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HLS ANNUAL REPORT

2010 was the start up year of the Verderers HLS. 2011 has been a year of consolidation. The HLS is a partnership between the Verderers, the Forestry Commission and the National Park Authority. Activities are delegated to the partners to manage: the Verderers manage the grazing-related projects; the Forestry Commission manages the Wetland Restorations and Access ; and the National Park manages Historic and Archeological Protection, and Education.

The HLS board is made up of one voting member from each of the partner organizations: I, Dominic May, represent the Verderers; Kevin Penfold represents the Forestry Commission; and Alison Barnes represents the National Park. Additionally, we have two non-voting members: Rachel Bailey from Natural England; and Graham Ferris from the Commoners Defence Association. The board has met four times a year, every three months, but from now on we plan to meet six times a year, every two months.

The HLS scheme funds projects to conserve or improve the ecology and environment of the New Forest Crown Lands, excluding the inclosures and camp sites. The HLS board is now concentrating on the agreement objectives:

Nature Conservation / Biodiversity

To achieve target condition (favourable or unfavourable recovering) for the designated habitats and species through appropriate management and depasturing of domestic stock, and the physical restoration of unfavourable habitats.

Landscape

To maintain, enhance and restore characteristic landscape features which contribute to the traditional semi-natural landscape character of the New Forest.

Historic Environment

To improve the understanding of the historic environment in order to support positive conservation management of visible and below ground archaeological and historic features, and restore historic buildings which contribute to the area's heritage and special qualities.

Resource Protection

To restore habitats and landscapes damaged by soil erosion and diffuse pollution.

Access

To improve the quality of visitor experience and to influence behavior through improved understanding of the New Forest's natural and historic environment, and land management.

HLS funding is £80 per hectare, and in 2011 our area of the Crown lands in the scheme included 19,447 hectares which gave us an annual payment of £1,550,801. Under the agreement, half of this money is spent by Verderers to support commoning and grazing, and a minimum of £750,000 must be spent on wetlands restoration projects. The board reviewed the projected budget in June against these commitments and swiftly came to the conclusion of the need to reduce our administrative overheads and to curtail the number of new projects being brought forward. This was unfortunate but necessary. Unfortunately this resulted in the loss of the HLS Manager and an abrupt change to the role of the working groups. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those present

who have contributed to the working groups: we have a number of projects ongoing and still much to be achieved that will require the goodwill and support of our partners and stakeholders.

In the last twelve months, the Verderers' portion of the HLS money has been dominated by two major costs. The first was the continuation of grazing payments to commoners for the final year under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme rules. The other large expenditure was the completion of the Beaulieu Road Sale Yard upgrade. Minor projects included reflective collars, micro chipping and accessories for the Agisters' Land Rovers. The Verderers also sponsor one member of the Land Advice Service at the National Park Authority. A small grant fund for commoners is now being managed in house by Colin Draper who is of course our Scheme Manager. The Verderers also used HLS funding for drift way fences at Dur Hill after the enclosure was thrown open. Funding for the Stallion scheme is an ongoing annual expenditure. In 2011 we also initiated a scheme to diversify the blood line of the New Forest pony, and we will wait to see the results before deciding if this will be an ongoing project.

Wetland restoration increased on the previous year with a total of 82 hectares being completed in 2011. The majority of the expenditure being the excellent work at Fletcher's Thorns near Rhinefield, and Ditch End Brook between Pittswood and Godshill Cricket Pitch. More minor work was done in Pittswood itself and at Spring Bushes. Preparation work for future years' projects included ordnance removal and pre-felling. All wetlands restorations require careful advance planning with a number of archeological and environmental surveys together with a series of site visits with stakeholders. In order to prepare plans for future years whilst completing a substantial restoration programme the partnership now pays for a Works Supervisor to support the efficient delivery of works on the ground.

The HLS has funded the Hampshire and Isle of Wight wild life trust's project to eradicate two non-native species, New Zealand Pigmy Weed and Parrots Feather. Eddie Wiseman conducted a Lapwing survey for us and his report makes very interesting reading. We have also started a survey of Bracken Stands that will enable us to improve the bracken management on the forest when the survey is completed later this year. And we have funded the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust project to analyze the effects of cutting and burning gorse and heather.

The HLS agreement also allows us to propose separate projects to be paid for by Natural England outside our £80 per hectare. We have recently completed the LiDAR Survey and we will be appointing a new LiDAR analyst in due course so that we can make proper use of the data which the survey has given us. Unfortunately the five Historic and Archeological Protection (HAP) projects that were part of the initial agreement in 2010 have not been done yet, but we have an extension until the end of this year to complete them.

Natural England give us an incentive to host educational visits by school groups. In total, 1,833 children benefited from a total of 47 education visits to the forest.

In the spirit of openness and transparency, we will make use of the HLS website to communicate better with you. For example, we decided at February's board meeting to agree the minutes immediately by e mail, and these were the posted to the web site within a week after that meeting.

PROGRAMME AND PROJECTS FOR 2012

We have recently updated our mapping of the scheme area and the outcome is an increase of approximately 110 hectares so our annual payment for this year increases by nearly £9,000.

At the end of February the Countryside Stewardship Scheme came to a close and from the 1st March the new Verderers Grazing Scheme (VGS) is in operation. This new system of grazing payments allows the entry of up to 300 people who did not qualify under the old Countryside Stewardship Scheme and this a major step forward for the HLS to support the future of commoning, particularly encouraging young commoners.

The start of the new Verderers Grazing Scheme on 1st March leaves a gap of five months since the end of the old Countryside Stewardship Scheme on 30th September last year. As an encouragement to existing Countryside Stewardship Scheme members, we will pay 5/12 of the December payment to sign up to the new Verderers Grazing Scheme this year.

The Verderers are also looking to provide wider support for commoning. This may include long term funding for publicity and marketing to increase prices of New Forest Ponies in particular.

The Forestry Commission is scheduling 299 hectares of wetland restoration this year. The major project is Latchmore in the north west of the forest. There are also plans for Brook Golf Course, Drivers Nursery, Camel Green and Soldier's Bog.

The HLS board is currently considering how to undertake the bird surveys which are part of our agreement with Natural England. We will also be continuing with the bracken survey.

We have some very worthwhile capital projects outside the £80 a hectare annual payment. We have funding for an upgrade of the cycle way markers and a new cycle map to enable people to more easily stick to the approved cycle network. We have funding for upgrades to Hatchett Pond and Whitefield Moor public toilets, including disability access. We have funding for the removal of the concrete posts on the old railway at Holmsley. We have funding for rabbit proofing of schedule ancient monuments. We have funding for 12 ½ miles of car free ditching. And we have funding to replace Bratley Pound.

I do hope that you have found this AGM to be useful: our intention is to make this an annual event to continue to operate our HLS in an open and transparent manner.

(The meeting was then thrown open for questions.)



Dominic May
Chairman, Verderers of the New Forest Higher Level Stewardship Scheme
4 April 2012