

North West Cattle Producers Association Feasibility Study Action Plan 2002 - 2005



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1. Feasibility Study - Executive Summary

1.1 The NWCPA commissioned this feasibility study in order to identify the key issues facing north west cattle producers, the effects of falling cattle numbers and the key impacts of cattle production.

1.2 Cattle numbers in the north west parishes of Assynt, Eddrachilles, Tongue and Farr have been falling for over 100 years. In 1911 there were 9344 cattle and by 1947 there were some 6,000. Today there are currently about 113 units and 2228 cattle. The cattle:sheep ratio has risen from 1:17 in 1911 to 1:46 in 2001.

1.3 The key problems facing producers can be summarised as high costs and low returns. Access to bulls is a big problem – there are now only 4 LIS or ‘Department’ bulls being used in the area. Batching problems occur when producers are forced to rely on AI for long periods. Bull parks and sheds no longer exist in many townships and the habit of breeding strategies which makes bull sharing possible has been undermined. There is a clear need for a new ‘Heifer Development Scheme’ like the one during the North West development Plan, but based on management payments for native breeds.

1.4 Lack of Suckler Cow Premium quota is a major brake on development of cattle production in the north west. The results of this study indicate that there is a shortfall of some 300 units in the area. Producers who want to get back into cattle production cannot get quota from the National Reserve. Producers seeking to increase production cannot get quota from the national Reserve either if they have some quota already. Only ‘*New Producers under 40 years*’ are getting any quota from this source. It is recommended that a new quota category be created by SEERAD in order to maintain and restore cattle numbers in areas like the north west. This new category should have a status equal to ‘*New producer under 40 years*’ and be available to producers in the crofting parishes of North Sutherland, West Sutherland, Wester Ross, Skye and Lochalsh, Lochaber, Argyllshire, Western Isles and Shetland. The cost of buying quota is prohibitive. The fact that quota may be phased out by 2005 makes it even more difficult for producers to tackle the issue in the short term.

1.5 The high cost of feed by the time it is transported in – often in several small quantities – keeps production costs high. For part-time producers production of winter feed can also be prohibitively expensive. The cost of feed was identified as the biggest difficulty to setting up/maintaining cattle production. NWCPA can help by supporting informal and formal feed co-ops.

1.6 For those thinking of growing their own feed, the cost of equipment and machinery for small and part-time producers keeps production costs high and inhibits new cattle keepers starting production. In-wintering is labour intensive and particularly hard for part-time producers with other employment.

1.7 The area suffers from a severe lack of fenced and dyked common grazings to keep cattle off roads, away from settlements and to keep cattle age groups separate. Grazings management is difficult to achieve in the absence of this kind of infrastructure.

1.8 Potential new producers and existing producers are interested in advice about feed options, breeding and cattle health. A significant proportion of cattle keepers, particularly those with Highland cattle, are interested in direct marketing meat for the local market. The majority of producers concentrate on store calf production.

1.9 Cattle can improve the quality of grazings and inbye ground through the way in which they graze, trample, dung and the way in which they ‘heft’. Croft and farm ground can deteriorate in fertility, fewer trace elements are available, birdlife, insects, flowers and herbage decreases when cattle are

removed. In areas with deep peat and on soft coasts cattle can cause poaching, particularly in the winter. There are a number of ways of avoiding such damage including creating hard standings for feeding, wood chip corrals and removal of cattle in wet winter months.

1.10 Among respondents to the study, the undisputed key motivation to keeping cattle was that ‘cattle are good for the ground’. Half of those who have stopped keeping cattle reported detrimental changes to the ground, wildlife and flora since the removal of cattle. Positive environmental and agricultural benefits could be achieved by a concerted effort to halt the decline in cattle numbers and increase the herd. Currently people without cattle are much less aware of the environmental benefits of cattle than those with cattle. This should be addressed in view of the area’s high environmental status.

1.11 The only way to reduce the cost of inputs and hence increase profitability in order to make cattle keeping economically viable is through co-operative working at township, parish and area level. This could be achieved through co-ordination and facilitation by the NWCPA.

1.12 The top 3 ideas which would help people continue or start cattle production were identified as:

Rank	Idea	NWCPA Action
1	Affordable rates to lease or buy Suckler Cow Premium Quota	Lobby on this issue and highlight the fact that quota might be eradicated by 2005
	Access to machinery & equipment via a group	Facilitate creation of Machinery Groups and help source funding. Help ‘batch’ work to improve access to contractors. Create a North West Machinery & Labour Ring.
2	Start-up loans or grants	Lobby for an extra cattle management payment for New Entrants to crafting and Business Start-up monies. Highlight the potential of RSS for people considering cattle keeping. Identify land management payments which would encourage cattle keeping e.g. grassland management, in-bye cropping, hefting on common grazings. Lobby for inclusion in grants/development schemes e.g. CCAGS, Land Management Contracts or purpose made scheme. Meet with Highland Fund to create a new leaflet explaining about low interest loans targeted at cattle keepers.
3	Fencing hill ground	Seek new types of funding on behalf of townships which seek help from NWCPA.
	Being part of a township or producers group herd	Lobby to remove the institutional barriers to group herds. Encourage all producers to JOIN NWCPA!

1.13 To take on these and other tasks the NWCPA will need not only a staff member but also a network of ‘Fieldsmen’ or Cattle Mentors at parish level. In this way the challenge of working in such a large and sparsely populated area can be tackled. Given the existing local pressures on available voluntary time the tasks which this group has set itself can only be achieved if a staff member and network of Cattle Mentors are in place. Without this progress cannot be made.

1.14 A wide range of suggestion have emerged from this study. Some ideas are suitable for taking forward by the NWCPA; others fall outwith the remit of a voluntary or producers group. The issues which can be taken forward by NWCPA would benefit from further discussion by members with a view to creating a 3 year Plan for submission for funding. The remaining issues could be usefully tackled via a partnership project of relevant public agencies and NGOs.

1.15 This report therefore suggest action in 3 Steps:

- Step 1: Winter Work Programme – maintain momentum and develop ideas with a Co-ordinator
- Step 2: NWCPA 3 Year Plan – through a Project Officer and Cattle Mentor network, implement the priority actions
- Step 3: Agri-environment Partnership Project – these actions can best be tackled by a partnership of agencies and NGOs.

1.16 In summary the key issues to be tackled by NWCPA are:

- **Communication and Representation** – information on breeds, markets, changes in support payments and lobbying on behalf of members over SCP, LFASS, 30 Month Rule, institutional barriers to Cattle Stock Clubs etc. Over the past few months the NWCPA has raised its profile and gained members. It is crucial to build on this good start. Members and supporters need to be kept informed and new members can be gained through a continued press profile.
- **Support for New and Existing Producers** – The survey response shows a strong demand for support. Some of this can be achieved through capacity building. Issues regarding the cost of feed, transport, bulling and marketing can be tackled by the group through further investigation. With a Project Officer and Cattle Mentor network the NWCPA could provide a Producers' Support Service.
- **Cattle health and Hi-health** – The survey and workshops have illustrated strong interest in discussing and learning about cattle health. Many producers are interested in joining Hi-health or discussing the issue at township level. NWCPA can facilitate this process and provide background information on health issues and disease pressures.
- **Marketing** – As a group producers can identify new markets for store calves and aim to meet changing market demands. NWCPA can highlight the importance of a high quality environment for production of a high quality product. The Feasibility Study shows a strong demand for local beef and other produce which could be met in a similar way to the Skye Food Link.
- **Youth Action** – raising awareness of the relationship between cattle and the environment through talks, croft visits and arts events. Build up the profile of cattle and the environment through schools and seek out interested young producers or potential producers. Provide experience in cattle handling and management for younger people.
- **Development of Co-operative Working** – Reduce costs and increase profitability through working together. Help create feed co-ops, Machinery groups, Cattle Stock Clubs or similar and bull sharing to cut costs.
- **Environmental Action** – Publicise and illustrate the environmental benefits of cattle keeping, making clear the links between high environmental quality and cattle keeping.
- **Agricultural Infrastructure** – making the most of existing grant options, pursuing new grant options and maximising impact through group approaches. NWCPA could help townships, individual producers and groups achieve this.
- **Capacity Building** – access to new skills for new producers, access to training and experience for existing producers as required. Through the Producers Survey a clear demand has emerged for

training and demonstration events focused on paperwork and form filling, cattle health, choices for cattle feed, halter training, foot trimming, breeding, marketing, carcass conformation and finishing Highland cattle. No doubt demand for other specific topics will emerge. The NWCPA should focus on networking, winter workshops and demonstrations. Provide free Fieldsmen/ Cattle Mentor Scheme for 3 years.

1.17 The NWCPA was created by a group of producers in 2000. During 2001 FMD inhibited progress but momentum was regained in 2002. The key achievements to date are:

- Drawing up plans for feasibility study
- Securing funding for Feasibility study and letting contract
- Press Articles to raise group profile
- Membership Information Sheet produced
- Response to LFASS consultation
- Meeting arranged with Michael Gibson, FSA, regarding review of 30 Month Rule
- Funding application for display stands and materials
- Two Workshops focused on future plans with speakers from Hi-health and SAOS
- Stall at Durness Food Festival promoting NWCPA and local beef
- Information to all townships regarding the potential of RSS for people going into cattle and the LFASS focus on cattle
- Membership rising steadily throughout 2002

1.18 The proposed NWCPA activities are particularly relevant to Actions 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 17 and 45 in the Scottish Executive's "*A Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture*".

2. NWCPA Strategy

2.1 Vision:

To reverse the historic decline in cattle numbers in the north west parishes by supporting new and existing producers.

2.2 Aims:

- Ensure positive environmental impacts from cattle production
- Publicise the fact that cattle are good for the ground
- Increase the cattle herd in the north west
- Take action to minimise production costs so that cattle keeping becomes economically viable
- Develop markets for north west producers
- Ensure producers get best value from agricultural and environmental grants and support
- Organise training for new and existing producers
- Provide assistance with form filling and paperwork
- Fundraise so that NWCPA can take sustained action

2.3 Proposed Membership Services

- Lobbying on behalf of members
- Producers' Support Service plus - Newsletters, website and leaflet
- Advice on cattle health and Hi-health Level 1 & 2
- Market Development – store calves & local beef
- NWCPA Cattle Handbook with section for new producers
- Free agricultural and environmental advice through 3 year Cattle Mentor Scheme
- Encouragement for Machinery Group creation and funding
- Advice about Feed co-ops in partnership with Norcelt
- Directory for bull sharing and agricultural contractors
- Winter Workshops & Study Trips

3. Action Plan

3.1 Step 1: Winter Work Programme 2002 – 2003

Objective:

To build on the momentum established during the Feasibility Study and agree a plan for the next three years.

Step 1 Targets:

- Let a 6 month contract for a Co-ordinator
- Ensure that 50% of north west cattle keepers are members by April 2003
- Create a register of potential cattle keepers
- Create a register of current cattle keepers
- Maintain contact with Local Beef List people
- Commission an epidemiology report on cattle health in the north west parishes
- Organise a visit from the Lewis & Harris Cattle Group on cattle health/Hi-health
- Run winter meetings to discuss Hi-health
- Write and distribute 2 Newsletters
- Subscribe to SAC Technical Notes and disseminate information
- Provide support services for new and existing producers via a contact point
- Run 3 workshops and 2 Study Trips
- Organise 3 Schools events
- Commission a suitable logo
- Revise NWCPA structure to enable employer status and fund management
- Create and submit a Three Year Plan for funding with a Project Officer post
- Begin discussions regarding a partnership project

Step 1: Winter Actions & Costs – 2002/3

Action	Description	Cost
NWCPA Structure	Advice from SAOS and lawyer. Co-op or Company Limited by Guarantee perhaps with charitable status (and a trading subsidiary called Far North Beef?).	Co-ordinator & lawyers fees - £1000
NWCPA Newsletter	To include a members notice board for bull hire, contractors etc. Send to all producers.	£2000
NWCPA Information Pack	Develop a prototype and cost it	Co-ordinator
Press articles	Northern Times and Am Bratach – every second month.	Co-ordinator
Logo & Identity	For NWCPA/trading subsidiary 'Far North Beef'. Commissioned by Co-ordinator.	£500
Subscribe to SAC Sheep/Beef and Technical Notes	Summarise main issues in Newsletter	£100
Databases	All cattle producers by parish and all potential producers and supporters from Feasibility Study phase. Also all those interested in local beef.	Co-ordinator & parish reps
Cattle Health	Proposal to help all members into Hi-health Level 1 & 2. Include in Newsletter. Organise area meetings to discuss – Hi-health and Yvonne Richardson (Lewis Group) to talk. Follow up with all producers. Second meeting to decide if members want this. If yes – full costings needed. Commission an epidemiology report to establish way ahead.	£3000
Machinery Groups	Assess what potential uptake is and funding options for new groups with a view to taking a co-ordinating role so that NWCPA provides a 'one-stop shop' for setting Machinery Groups up from writing the plan, providing constitution, costings and securing funding.	Co-ordinator
Workshops	Cattle Feeding Cattle Health Hill Breeds & Markets	£750
Study Visits	French Group MacBeths – Finishing & marketing Highland meat	£3500
Schools Action	3 Secondary Schools Talk by 2 cattle keepers each Visit to croft/farm in each area.	Co-ordinator & volunteers T&S for volunteers.
Cattle Mentors/ Fieldsmen	Draw up job description, assess costs and identify suitable mentors. Consult with FWAG.	Co-ordinator
3 Year Plan	Develop, discuss, cost and submit for funding. Applications to: Leader+, Scottish Community Diet Project, RSPB, Highland Biodiversity Partnership, Highland Council, SNH, Crofters Commission, HISP	Co-ordinator
Partnership Project	Explore options with THC, SNH, Crofters Commission, RSPB, Highland Biodiversity Partnership, FWAG, SEERAD, CASE,	Co-ordinator
General Expenses	Postage, phone, meetings, press ads, stationery, mailings (exc Newsletter) etc	£2000
T&S - Committee	Meetings and travel	£1000
T&S – Co-ordinator	Meetings and travel	£2500
Co-ordinator	Let a contract	£6000
TOTAL		£22350

Step 1: Funding Applications

Organisation	Contribution Description	Amount
Community Economic Development	Financial – under Measure 1 & 3	£5000
The Farmers Fund	Financial	£7250
Crofters Commission	Financial – Capacity Building?	£2200
The Highland Council	Financial – Agricultural Development	£2200
SNH	Financial	£2200
Highland Biodiversity Partnership	Financial - Projects	£1000
RSPB	In kind – printing and distribution of 2 NWCPA Newsletters to all croft/farm households and to Local Beef List	(£2000)
TOTAL		£22350

3.2 Step 2: NWCPA Three Year Plan 2003 – 2005

This step will be further discussed and developed during the Winter Work Programme. The targets and priorities listed below are hence in draft form at this stage. The aim is to employ a part time project officer for 3 years to carry out the suggested action plan for NWCPA.

Objective:

To make a start on reducing the cattle:sheep ratio from 1:46 to 1:23 in next 15 years and resist pressures towards higher stocking densities without jeopardising producers' ability to make a profit

Step 2 Targets:

- 75% of cattle keepers as members by April 2004
- Help 20 new people into cattle production
- Facilitate 10 new Machinery Groups
- Create Project Officer Post and Fieldsmen/ Cattle Mentor Network
- Direct market Highland beef locally
- Develop new markets for store calves
- 2 Newsletters per annum
- 3 Workshops per annum
- 1 Study Trip per annum
- Establish Producers' Support Service, website & leaflet
- Annual Food Festival Event
- Annual Youth event focused on cattle and the environment
- Publicity to link quality produce with high level of environmental designations
- Develop 'Good Farming Practise' Guidelines as a group

Step 2: NWCPA Three Year Plan - Priority Actions

1. Representation

- Lobby for a new 'Very Fragile Areas' category in applications to the National Reserve for Suckler Cow Premium quota which should have the same status as 'New producers under 40 years' and would include Cattle Stock Clubs and similar
- Highlight with SEERAD the huge shortfall in quota in the north west parishes, the break on development this creates and the environmental need to get cattle back onto the ground
- Lobby regarding changes in LFASS
- Lobby regarding CCAGS review and inclusion of 'things with wheels'

- Lobby for New Entrants to receive extra Management payments for starting cattle and cattle equipment, including things with wheels – and Business Start-up monies.
- Lobby for AI services to be included in HIVSS
- Encourage Crofters Commission to pilot bull provision for lower numbers of cattle/producers in the north west as part of a strategy to rebuild crofting herds and stock quality
- Lobby for removal of institutional barriers to group production – CCAGS, SCP quota application process etc.
- Lobby for reintroduction of a cropping grant on environmental grounds
- Join with other producers groups in influencing the outcome of the review of the 30 Month Rule to the benefit of members

2. Communications

- Establish a regular NWCPA Newsletter
- Produce regular press articles about NWCPA activities to maintain profile and momentum and build membership
- Create a website and leaflet describing membership services
- Establish NWCPA phone line and e-mail

3. Support for New and Existing Producers

- Provide a Producers' Support Service through the Project Officer and Cattle Mentor Network
- Support existing and new producers in tackling paperwork and understanding regulations
- Develop a Cattle Handbook or Starter Pack
- Keep members informed of the implications of gradual withdrawal of production based support payments
- Develop NWCPA Good Framing Practise options in anticipation of this new system

4. Cattle health and Hi-health

- Organise meetings to discuss cattle health and establish epidemiology information for north west
- Try to source funding to help members achieve Hi-health Level 1 & 2 status at a cheaper rate

5. Marketing

- Facilitate area breeding strategies and batching
- Develop links with other producers at the different production stages and provide market information
- Develop links with buyers, abattoirs, butchers, food writers etc. and develop understanding of conformation issues
- Assess the costs of converting Lochinver butcher to a Low Throughput Cutting Plant
- Assess group finishing options based on a finishing unit elsewhere
- Trial sales of local beef with Highland cattle making a feature of seasonality

6. Youth Action

- Meet with Highland Fund to develop and design a leaflet/information pack aimed at new cattle producers
- Develop a guidance pack for setting up Cattle Stock Clubs and group herds
- Cattle Handling Course with Mentors
- Schools events – Food & Future production – Arts events, Croft Visits
- Cattle & Crofting – environmental arts event

- Highlight the RSS options for reintroduction of cattle to all townships

7. Development of Co-operative Working

- Facilitate informal and formal creation of feed co-ops and Machinery Groups
- Create a register of needs by parish for contractors and shared feed/Mart transport and a North West Machinery & Labour Ring
- Create a register of demand for bulls and bulls available, including assessment of transport options
- Investigate ways to recreate bulling parks, facilitate this and encourage area/township breeding strategies to make bull sharing possible
- Find ways to achieve shared in-wintering and related job creation

8. Environmental Action

- Facilitate uptake of Rural Stewardship Scheme and lobby for area targeting of support to north west
- Provide information on cattle and the environment
- Find ways to support winter feed production
- Input to Land Management Contacts

9. Agricultural Infrastructure

- Investigate the possibility of funding to re-establish the necessary basic infrastructure to facilitate cattle keeping
- Support the creation of a partnership Project which includes extra funding for fencing and dyking of hill ground since the costs are beyond the means of most townships
- Suggest shelter belts under CCAGS as an option for creating stock proof areas

10. Capacity Building

- Winter Workshops – Regulations, Support Schemes and Paperwork; Winter Feed Production; Feeding Options for Hill Cattle; Health; Woodchip Corrals; Halter Training; Calving; RSS etc.
- Encourage research and information on hill cattle
- Annual Study Trip

Step 2: Potential Funding Applications:

Leader +, The Highland Council, SNH, RSPB, The Crofters Commission, CASE, Highland Biodiversity Partnership, Scottish Community Diet project, Farmers Fund.

3.3 Step 3: Partnership Project Proposal

Suggestions for an agency partnership project in view of the fact that many key issues and actions are beyond the scope of a voluntary group.

Aim:

To set up a partnership of agencies and NGOs with the aim to create a multi-objective ‘Crofting Counties’ pilot scheme in support of cattle and cattle producers . This Partnership could also be an Advisory Panel to the proposed Project Officer, NWCPA being the management or steering group.

Step 3 Targets

- Create 5 Cattle Stock Clubs
- Monitor the environmental impacts of cattle re-introductions and develop simple measures – cropping, cattle numbers, diversity of management etc.
- Create clear links between quality local produce and areas with high levels of environmental designations
- Re-establish township infrastructure for cattle on grazings in minimum of 15 townships
- Increase winter feed production by 20%
- Pilot discount LIS bulls as part of group breeding strategies
- Create mechanisms for encouraging estates to release land for seasonal grazings lets, bulling parks and winter feed production.

Step 3: Proposed Partners

The Highland Council, SNH, The Crofters Commission, RSPB, Highland Biodiversity Partnership, CASE, SEERAD

Step 3: Partnership Project Proposal – Proposed Actions

1. ACTION: Aim to reduce the cattle:sheep ratio from 1:46 to 1:23 in next 15 years and resist pressures towards higher stocking densities without jeopardising producers’ ability to make a profit
 - Highlight the positive environmental and agricultural benefits of cattle keeping throughout the north west as a way of encouraging cattle keeping
 - Work to achieve this through group, partnership action and Natural Care
 - Explore whether the proposed Partnership Project could work with a volunteer township in each parish to create a Cattle Stock Club and the necessary infrastructure with arrangements in place for ownership of the cattle to be with the Stock Club by the end of the project
 - Study the habitat impacts of proposed Cattle Stock Clubs and try to ensure that they cover a relevant range of habitats
 - Request that the Partnership Project includes cropping management grants for new and existing producers supported by grants for equipment, training, technical advice and machinery. **Where the terrain allows** – minimum of 25% of inbye for hay/silage and 15% for fodder crops
 - Work with RSPB in trying to increase corncrake numbers
2. ACTION: Create incentives to find ways, with NWCPA co-ordination, of re-establishing bull sharing
 - Provide finance (through CCAGS) and on the ground advice for recreating bull parks and byres
 - LIS could offer half price bulls and wintering for 6 years as a kick-start
 - Include training in handling and wintering bulls

- Assist groups of producers/townships to agree a breeding strategy which makes it possible to share a bull in the first place – if there are a few Highlanders and a few other cows it may not be easy to share a bull at all every year
3. ACTION: Campaign for integrated and broadened support to reflect current conditions
- Include ‘things with wheels’ -agricultural machinery - in CCAGS
 - Broaden CCAGS to include Cattle Stock Clubs or producers groups from a number of townships instead of just one township since this would reflect real co-operation patterns
 - Adjust RSS and CCAGS to provide 90% - 100% funding for township fencing and dyking by using the ‘cultural landscapes’ issue
 - Increase RSS rates for retention of native cattle or native based crosses and include common grazings in calculation
 - Promote *RSS Management Option 24: Introduction or Retention of Extensive Cropping* - but lobby for higher payment rates and integrated support – Machinery Groups, technical back-up and training – or pursue same through partnership project
 - Investigate ways of providing a new North West Heifer Development Scheme through cattle management payments and winter feed growing
 - Move towards a ‘One Stop Shop’ approach for support