

Bull Hire Scheme : letter from MSPs Rhoda Grant and Peter Peacock to Grazing Clerks

12 November 2008

Dear

Bull Hire Scheme

Following the Scottish Government's recent formal response to the Shucksmith Report there are many matters that require further attention and action and on which crofters have been expressing reservations; reservations we share.

Among the issues there is one that stands out as requiring immediate attention and action, before matters move beyond a point of no return. We refer to the proposed abolition of the present bull hire scheme run by the Crofters Commission.

We are aware of widespread dismay and concern about the decision to end the bull hire scheme.

We have tabled a series of Parliamentary questions on the issues arising and we enclose a copy of those for your interest.

It appears to us that Ministers have totally underestimated the importance of the bull hire scheme and this view was re-enforced having recently visited the stud farms at Inverness.

The scheme, which has been running for generations, is an excellent example of sensible state action supporting community and individual crofting enterprise.

The case for the bull hire scheme might be summarised as this:-

- It gives access to crofting enterprises which may be too small to justify the expense and complication of owning and keeping of a bull.
- Stock quality is enhanced by access to good quality; health certified and well looked after bulls.
- Bulls are taken to the most remote locations of the Highlands and Islands to ensure location is not allowed to be an impediment to quality.
- The market and prices are improved through the quality achieved.
- The scheme recognises that many communities which need a bull suffer severe winters and provides over-wintering within good facilities and with expert staff.
- Crofters can access a second bull if that ever became necessary within a season.

The case that has existed for the bull hire scheme still exists for many communities and, even where there may now be alternatives, that does not diminish the case for supporting those that still need and benefit from it.

While the previous administration explored the future of the scheme, they didn't proceed to end it.

Peter Peacock
Member of the Scottish Parliament for the Highlands & Islands

Please reply to: Regional Office, PO Box 5717, Inverness, IV1 1YT. Tel. (01463) 716299, Fax. (01463) 716572

e-mail: Peter.Peacock.msp@scottish.parliament.uk
web: www.handimsp.org.uk

The case against the Government's decision might be summarised as being:

- The proposed privatised alternative to the scheme is unclear.
- It cannot be clear that any alternative will work.
- A bull is a large and potentially dangerous animal which needs particular care - it is not clear that adequate over-wintering facilities can be funded and created everywhere they are needed.
- The bulls currently benefit by over wintering with expert and experienced care. This will be lost.
- The health status of stock is crucial if quality and reputation is to be maintained, but can this be guaranteed in future?
- It is not clear a private market exists or would guarantee a bull to every location, or of the quality required.
- Help with costs might come through the SRDP, but this is not guaranteed and the bureaucracy of the SRDP means it is inaccessible to many crofters.
- There is a danger crofters in some communities will stop breeding cattle - this is bad economically and environmentally.

We would like to hear your views on this and those of your friends and neighbours and we will be very willing to make representations to the Scottish Government on this issue.

If the Scottish Government is to be persuaded to reverse their decision they will need to hear the views of crofters.

We have enclosed a number of return cards which will make it easy for you and your neighbours to say whether, like us, you would want the government to re-consider and reverse its decision to end the bull hire scheme.

Simply signing the card and returning it to us will both allow us to gauge the full strength of concern there is about this issue and then to make appropriate representations to Ministers.

If it is easier, you can access an e petition at

<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/savethebullhirescheme>.

We recognise that some crofters have private arrangements to access a bull, but this is an issue where we believe crofters need to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, in solidarity, in order to get a shift in policy and to support those crofters who still need or would want the choice to access the bull hire scheme run by the Crofters Commission.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely

PETER PEACOCK MSP

RHODA GRANT MSP

Peter Peacock
Member of the Scottish Parliament for the Highlands & Islands

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