people of Wales a chance to have their say on what could be the potential effects of a ban, particularly on rural communities.

In December 2000 a plenary session of the National Assembly for Wales referred the Hunting Bill to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee to consider its bearing on Wales. Although the Bill failed to become law before the General Election, the Queen's speech in June indicated that the Government would enable a free vote to take place on the future of hunting with dogs.

The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee has therefore decided to conduct an investigation into the effect on Wales of implementing a ban on hunting with dogs. **It is not the committee's intention to express a view on the desirability of a ban, but rather to identify any factors of particular significance to Wales that should be fed into the Westminster debate. To this end, the committee invites written evidence on the possible consequences of implementing a ban, drawing attention to any factors of particular relevance to Wales.**

Any person or organisation wishing to submit written evidence to this investigation should email their submission to agri-rural.comm@wales.gsi.gov.uk or send a copy to the Clerk of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, Committee Secretariat, National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay, Cardiff, CF99 1NA to arrive no later than Friday 16 November.

The committee is conscious of the current pressures on rural communities in particular whilst the effects of foot and mouth continue and so has set a relatively long deadline for responses to this investigation. But should a vote in Westminster be called soon after the House of Commons returns in mid-October, the committee may need to respond before the November deadline indicated above. Those wishing to submit views are encouraged, therefore, to respond by Friday 12 October 2001 if at all possible, in order to guarantee that their views can be taken into account.

July 2001