



BRIEFING TO THE INCOMING MINISTER OF CONSERVATION

**NEW ZEALAND GAME
ANIMAL COUNCIL**

FEBRUARY 2023



Game Animal Council
NEW ZEALAND

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“Sustainable management of game animals and hunting for recreation, commerce and conservation.”

ABOUT THE GAME ANIMAL COUNCIL

The New Zealand Game Animal Council (GAC) is a statutory body established under the Game Animal Council Act 2013 to represent the interests of the hunting sector and improve the management of game animals (deer, tahr, chamois and wild pigs) while contributing to positive conservation outcomes.

Creating the GAC was viewed as a mechanism for addressing the conflicts that have challenged the administration of game animals in New Zealand. The management of game animals in New Zealand reflects the influence of societal attitudes, research and scientific knowledge, advances in technology and government policies.

Game animals are viewed variously as an asset for tourism; a recreational sport resource; a food source for many communities; wild animals to be managed; valued introduced species; the basis of a wild venison export industry; a part of the farmed livestock industry; and a resource for industries based on professional guiding and trophy hunting.

The GAC aims to secure the future of game animals and hunting by embodying modern management principles and practices whilst remaining mindful of New Zealand's unique situation with respect to the conservation of indigenous species.



GAME ANIMAL COUNCIL ACT

Under the Game Animal Council Act 2013, the GAC's functions in relation to game animals and hunting are:

- To advise and make recommendations to the Minister
- To provide information and education to the hunting sector
- To promote safety initiatives for the hunting sector; including firearms safety
- To advise private landowners on hunting
- To develop, on its own initiative or at the direction of the Minister, voluntary codes of practice for hunting
- To raise awareness of the views of the hunting sector
- To liaise with hunters, hunting organisations, representatives of tangata whenua, local authorities, landowners, the New Zealand Conservation Authority, conservation boards, and the Department of Conservation to improve hunting opportunities to conduct research, including research on the hunting of game animals
- In respect of herds of special interest for which the Minister has delegated management powers under section 20 to the Council –
 - To undertake management functions that are compatible with the management of public conservation land and resources generally
 - To exercise its powers for the effective management of the herd
- To operate voluntary certification schemes for professional hunting guides and game estates
- To promote minimum standards and codes of conduct for certified hunting guides and game estates
- To investigate complaints and take disciplinary action in relation to certified hunting guides and game estates
- To provide any other services to hunters that the Minister is satisfied are ancillary to the Council's other functions
- To perform any other functions conferred on it under this Act or any other enactment
- To assess the costs of managing herds of special interest and make recommendations to the Minister on ways to recover those costs.

STRATEGIC PLAN

The Game Animal Council has a five-year Strategic Plan based around eight key themes:

THEME ONE - Enhance the quality of game animal herds while remaining consistent with conservation values

THEME TWO - Develop positive relationships between the Game Animal Council and stakeholders through effective communication

THEME THREE - Promote hunter safety

THEME FOUR - Reduce conflict among stakeholders

THEME FIVE - Improve the acceptance of hunting as a safe and legitimate activity

THEME SIX - Promote standards for hunting and management of game animals

THEME SEVEN - Develop appropriate management and administration structures

THEME EIGHT - Promote the interests of the Game Animal Sector.



OUR PEOPLE

Game Animal Councillors offer a wide range of knowledge, skills, attributes and interests, and have valuable connections within the hunting, conservation, tourism, farming, forestry, community, kaitiakitanga and scientific sectors. Councillors are not appointed to represent any affiliated bodies but rather represent all hunting sector interests.

The GAC's current Councillors are:

- Grant Dodson (Chair)
- Sharon Salmons (Deputy Chair)
- Eugene Rewi
- Bruce Warburton
- Tui Keenan
- Peter Swann
- Erin Garrick
- Steve McFall
- John Cook
- Kevin Eastwood

The GAC has over the last three years employed a General Manager and with recent funding increases has been able to employ a dedicated Policy Advisor and Hunter Safety and Education Programme Lead. These staff are supported by a small team of part-time and casual contractors who fulfil specific functions including administration, technical and scientific advice, project management and communications.

FUNDING

The GAC is primarily funded through a government appropriation via Vote Conservation. For 2022-23 this funding is \$600,000 and is set to rise progressively over the following three years to \$1,200,000 by 2025-26. Additional funding of \$70,000 per year is also allocated through the Jobs for Nature Programme to progress the development of an online hunter safety and education programme.

A five-year funding strategy was recently commissioned and developed with assistance from consulting firm MartinJenkins. The 2022/23 – 2026/27 Funding Strategy considers and analyses options to fund the GAC's future operations. Each option was assessed against a set of funding principles – is it doable, is it easy to implement, is it enough, and can it be enduring? In addition, options that recovered costs from third parties were assessed against cost recovery principles established by Treasury and the Office of the Auditor General.

The results of the funding assessment show that:

- There is a strong case for the Crown to fund the GAC's operations until conditions are right to implement other funding sources.
- The Game Trophy Export Levy, as set out in the Game Animal Council Act, remains a significant and viable revenue source for the GAC in the longer term.
- Voluntary schemes could contribute to the overall funding mix. However, they present a high level of uncertainty due to their voluntary nature.
- A range of other funding sources, like grants, gifts, donations, and bequests could form a relatively smaller proportion of the GAC's overall funding mix.

Given the challenges of the current economic situation and the provisions of the Game Animal Council Act, Crown funding is the only viable source for core funding of the GAC's operations over the next five years. Alternative funding sources including the Game Trophy Export Levy may become viable but will require appropriate development during the 2022/23 – 2026/27 period and beyond. Crown funding will be supplemented by independent sources of income, such as donations, however, these sources are limited in scope.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

The GAC relies on the Department of Conservation for governance support and has developed very good relationships with Department staff. This has been built on good communication, a better understanding of the GAC's role and the evolution of policy with regards to the management of game animals and conservation. The GAC and DOC work closely together on a number of projects and advice flows easily between the two organisations. We look forward to further enhancing these relationships in order to improve hunting opportunities and the management of game animal species.

THE NEW ZEALAND HUNTING SECTOR

Over 160,000 New Zealanders are annually involved in some form of hunting with an estimated 50-60,000 involved in large game animal hunting (deer, chamois, tahr and wild pigs). Around 34,000 individuals obtain permits to hunt on public conservation land each year.

As well as its critical importance to game animal management, hunting is an important source of mahinga kai for many communities, has a positive impact on health and wellbeing for tens of thousands of people and encourages participation in community-led conservation initiatives.

A 2014 study estimated that recreational hunters in New Zealand annually harvest approximately 135,000 deer, 132,000 other big game animals (tahr, chamois and wild pigs) and over 230,000 feral goats. With the increase in the popularity of hunting over the last few years these numbers are likely to have increased. The commercial harvest is highly volatile due to the fluctuations in the venison market but typically accounts for 10,000 to 30,000 animals annually.

The total gross sales effect of New Zealanders participating in large game hunting was calculated in 2012 to be in the order of \$180 million annually, however that has likely increased over the last ten years. Prior to Covid-19 it was also estimated that the commercial tourist hunting sector brought in around \$100 million of direct overseas revenue annually, employed approximately 470 people in full time or seasonal employment and a further 60 registered people in the associated taxidermy and trophy exporting services.

The GAC works alongside a strong network of hunting sector clubs and NGO's, including the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association, New Zealand Professional Hunting Guides Association, New Zealand Association of Game Estates, Fiordland Wapiti Foundation, Central North Island Sika Foundation, New Zealand Tahr Foundation, New Zealand Pig Hunting Association and SCI International (New Zealand). We would recommend the Incoming Minister of Conservation also engages with these organisations.



GAME ANIMAL MANAGEMENT

DEER MANAGEMENT

In some locations deer numbers have increased beyond what is a reasonable carrying capacity for the environment. This is not only bad for the health of the forest but also has an impact on the quality of the animals and the hunting. Other areas currently have 'deer free' status and the GAC is committed to making sure those places remain deer-free.



Simultaneously, there are areas where deer exist in high-value herds in low numbers and herd management practices may be required to protect them, e.g., Wakatipu white-tailed deer. It must also be recognised that deer are an important food resource for many communities and it is important to many New Zealand families that access to this wild source of protein is preserved.

Fundamentally, hunters want to hunt good quality animals in a healthy environment, and in order to ensure that, we must institute modern management practices that fit with New Zealand's unique circumstances.

TE ARA KI MUA

The GAC continues to collaborate with DOC on progressing the Te Ara ki Mua management framework for wild goats, deer, chamois, wild pigs and tahr. The GAC previously worked alongside DOC in developing and communicating the Framework, which rightly recognises the complex place deer and other game animals have in New Zealand.

Budget 2022 allocated \$30 million over four years to help implement Te Ara ki Mua and the GAC is enthusiastic about its role in assisting the hunting sector to help deliver it.

Te Ara ki Mua is to be implemented in partnership with whānau, hapū and iwi, and with the input and involvement of local communities. With regards to deer management, the additional funding will go towards initiatives that include regional and site-based planning and management solutions that balance the animals' ecological impacts with their benefits. This presents the opportunity to shift away from the 'all-or-nothing' approach that has characterised management in New Zealand and create enduring solutions that provide for both the community, recreational and commercial benefits of deer while mitigating their more negative impacts.

WILD ANIMAL RECOVERY OPERATIONS

Wild Animal Recovery Operations (WARO) typically account for around 15-20 percent of the estimated annual deer harvest with recreational hunting accounting for almost all the rest.

The way the WARO concession system currently operates does not realise the potential benefits a well-targeted commercial harvest could have for game animal management. Historically, how the WARO system operates has created significant and unnecessary conflict between the commercial and recreational parts of the hunting sector. Concerns relate to the number of deer being harvested in certain places, stags being harvested in accessible and popular recreational hunting locations and the boom-or-bust nature of the industry.

The Department of Conservation currently has underway a problem identification exercise into WARO, which is due to be completed later this year. This is limited in scope however, and the GAC recommends that a comprehensive 'review' of the WARO system and how it can best contribute to Te Ara ki Mua while reducing conflict with recreational hunting should be undertaken in the near future.

TAHR MANAGEMENT

Tahr management has in the past been a divisive issue punctuated by polarising rhetoric on both sides. Fortunately, and partly due to the work of the GAC, this has been replaced by a more constructive consultation process that has been largely free of conflict and where the voices of all stakeholders are heard.

The GAC is broadly supportive of the current 2022-23 Tahr Control Operational Plan. The plan is rightly focused on areas outside the feral range, where tahr densities remain high and where management will have the greatest conservation benefit. The Plan is adaptive and responsive to advice provided by the GAC and the hunting sector. We do, however, remain unconvinced of the conservation benefit of removing all recognisable male tahr from the two national parks and believe resources could be better spent managing breeding nannies in the national parks and in other sensitive parts of the range. The 2023-24 Plan is currently in development.

Work continues to progress between GAC, DOC, local Papatipu Rūnunga and Ngāi Tahu on the development of a hunter-led tahr management area in the South Rakaia/Upper Rangitata area of MU1.

With regards to the Himalayan Tahr Control Plan 1993 generally, the GAC remains of the view that it is outdated due to advances in science and technology, increased knowledge and resources use, sets unfeasible objectives, and has failed to meet the level of adaptability required to manage tahr in changing ecological and socioeconomic environments. The GAC recommends that a management plan is developed for tahr that addresses these issues and aligns management with the principles of Te Ara Ki Mua, provides better protection of tahr habitat and a quality tahr resource for hunting.



HERDS OF SPECIAL INTEREST

Under the Game Animal Council Act, the Minister of Conservation may designate any species of game animal in a specified area on public conservation land to be a herd of special interest. An example of how this model can work both for the benefit of hunting and conservation already exists through the accord that DOC has with the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation. Deer in the wapiti area of Fiordland National Park are actively and successfully managed through a hunter-led, hunter-funded management regime that sees more than 1000 deer removed annually and regular vegetation impact monitoring. The outcome of this approach is enhanced herd quality and vegetation protection.

The GAC considers herds of special interest to be a tool that should be applied for intensive management of highly valued game animal herds in certain locations to improve both hunting and conservation outcomes.

A DOC/GAC collaborative work programme that is looking into the necessary process steps to establish herds of special interest is nearing completion. In the meantime, ministerial recognition of the top herds of special interest candidates would assist the GAC and DOC to action any preliminary work required for more efficient development and then delivery of management plans for these herds and their habitat.

OTHER GAC MANAGEMENT PROJECTS

The GAC has been involved in advising, supporting and implementing a number of recent game animal management projects, including:

- The Lake Sumner RHA Management Operation in partnership with DOC and the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association.
- Partnering with DOC and the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation to design management operations that protect sensitive conservation areas around Bradshaw Sound and enhance the trophy quality of the Fiordland wapiti herd.
- Providing support to the Central North Island Sika Foundation in setting up a sika deer management programme in the Kaimanawas.

PROMOTION OF GOOD MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

As outlined elsewhere in this briefing, recreational hunting accounts for the vast majority of game animals and pest goats harvested in New Zealand. It is therefore an important part of the GAC's work to promote good game animal management principles to the hunting sector.

LOOKING AFTER OUR GAME ANIMALS

Looking After Our Game Animals is a campaign developed by the GAC to encourage hunters, particularly new and inexperienced hunters, to implement game animal management practices that will help achieve beneficial hunting and conservation outcomes. The online resource at the heart of the campaign features information outlining key aspects of good game animal management such as; how the habitat is the foundation of the hunting resource; how male and female game animals have a different role in the herd and a different impact on the environment; and most importantly, how targeting more females and leaving younger males can achieve better quality and lower-density game animal herds in a healthier ecosystem.

NZ RED STAG AGEING GUIDE

Red deer are the most ubiquitous game animal species in New Zealand and good red deer management is about having hunters targeting old mature stags as well as harvesting their fair share of breeding-age hinds. Harvesting younger stags does nothing for herd management and means those animals never get the chance to mature and realise their full potential. The GAC produced this guide to provide hunters with information on how to judge the age of red deer stags in the field and positively contribute to their management.



CONSERVATION

The hunting sector provides many benefits to conservation in New Zealand. The harvesting of large game animals has obvious conservation value, but hunter-led conservation work also includes involvement in a number of predator trapping and species conservation programmes. Both the Fiordland Wapiti Foundation and Central North Island Sika Foundation run extensive trapping programmes for whio recovery, while hunters are involved in bringing kiwi back to the Kawekas, various pest control projects around the country, as well as monitoring kea in Fiordland and the tahr ballot areas. Hut building and restoration work is also provided by the Rakiura Hunters Huts Trust, New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association and Safari Club International (New Zealand). Hunters are prominent participants in the Backcountry Trust, which has played a major role in refurbishing DOC huts.

The GAC has over the last few years been involved in conservation initiatives including:

- Establishment of Hunters for Conservation as a Trust.
- Assistance provided to the Sika Foundation Conservation Trust to deliver adaptive deer management and conservation programmes
- Tahr Ballot Kea Sightings Project alongside the Kea Conservation Trust and Tahr Foundation
- An assessment of tahr mortality during the Zero Invasive Predators Perth Valley possum eradication programme.
- Fiordland deer management projects



APPLICATION OF TOXINS

The application of 1080 has long been a divisive issue within the hunting sector and there still remain deeply-held concerns over aerial toxin operations, particularly where deer and pigs are present and hunting is popular. Concerns relate to such issues as the availability and safety of harvested meat, the potential for high animal mortality, animal welfare, the safety of hunting dogs and the impact of aerial operations on native species (including kea).

The GAC's general policy is for a reduction in the use of toxins while acknowledging their importance for predator and vector control in certain places. Each toxin application should be designed and timed to minimise by-kill and suffering for both native and game animal species and have as little impact on hunting, food gathering and recreational activities as possible.

Deer repellent is a critical tool to help mitigate the impact of aerial 1080 operations on deer and it is the GAC's policy that deer repellent should be used in all aerial operations where deer are susceptible to poisoning. The GAC currently works with DOC, OSPRI and regional councils on the application of deer repellent in aerial operations where valued herds exist, however allocations for deer repellent use to date have been insufficient to protect valued herds.

The GAC advocates for the allocation of sufficient resources to find alternatives to the use of toxins in the environment and remains fully opposed to the use of toxins to control game animals and maintains that there is no justification in using toxins for that purpose.

HUNTER SAFETY AND EDUCATION

The GAC is currently working on the development of an online hunter education programme, 'Better Hunting', which is largely funded through the Jobs for Nature initiative and supported by our ministerial letter of expectations. We also put significant effort into promoting safety messaging to the hunting community through our social media and online presence.

'BETTER HUNTING' EDUCATION PROGRAMME

The objective of 'Better Hunting' is to provide useful and freely accessible information to new and inexperienced hunters and over time to develop an increasing population of New Zealand hunters trained to maximise their hunting success and to do so safely. The Programme is intended to provide a bridge between gaining a firearms licence and practical hunter training such as NZDA's HUNTS course.



Better Hunting is being developed with a significant emphasis on safety, including general outdoor safety that encompasses bushcraft skills and the information necessary to properly prepare and plan a hunt. Naturally, firearm safety is a key component of the safety aspects of the programme.

Recreational hunters also require good information on where to hunt and when, and how to hunt successfully. Information on population dynamics and the contribution of hunting to conservation outcomes is covered. Hunters will be provided the information to make good game animal management decisions whilst out hunting.

The development of Better Hunting is on track and we expect to launch it publicly on a standalone platform in October 2023.

CURRENT SAFETY ADVOCACY

The GAC works both unilaterally and with other outdoor recreation stakeholders as well as with DOC and other government agencies to promote hunting and outdoor safety. A key focus for this is around the March - May Roar period, which sees large numbers of hunters head in to the backcountry. The focus of our messaging is around making good preparations, carrying the right equipment, leaving appropriate intentions, being safe around firearms and making good decisions while on the hill.



OTHER KEY ISSUES

PUBLIC ACCESS

Access issues are a major concern for hunters. This was reflected in a survey of GAC followers and supporters in late 2022. Of the nearly 700 respondents, 67 percent identified access difficulties as the thing that most impacted their hunting in their local region. This result was further supported by feedback gained at the 2022 Sika Show where nearly 43 percent of delegates surveyed also indicated access as an issue affecting their hunting.

While the survey result also included access to hunting on private land (including forestry land) anecdotally, we know that access across private land to the public conservation estate has become more difficult in recent years particularly as health and safety considerations take precedence.

The GAC supports the work of Herenga ā Nuku Aotearoa, the Outdoor Access Commission and is encouraged by the refocusing of the Commission around outdoor access more generally as access to the outdoors is much more than just walking. It is important to provide suitable access for vehicles as well as hunters carrying firearms and accompanied by dogs (where dogs are permitted on the land the access is provided for).

The GAC also has concerns where public conservation land is reclassified above its true conservation value as this often demands restrictions on access and activities that reduce participation in recreation, including hunting. This can lead to detrimental conservation and game animal management outcomes where, without hunting pressure, game animal and wild goat numbers increase and adversely impact the native ecosystem.

FIREARMS

Reasonable access to firearms is absolutely critical to participation in hunting and hunter's contributions towards game animal management and pest control. The GAC has worked constructively alongside other hunting sector organisations as well as with DOC, NZ Police and other agencies to make practical improvements to recent changes to firearms legislation. This includes making sure pest controllers retain the ability to access semi-automatic firearms, that the rules around the transportation of firearms, parts and ammunition remained pragmatic, and change of possession provisions take into account the realities of recreational and guided hunting.

Current NZ Police proposals to significantly increase firearms licence fees as well as fees for dealer licences and licence endorsements are of significant concern to the GAC and could have a significant impact on compliance, the uptake of hunting and entry into the professional hunting sector. Our principles when it comes to licence fees were reflected in our submission to the Arms Legislation Bill in 2019:



“The objective should be to have everyone who uses firearms trained and licensed unless under direct supervision. Cost should not be a barrier. Many hunters hunt to put food on the table, especially in rural communities. Young people starting out in hunting similarly are resource poor and we need to incentivise people to become licensed.”

The GAC is also concerned at regulatory changes that will make access to and operation of shooting clubs and ranges far more onerous. Increased compliance for smaller clubs and ranges and the prospect of their closure could have a detrimental impact on the provision of firearms safety training and sighting in opportunities for hunters.

The GAC continues to provide advice to NZ Police and other agencies on firearms-related issues of concern to the hunting community through the Firearms Community Advisory Forum and Range Certification Engagement Group.

ILLEGAL HUNTING

There is considerable concern at the impact this is having on landowners, including hunting guides and game estates, both financially and from a personal safety perspective. An April 2021 survey of 1200 farmers undertaken by Federated Farmers showed that of the 52 percent who had suffered a crime in the last two years over 47 percent had been victims of illegal hunting.

The GAC is working with Police to coordinate a workshop of key stakeholders in June 2023 to discuss current rural policing initiatives and what else can be done to reduce the instances of illegal hunting.

BIOSECURITY

There are a number of diseases that affect game animals and hunting, which present a significant threat to New Zealand's biosecurity. The GAC endeavours to make hunters aware of these and to support initiatives to prevent incursions.

- The GAC continues to support the goal of eradicating Bovine Tb from New Zealand. The overriding concern for the GAC is the direct and indirect effects of Bovine Tb control operations on game animals and hunting. The GAC has a history of working constructively and cooperatively with DOC and OSPRI, around mitigation measures including, but not limited to, the ongoing development and application of deer repellent, and will continue this approach.
- Kauri Dieback Disease is of significant concern and the GAC supports current mitigation measures to prevent its spread.
- Chronic Wasting Disease is a fatal neurodegenerative disease of both farmed and wild deer. It occurs in most species of deer and is present in USA, Canada, South Korea and Norway. The GAC has provided advice to hunters and hunting guides on the importance of declaring and cleaning gear used in CWD-endemic regions to prevent its arrival into New Zealand.
- African Swine Fever is spreading in Europe and Asia with many wild and domesticated pigs becoming infected and dying. The GAC has provided hunters with Biosecurity NZ advice on what to look out for and how to prevent its spread if it does arrive in New Zealand.
- The potential of a Foot and Mouth incursion into New Zealand is taken extremely seriously by the GAC and we are engaged in work with other agencies to develop appropriate responses. This includes the development of a communication strategy to educate hunters on identification as part of disease monitoring, and on impacts to hunting and hunter contributions to disease elimination should foot and mouth be detected in New Zealand.

ANIMAL WELFARE

The GAC represents the hunting sector on the Animal Behaviour and Welfare Consultative Committee and provides advice regarding existing hunting practices, codes of practice and regulatory proposals including the use of dogs in hunting. Assistance was also provided to the New Zealand Pig Hunting Association to develop a code of practice for pig hunting.



SUMMARY

The Game Animal Council is focused on making a positive contribution to the way game animals are managed for both hunting and conservation and looks forward to providing you with advice and recommendations that will assist in achieving good outcomes for both. We remain committed to working with DOC and other government agencies as well as hunting sector organisations and key conservation stakeholders to also achieve these shared objectives.

If you or your staff have questions about the information provided in this briefing please do not hesitate to contact:



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