Scottish Government Support for Advice in the Crofting Counties

A rural Scotland that is sustainable, outward looking and dynamic - with a diverse economy and active communities, where rural prosperity can increase in ways that make best use of all resources - is important to the Scottish Government.

To assist in achieving this the Scottish Government provides funding towards the provision of the rural advisory service in the crofting counties. SRUC is commissioned annually and this service is delivered locally through its SAC Consulting division as part of the Veterinary and Advisory Services (VAS) programme. This funding provides discounted fees for consultancy services for crofters as well as a range of free advice and information through workshops and meetings supported by numerous publications.

With offices in Lerwick, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Balivanich, Portree, Thurso, Inverness, Oban and Campbeltown, delivery is local and the discounted service on a wide range of technical and business issues is seen as a major benefit of the VAS support to the crofting counties. Discounts of between 40% and 65% are funded for crofters and in the last year over 2,870 crofters benefitted from these discounts, with 1,884 taking out a crofter’s subscription with the highest rate of discount. The Scottish Government considers the impact of this to be significant. For example these nine local SAC Consulting offices in the Highlands and Islands assisted 2,551 IACS applications in 2014 with 96% of these completed online to ensure accuracy and timeliness. The Single Farm Payment (SFP) secured for these businesses amounted to some £38.2M in 2014. In the last three years of the last Scottish Rural Development Programme a total of 959 Rural Priorities applications were assisted with a total approved projects value of some £50.8M.

SAC Consulting’s network of local offices across Scotland continues to ensure the delivery of public good advice as well as access to up-to-date and relevant business advice to the remote and disadvantaged areas of Scotland. With the support of the VAS programme, crofters and farmers across the country continue to access the advice necessary to operate their businesses viably and to the sustainable standards that the Scottish Government recognises are necessary to make all of Scotland a successful country.

Outcomes from this work are enhanced as a result of the ability to undertake collaborative activities across a range of work themes known as Advisory Activities (AAs). This not only enhances delivery efficiency through working together but also delivers a range of outcomes that have a positive impact in the crofting counties. Information and advice is provided through various events supporting sector development and best practice. SAC Consulting works with a range of organisations to ensure advice is consistent and that the most effective use is made of the funding available.

The delivery of free advice and information covers a range of topics including animal welfare, biodiversity and conservation, as well as pollution control and new entrants amongst others. In 2013/14 thirty seven different events were held across the Highlands and Islands with over 740 attendees. Examples of these activities are highlighted in this publication.
Crofter Clinics

During 2012/13 a programme of crofter clinics was delivered across Sutherland, during which advice was given to crofters on the range of options available to them within the various funding frameworks and how these could be used to sustain and develop their business in very fragile rural communities. This was particularly relevant given the changes in the access to crofting grants and the requirement for crofters to get the holding properly mapped and registered with the Crofting Commission.
Animal Disease Surveillance and Control

SAC Consulting provides a veterinary diagnostic laboratory service to vets in practice throughout Scotland through a network of 8 Disease Surveillance Centres (DSCs) strategically located throughout the country in areas of greatest livestock density. Submissions of diagnostic material are also regularly received from outwith these areas. Our Veterinary Investigation Officers maintain a regular day to day dialogue with vets in practice throughout the country and advise on the appropriate samples to collect and means of disease investigation. In addition a 50% discount is applied to laboratory fees on submissions from registered crofts. Outbreaks of new or unusual diseases are investigated regardless of where in Scotland they occur.

Over the last few years the VAS programme has supported the investigation of a number of animal diseases including clostridial enterotoxaemia, idiopathic necrotising enteritis, Schmallenberg virus, cattle scab, blackleg, Clostridium difficile and liver fluke. This work benefits all livestock holders across Scotland and beyond. Information is shared with veterinary specialists and feeds into a number of their sector publications. Crofters, farmers and other agricultural stakeholders are informed of current disease issues through Disease Surveillance News, their local SAC Consulting newsletters as well as through the SRUC website. This work, coupled with livestock issues identified on croft, helps to shape the delivery of a number of livestock related activities some of which are outlined below.

Bull and Suckler Cow Management

Key to successful delivery is identifying and understanding local issues facing crofters and designing activities that directly tackle these issues. In 2010/11 there was significant uncertainty over the Crofting Commission Bull Hire scheme which many had relied on in the North West Highlands. There were also several particular bull management issues arising in small herd situations. A Bull Management campaign was designed to target the smaller scale producers in this area.

The first meeting, held on Skye in September 2011, was delivered by one of SAC Consulting’s beef specialists and an SAC Consulting vet and was facilitated by SAC Consulting’s Portree office. This meeting looked at several issues including bull housing, nutrition and lameness. Bull health issues were discussed with BVD and Johne’s disease being the main topics. A local vet was also involved to ensure issues specific to the locality were included. The meeting looked at managing fertility in small herds and managing bulls within a cooperative with other herds in the township. Crofters and farmers considered how they could use EBVs (Estimated Breeding Values) to aid the selection of the right bull for their cows and situation. The meeting also covered how CCAGS can be used to support the improvement of facilities for bulls if considering bull purchase.

Several events were held in Uist, Stornoway, Ullapool, Barra and Islay; each adapted to local needs whilst focussing on health checking, the value of quarantine provision, health and welfare topics. The event on Lewis, organised by the Stornoway office, focussed on discussing the benefits of disease testing for improved stock performance and animal welfare. Joint community working was discussed as a way for groups to work together to implement improved stock management, record movements and assess, control and eradicate disease. This campaign was well received with all participants indicating that they would implement things they had learned.

The 2011/12 series of meetings was well received by industry and in 2012/13 a collaborative campaign was developed with Quality Meat Scotland (QMS) and again included the local vet practice. Key practical and technical subjects were covered including bull management, health, nutrition and genetics. One key objective was to discuss with crofters and farmers issues relating to bull selection and management to increase profitability and improve animal welfare. This activity addresses a number of issues relating to the store calves that move from the north west to the east or south for finishing and eventually supplying the PGI Scotch Beef brand.

In August 2013 approximately 100 farmers attended three on-farm events held in Tiree, Bonar Bridge and Shetland.
The focus of these events was cattle management for both bulls and suckler cows and included topics such as welfare, cattle health and particularly bull selection. The use of different breeds of bulls was discussed as well as selection using EBVs to avoid calving problems. Local vets were involved to discuss specific local issues along with discussions on topical diseases such as Schmallenberg Virus, fluke and Johne’s. These events proved very popular with over 75% of attendees rating them as “excellent” and the remaining 25% rating them as “very satisfactory”.

A key benefit of cattle keeping in extensive and often High Nature Value (HNV) farming areas is the beneficial effect of cattle grazing on semi-natural habitats. At a meeting in Skye in 2013 that focused on extensive cattle, the Bumblebee Conservation Trust showed the benefits of management of these areas for rare bumblebees and ways that cattle keepers can further enhance habitats.

A further series of meetings is planned for summer 2014 and will include events on Skye and Islay. These workshops will concentrate on welfare, genetics, nutrition, management and cattle health, as livestock production in these areas is vital to the farming sector. This activity will further help cattle keepers in extensive areas adapt and increase technical performance in this time of change with volatile markets and CAP reform.

**Fluke Roadshow**

Liver fluke is a well recognised disease of cattle and sheep in many parts of Scotland. The mild wet winters we have experienced in recent years have contributed to the spread of liver fluke disease. In 2011/12 rumen fluke, another parasite, was identified as a cause of disease for the first time in Scotland. Both liver fluke and rumen fluke were the focus of a number of events and activities delivered as part of the VAS programme and in the last year a fluke roadshow was delivered.

Over 85 farmers attended the Fluke Roadshow which took place at 5 different locations across the Highlands and Islands, starting in Westray in August 2013, moving through Sutherland and Caithness then culminating on the Isle of Lewis in October 2013. These meetings were held on-farm with a morning session comprising a series of topic specific talks and then a hands-on afternoon session focussing on a range of topics including lameness, land management and electronic weighing. An SAC Consulting vet highlighted the damage inflicted by liver fluke infection by undertaking a liver dissection. The common problem of incorrect dosage of flukicide was also addressed. Incorrect dosage usually results from under or over estimating livestock weights, so those crofters and farmers attending were asked to competitively guess the weight of tups, an exercise that clearly highlighted the issue.

At the Stornoway event, delegates also heard and discussed feedback from a review of the local vets’ findings for the Stornoway abattoir 2013 autumn season. SAC Consulting Veterinary Services has also provided input into meetings hosted by abattoirs and meat processors to discuss liver fluke. Again these meetings have been well attended and well received.

**Hill Sheep Welfare and Productivity**

In November 2011 a sheep welfare and productivity event was hosted for crofters and farmers. The aim was to address the low numbers of lambs sold per flock in many of the hill situations in the West Highlands. Anecdotally ‘black loss’, which is the unattributable loss of lambs during the summer when they are on hill grazings, is a major problem. The meeting covered a range of support...
measures available for extensive sheep systems including the SNH Sea Eagle Scheme and other environmental measures. Production cycles and potential interventions to raise productivity were also covered at this event. This included demonstrating sheep condition scoring, disease challenges that face the lamb from birth to weaning, management of the pregnant ewe and the benefits to animal welfare from improved grassland management.

Husbandry Techniques for New Producers

With many new small scale pig producers in the Hebrides and Northern Isles, there is a demand for training courses tailored to provide practical information on pig husbandry and welfare to producers with little or no husbandry experience. SAC Consulting staff have delivered such courses in Skye, Lewis, Uist and Shetland.

These courses are split into 2 sessions: a theory based morning session, with a more practical afternoon, where the delegates get more hands-on experience. Delegates have appreciated the fact that these courses go beyond theory and deliver at a practical level. Courses were designed so new keepers understood all the practical implications as pig welfare is paramount and veterinary and husbandry issues were covered in detail.

Many of the new producers were very well read on the subject, but benefitted greatly from practical training and seeing other producers’ pigs and facilities. A few myths were dispelled about ground suitable for pigs; electric fencing requirements and feeding. Many delegates were surprised at the size pigs can grow to – over 100kg - and just how effective pigs can be at churning up ground.

While the courses in themselves were very well received, of further lasting benefit are the new networks which have now been established for exchanging information and help. Throughout 2014/15 these practical courses are being replicated with further courses on sheep, cattle and hen keeping.

Restocking Honeybee Populations on the Isle of Arran

Varroa mite is a worldwide problem which has a massive impact on the beekeeping industry and over the years it has had a huge effect on the Isle of Arran. With the native honeybee population on Arran virtually wiped out due to the Varroa mite, it was essential to help the island’s beekeepers as they had no Varroa mite management experience. Furthermore it was important that Arran was restocked with honeybees.

Arran formed a beekeeping group in January 2013 and soon after they were granted £2,000 from the Arran Trust in order to encourage new beekeepers as well as to source Scottish bred honeybees to help towards restocking Arran. From the grant the beekeeping group were able to source and order eleven nuclei which are small honeybee colonies with a population of approximately 8,000 honeybees including a newly mated queen. The colonies were scheduled to arrive in Arran in the summer of 2013.

During April 2013 SAC Consulting was contacted and a Varroa management training day was arranged. The
The objective was for the beekeepers to learn about the management of the Varroa mite before the honeybees arrived in the summer. Without this training the new colonies would die out in time. The training course took place in April 2013. By providing the Arran beekeepers with sufficient expertise and knowledge of the Varroa mite they would be able to use integrated pest management techniques. This would hopefully lead to achieving a sustainable and healthy population of honeybees for pollination and honey production on the Isle of Arran. The course had both theoretical and practical components and the beekeepers who attended felt it was very rewarding and reduced their concerns about dealing with the Varroa pest.

The eleven nuclei duly arrived on Arran in August 2013; each beekeeper then transferred them into hives and prepared them for the winter of 2013. The Arran beekeepers’ next concern was how to manage their colonies for swarm control and prevention for the forthcoming season in 2014. SAC Consulting was able to provide a second training day which was held in March 2014. The objective of the second course was to provide knowledge on efficient colony management and to impart skills to support future stock increases from the parent colonies that had arrived in the summer of 2013.

Benefitting Scotland's Wild Birds

Wild birds play an important role in remote areas of Scotland and part of the VAS programme funds wild bird disease surveillance. Work undertaken covers a range of issues from investigation of bird eggs that fail to hatch, reasons for a decline in breeding populations to disease prevention in game birds.

The red-billed chough is one of Scotland's rarest breeding wild birds; it is also classed as being of high conservation priority across Europe. The islands of Islay and Colonsay hold virtually the entire Scottish population of this species and so parts of these islands have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protection Areas. Unfortunately the breeding population on Islay is in decline, falling from around 60 breeding pairs in 2002 to around 45 pairs in 2012.

The Scottish Chough Forum, including researchers from the Scottish Chough Study Group, Glasgow and Aberdeen Universities, SRUC, Scottish Natural Heritage and The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, has been monitoring the population since the 1980s. As part of the wild bird disease surveillance AA, SAC Consulting vets have been carrying out post-mortem examinations on choughs found dead or euthanased on welfare grounds and have identified several important and novel disease conditions. Researchers will be able to utilise the post-mortem findings to develop strategies to reduce the adverse effects of some of the conditions that have been identified.

Game bird rearing and releasing practices have benefitted from work undertaken during 2013/14. Coccidiosis remains one of the commonest conditions diagnosed in game birds submitted to SAC Consulting Veterinary Services in the summer months, despite the routine inclusion of anticoccidial drugs in the feed. Analysis of submissions is feeding into advice for pheasant and partridge rearing.
Climate Change, Pollution Prevention, Crop Health and Farm Woodlands

Over recent years crofters and farmers have benefitted from a range of specialist advice on ways they can improve business profitability and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from routine practices under the Farming for a Better Climate initiative.

Farming for a Better Climate

During 2013/14, a number of events were held across the country, reaching some of the more remote areas of Scotland. These events are delivered in conjunction with other Advisory Activities and some examples are featured below.

In November 2013 an event entitled Soil Structure – The Foundation of your Farm was held at Dalivaddy Farm, Drumlemble in Kintyre. Courtesy of the Ralston family, farmers were invited to hear from one of SAC Consulting’s soil and drainage specialists about the effect of soil compaction and how crop growth as well as drainage can be affected if farm soils are neglected. Working with a local business from Campbeltown, a demonstration of various equipment to aid soil aeration was organised.

In February 2014 SRUC’s Kirkton and Auchtertyre farms, near Crianlarich hosted the Improving the Performance of your Sheep Flock event. Over 30 hill sheep farmers and crofters from around Oban, Stirling and Campbeltown gathered to hear the latest advice on how management and nutritional change can improve the efficiency of their sheep flocks, whilst also improving their farm carbon footprint. A demonstration of the electronic shedder gave participants a chance to be hands on with the sheep, comparing their assessments of weight and condition with the figures obtained from the read-outs of the weigh crate.

Biomass and the Renewable Heat Incentive were the focus of a renewables open day at Swanbister in Orkney in March 2014. Farmers and crofters were able to look at an already established one hectare plot of willow and discuss planting, maintenance and harvesting options. A woodlands specialist from SAC Consulting spoke about tree establishment and grants, supported by an SAC Consulting renewable energy specialist who highlighted opportunities for landowners under the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme.

Previously in 2011/12 an on-farm demonstration day had been held in Inverness-shire to provide a practical demonstration of a district heating system and to provide information on all aspects of woodfuel, the Renewable Heat Incentive, woodland management and processing for woodfuel. Seeing the system in action enabled attendees to learn firsthand and has encouraged further interest in renewable energy in following years.
Two events will be delivered in the North West Highlands in summer 2014 focussing on efficient cow herds. In collaboration with other advisory activities, these events will explore building design and how it can reduce pollution risks, improving efficiency through balancing livestock rations, condition scoring and the accurate use of medicines. Adopting these steps could make the farm business more efficient, reducing the farm carbon footprint.

Farm woodland creation and management will be discussed at an event in the Thurso area towards the end of the summer 2014. In addition to SAC Consulting’s woodland specialists, the meeting will also be supported by a speaker from Forest Enterprise Scotland. The meeting will explore some of the issues in relation to farm woodland establishment and management, and the benefits additional planting or management of existing farm woodlands can bring to the farm business.

Improving efficiencies in the dairy herd will be the topic of an event in Kintyre towards the end of the 2014/15 year. Energy use in the dairy, improving livestock efficiencies and making best use of slurry and manures are all topics worthy of further investigation that could help to improve efficiency on the dairy farm.

Climate Change Focus Farms

During 2013, the first round of climate change focus farmers reported both financial and carbon savings. Despite challenging weather conditions over the monitoring period, Torr Farm near Castle Douglas and Glenkilrie below Glenshee improved farm efficiency and reduced their carbon footprint by at least 10%, with future reductions expected at Stewart Tower near Stanley. Together the three farms achieved financial savings of around £60,000 by taking a second look at routine practices with support from SAC Consulting specialists and consultants. With additional funding announced by Richard Lochhead MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment in May 2014, the number of Climate Change Focus Farms has increased to eight.
To date, three of the five new climate change focus farms to participate in the initiative from 2014 to 2017 have been appointed in remote areas - Brora, Muir of Ord and Glen Urquhart. A series of activities will be developed in relation to these farms and more information can be found at www.farmingforabetterclimate.org. Details are also available on Twitter @SACFarm4Climate.

**Soil Nutrient Network Farms**

As part of the VAS programme several Soil Nutrient Network farms have been established. One of these farms is Treshnish Farm on the Isle of Mull. Working with a group of local farmers, these farms focus on some of the ways farmers can improve and protect farm soils and make best use of nutrients on the farm, highlighting the range of benefits this can bring to the business. Host farms hold ‘before and after’ meetings; the first meeting explores soil conditions and remediation strategies and looks at the best use of nutrients on the farm.

Participants at the meeting are encouraged to explore and adapt the steps demonstrated at the meetings back on their own farms. Farmers are invited back the following year to a second meeting to look at what impact the changes have made on the host farm and discuss their findings. There is more information on the Soil and Nutrient Network farms at www.farmingandwaterscotland.org/info/7/soil_and_nutrients.

**Improving Grassland Management**

Local knowledge is key to ensure that crofters receive accurate and appropriate advice for their location. A few years ago it was noticed that grass silage being brought in to the Uist office for analysis required supplementing with a lot of expensive concentrates to meet the requirements of the stock. SAC Consulting staff helped the crofters to address this issue by providing them with information on how to improve all aspects of their grassland management.

In March 2013 a meeting was held with the objective of addressing the issue of the poorer quality of some grassland by promoting rejuvenation of tired grass swards. A practical demonstration of a grass seed drill was the main event. Over the following winter there was also a series of meetings held in the West Highlands, Skye and Uist on managing grassland including pollution prevention. At these meetings the ‘Know the Rules’ message was spread and publications distributed to attendees. As a practical measure, to ensure PEPFAA is followed, work stations on sprayer calibration, fertiliser calibration and making best use of FYM were provided. These meetings have also touched on the need for a sprayer qualification and as a result approximately 24 crofters have now got sprayer certification.

Improving grassland management will also be discussed at an event in Caithness towards the end of the summer. Steps to assess and improve grassland management will be covered, alongside ways farmers can make best use of home produced manures and bought in inputs such as lime and fertiliser.

One positive impact of these meetings is the number of crofters taking a keen interest in the fertility of their soils, carrying out sampling and wanting to implement...
a change to their current systems to improve the quality of their grassland. With rising fuel and haulage costs in the remote corners of Scotland the long term profitability of crofting businesses is reliant on changes such as these and on reducing expensive inputs and making the most of the available ground. Crofters are also aware of the importance of the diverse and rare habitats and species which are present in their areas. SAC Consulting staff have provided information and assistance which is tailored to the crofters’ local area and helped them to have productive businesses whilst still maintaining their iconic habitats as noted later in this document.

Soil and Nutrient Management Workshop

A workshop was held in July 2014 at Fort William focusing on soil and nutrient management. The following topics were covered:

- Soil structure – its importance and how to improve it
- Soil pH and P & K status – how this relates to growing more grass
- Are you putting enough P & K on your fields, or too much?
- Efficient grassland management strategies

Field visits included a couple of soil pits to look at soil structure and compaction, as well as three grass fields to look at and discuss ways to improve grass growth, without wasting nutrients.

Improving Water Quality

As part of its Pollution Prevention Advisory Activity, SAC Consulting held meetings across Scotland to raise awareness of pollution prevention. These included providing support to the Spiggie Loch action group meeting in Shetland as well as a meeting in Orkney which was organised following concern about water quality in Kirbister Loch. The Kirbister Loch meeting included presentations from local SAC Consulting staff, SEPA and Scottish Water. Topics included highlighting the value of slurry and manures to the farm business and options on alternative watering, based on Scottish Government funded work. Recent changes to the Diffuse Pollution General Binding Rules and the Mind the Gap leaflets were also promoted and the event concluded with a talk on the Scottish Water Sustainable Land Management Incentive Scheme which is being extended to include the catchment areas around Kirbister, Boardhouse, Bea and Burness Lochs. As a result of the meeting a number of farmers will be preparing Water and Environment Management Plans to protect local water quality.

Crop Health

A number of crop health activities are delivered as part of the VAS programme. Crop health work in remote areas is focussed on the more unusual problems associated with cropping in extreme climates. Soil type and pH is often very different than in Scotland’s main arable areas,
and salt damage and sand blow have been additional problems. Nutrient deficiency problems are therefore common. The availability of plant protection products is often very limited and support is given to selecting the best options from what is available for use locally. Disease and pest profiles are often different – for example ‘halo spot’ in barley is regularly diagnosed in samples of barley from Orkney but not noted elsewhere in crop monitoring.

Local comments on crop health are collected from Caithness and Orkney for publication in the Crop Protection Report and online at fortnightly intervals during the main growing season. Support is also given relating to enquiries about alternative crops – for example plant health problems in small hardy ornamental nurseries which often relate to wet rots or technical information on bulbs grown for use in medicines. Information is available from a number of sources including the website www.sruc.ac.uk/crops, a Twitter account @SRUCCropClinic, Technical Notes and also in newsletter articles.

Farm Woodland Advice

Farm Woodland News, is published twice a year, and is circulated to over 3,200 farmers and land managers as well as staff in agencies and interested individuals. This covers a wide range of topics, most of which are relevant to those in the more remote areas of Scotland. Each edition has an update with the latest news on grants and makes reference to any particular incentives available to land managers on the western or northern isles. Specific topics covered in recent editions that are relevant to these areas include rhododendron control, woodfuel, wood ants, the importance of drainage, information on restocking and discussion on the provenance map for native species. A ‘Species Focus’ article in the Spring 2014 edition was on downy birch – a dominant species in the uplands.

A number of farm walks and meetings have also been held in the uplands. In spring 2014 an event on ‘Woodlands and Shooting’ was attended by over twenty farmers and gamekeepers at an estate in Inverness-shire. This covered topics of animal health as well as woodland management. Shooting is important in the upland economy and the event provided information on how the appropriate management and woodland structure can help achieve the best results. Other events have included a discussion on woodland opportunities given to crofters at Applecross, woodland events in Orkney and Shetland, and a presentation at a farm meeting in Caithness.
Local Food and Drink

The growth of local and regional food and drink has been a focus for advice to food and drink producers for a number of years. The Think Local programme started in April 2013 targeting specific growth areas:

- Farmers Markets and Events
- Local Food Retail and Food Tourism
- Added Value
- Regional Food Development
- Collaboration

The Think Local initiative has provided support across Scotland, and this has been supplemented by the Community Food Fund which supports the growth of communities, local food, networks as well as events and activities which celebrate and promote local food and drink.

Community Retailing

The SAC Consulting Food & Drink team has undertaken a number of activities to improve business interaction in remote areas. This has included a series of workshops on community retailing. Community retailing is often a lifeline for the most remote areas of Scotland, and the sole provision of groceries for small communities. The income the communities can derive to make this sustainable will come from summer visitors, so the team worked with the retailers on merchandising displays and on the procurement of local food by arranging a series of workshops, which included a producer showcase to raise awareness of the products available locally. Four workshops took place in Lewis, Harris, Shetland and Skye. The Shetland workshop resulted in the development of a food trail in Shetland, to connect visitors to local food across the islands.

Food Awards and Shows

The Food & Drink team also delivers direct advice in a number of other areas, including promotion through food awards, and this includes the Highlands and Islands Food Awards judging, where the team judged the Best Marketing Initiative. The team also provided support to the Royal Highland Show President’s Initiative in 2013 to bring a group of 10 producers to the Royal Highland Show food hall from across the Highlands and Islands. The producers featured on a single stand, and were able to trade and to promote their produce and increase awareness. The event was such a success that a small group of producers chose to repeat the experience in 2014 with a collaborative presence at the show.
Protected Food Names

The team is active in providing advice on the development of Protected Food Names (PFNs), and this has included the initial development of a number of areas, particularly with enquiries from Orkney and Shetland. Through the VAS programme food and drink specialists are working with a number of businesses in the remote areas of Scotland to develop and protect their products through the application of PFNs.

Regional Identity

The development of regional identity is a key element in the growth of local food and drink. Through the Think Local initiative, food and drink producers have been supported in the consideration and development of their regional identity as a key focus for event activity. Specific events which celebrate and promote a region’s local food and drink have received assistance.

Regional Food Networks

Support for the development of regional food and drink has also come in the form of engagement with 13 new, refreshed or revived networks across the length and breadth of Scotland, from Shetland to the Borders. Many of these networks are now considering their approach to the market and the potential for collaboration for capitalising on new market opportunities, improving logistics or sharing resources and in creating consumer and tourist interest. Support has also been derived from the Community Food Fund, administered by SRUC on behalf of the Scottish Government, where funding has been given to food and drink networks and events on Uist, Shetland, Orkney, Barra and across Argyll.

Advice for the Organic Sector

The organic farming Advisory Activity has successfully reached farmers and other interested parties across the length and breadth of Scotland. A regular programme of on-farm events is delivered with the help of local SAC Consulting offices across Scotland. In 2013/14 on-farm events included events in Orkney, Campbeltown and Oban and brought specialist SRUC advice face to face with a local audience. During 2014/15 there are plans to hold events in Dornoch, Portree, and Ardersier.

Information provided at these meetings is available from the SRUC website [www.sruc.ac.uk/organicfarming](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/organicfarming) to anyone unable to attend to ensure the key messages are available to all. The website also contains a wealth of technical and market information for organic farmers and other interested parties to access. This includes Organic Farming Technical Summaries - practical, easy to read guides, written by a range of SRUC specialists from the Research and Consultancy divisions with input from SAC Consulting’s organic specialists. Throughout 2014/15 new Technical Summaries will be added to the website.

The organic helpline also provides an effective contact for those working in the more remote areas. This helpline
enables organic farmers from all over Scotland to speak to an organic specialist during working hours.

**The Organic Market Link Initiative**

This project continues to support development and marketing in Scotland’s organic sector. This initiative provides a strong link across the organic sector through its EmailSales activity. EmailSales provides supply and demand information across the sector, encouraging collaboration and communication and therein strengthening supply chain links both vertically and horizontally. Throughout the last year, 25 fortnightly emails with more than 400 adverts have been circulated to 300 recipients.

**Diversification**

SRUC maintains a farm diversification, non-food crops and renewable energy website [www.sruc.ac.uk/diversification](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/diversification) (or [http://www.sruc.ac.uk/renewableenergy](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/renewableenergy)) on behalf of the Scottish Government. In addition to general updates of information, the 2013/14 VAS programme saw new information sheets on ecotourism, maize mazes, Christmas trees, and the use of social media for a diversified business. The graph below shows the pattern of enquiry topics over the past few years.

As Scotland’s final CAP reform package becomes clearer during the summer of 2014 farmers will be able to fully assess the likely financial impacts on their businesses and it is expected that this will stimulate renewed interest in diversification opportunities to coincide with the launch of the new SRDP in 2015.
New Entrants to Farming and Crofting

Following its launch in 2012, the Scottish Government’s New Entrants to Farming Programme has seen an increase in its activities and impact. A further three groups of participants were recruited in 2013 bringing the total number of new entrants engaging with the programme to over 140. A number of groups are now established including groups in Caithness and Argyll.

The overall aim of the New Entrants programme is to address the barriers facing new entrants to agriculture and the issues associated with an ageing farm workforce and low level of generational turnover. The programme’s objectives are to ensure those entering and aiming to enter the industry receive specific business guidance, geared towards ensuring they are as successful as possible.

The Thurso New Entrants group comprises about 20 young farmers who regularly meet to discuss various issues that they see as important to their business. Meetings to date have included analysing farm accounts, CAP reform and financial benchmarking [against each other] which was a huge step forward. Since the establishment of the group seven members of the group have undertaken a Whole Farm Review. This has provided a full and detailed insight into the current technical and financial performance of their business. It has also identified other opportunities for the business such as diversification, biodiversity projects and purchasing more land. During 2014/15 the group will visit each other’s farms and from the benchmarking results see the pros and cons of different enterprise systems active within Caithness. The overall aim of this group is to learn from each other to develop their businesses and create a good working relationship between likeminded young, motivated individuals.

Funding for New Entrants

In 2013 the Government announced a £2M support package to help New Entrants and deer farmers who had been excluded from support under the Single Farm Payment (SFP) scheme. Using local knowledge and experience SAC Consulting staff in the Uists were able to review IACS applications over a number of years and identify those who could benefit from the new funding. Applications were made and funding was secured for 10 crofters who had been operating without any SFP for a number of years. This funding has helped these businesses and without the expert input from local staff these crofters would not have been aware of the support available.

Information for New Entrants

To support New Entrants a specific website www.sruc.ac.uk/newentrants has been created along with a series of Guidance Notes on a range of business topics linked to the workshops. Guidance Notes produced to date include:

✓ Business Planning & Financial Management
✓ Employing People
✓ Laying the Foundations for Business Success
✓ Leases & Joint Ventures
✓ Marketing & Negotiating
✓ Renewable Energy Opportunities
✓ Starting Up & Business Structures
New Groups for 2014/15

Two New Entrants’ groups are planned for 2014/15 in the Highlands & Islands, one in Harris (covering Harris, Lewis and Uist) and one in Inverness. A third group will be established in Stirlingshire / Perthshire. These will be publicised in these areas and anyone interested in joining one of these groups should contact their local SAC Consulting office.
Biodiversity and Conservation

Over the last few years a number of biodiversity and conservation initiatives have been supported by the VAS programme. These have included wader initiatives where, working with the RSPB and others, wader scrapes were created where there was a lack of natural feeding areas. SAC Consulting also worked with others to establish beneficial environments for bats as well as improving farm habitats for the Scottish wildcat, the red squirrel and the water vole.

Common Grazings

During 2012/13 SAC Consulting facilitated a focus group comprising two unregulated common grazings that together make up 3000ha of ground that includes SSSI and upland grassland and heathland habitats. The objective was to look at the practical steps that could be taken by the Common Grazings Group to help improve the condition of designated site features as well as help support remote crofting communities and traditional practices on the common grazings. Crofters were brought together to discuss and identify practical opportunities for implementing a management plan that would provide potentially significant improvements in the management of the designated site.
Peatland Restoration

During 2011/12 workshops were held on Lewis, Skye, Uist and Applecross to discuss the management impacts of burning, grazing, trampling and vehicle damage and to demonstrate a range of management techniques aimed at helping to restore damaged peatlands. Grant funding through SRDP Rural Priorities was used to encourage peatland restoration across common grazings and to implement a range of management techniques such as damming grips, re-vegetating bare peat and avoiding inappropriate muirburning, particularly on designated sites. These peatland events were attended by 53 crofters, many of whom were common grazing clerks and on grazing committees who manage large areas of peatlands.

Scotland has internationally important blanket bogs which support internationally important breeding bird populations. The blanket bogs also store vast amounts of carbon. Widespread action is needed to stop the loss of carbon by encouraging good practice to maintain and enhance blanket bog vegetation and where possible to reinstate an active layer of bog mosses which will restore the vital ecological functions that peatlands deliver.

Work was undertaken with the Applecross Estate to help restore the bog mosses that have been damaged through historic burning and grazing where vegetation can take many decades to recolonise due to the harsh windy environment which dries out the bare peat. An innovative technique of “sowing” pea-sized beads of bog mosses on to bare eroded peatland aims to speed up the process of peatland vegetation recovery. The trials were used as a demonstration of peatland restoration for Applecross crofters.

Rhododendron Clearance in Torridon

In 2012 a West Highland hotel and a West Highland estate collaborated on an ambitious SRDP proposal to clear 100 hectares of mature, dense and inaccessible rhododendron with the help of SAC Consulting.

The hotel lies within the Wester Ross National Scenic Area. Crofting and farming activity is extremely limited hence tourism and, to a limited extent, forestry, sustains much of the local economy. Rhododendrons, introduced into Victorian gardens of large estates, have spread throughout semi-natural woodlands, plantation woodlands and onto moorlands and coastal habitats, destroying many semi-natural woodland and moorland habitats and making access difficult.
Because rhododendron is highly invasive, long term eradication is more successfully achieved across a landscape unit involving a partnership approach. The estate, owned and managed by the National Trust for Scotland, had already cleared extensive areas of rhododendron and trialled various clearance techniques which helped prepare the way for the private landowners.

The estate and hotel submitted a SRDP proposal, based on detailed surveys and assessments. The project was approved and the arduous labour-intensive clearance on the rocky and steep terrain is underway. Some machine work was possible but has been extremely limited. Even with SRDP support, the landowners have a challenging task to complete the work within the grant budget.

Grasslands for Crofting and Wildlife on the Western Isles

During 2013/14 SAC Consulting held events on Uist and the Isle of Lewis to discuss the management of improved, semi-improved and machair grasslands for crofting, corncrakes and bumblebees. The events were attended by 34 crofters with input from the RSPB and machinery companies.

The meeting at Ness, Isle of Lewis focussed on grasslands for corncrakes within a corncrakes Special Protection Area (SPA), with active crofters entered into agri-environment schemes in attendance to learn about providing the optimal habitat for cover, feeding and breeding for corncrakes from their arrival in the spring to departure in the autumn. The meeting was led by the RSPB and facilitated by the local consultant from SAC Consulting.

The meeting was well attended and included a short presentation on corncrake habitat followed by a visit to a croft currently participating in a SRDP RP contract focussed on providing suitable habitat for corncrakes. This visit provided an excellent opportunity to see the creation of corncrake cover. The crofter had planted rhubarb and allowed taller grasses to grow to provide cover for the corncrakes within a fenced area. As a result of advice at the meeting, the crofter is now going to plant yellow flag iris to provide further corncrake cover in the fenced area. At the meeting a second smaller area which is not cut for silage was also identified as an excellent area for corncrakes to find shelter as it contains a pile of field stones. To further improve this area, nettles have been transplanted into the area since the meeting.
The meeting is going to be followed up with a second one in the late summer 2014 to revisit the croft. This will help show the different stages of corncrake cover growth and discuss the successes and challenges experienced by the crofter with regards to the creation of corncrake cover. The croft also contains an area of species rich grassland which will also be revisited at the next meeting to see the different growth stages.

Local grassland management issues were the focus of the meeting held in Uist. With many crofters participating in agri-environment schemes to benefit corncrake and farmland waders, achieving a balance between forage quality and habitat quality has become challenging. Speakers emphasised the effect that pH has on fertiliser uptake, the importance of appropriate fertiliser use and how the timing, rate and type of fertiliser should be tailored to soil nutrient status and crop requirements. There was also a short interactive session on spreader calibration and the legislation which is in place to reduce diffuse pollution; namely the buffers required when spreading near watercourses. The final discussion focussed on weed management and use of clover to enhance machair grassland for pollinators.

Encouraging Bees and Other Beneficial Insects

Farmer and crofter meetings were held in Argyll, Orkney and Skye & Lochalsh with the aim of encouraging crofters and farmers to help bees and other beneficial insects by taking a few practical measures to provide habitat and food sources and by assessing their pesticide use.

At these meetings crofters and farmers learned that the loss of honeybees has increased the reliance on pollination by wild bees. It is therefore vital that pollinating insects have access to good food sources throughout the season. More pollen and nectar can be provided through appropriate grazing on moorland and semi-natural grasslands, maintaining semi-natural areas within field margins and burn banks to allow plants and herbs to flower, as well using more clover leys in the farming system.
**Bracken Control**

A very successful series of workshops run in the west of Scotland has been on Bracken Control. Over the last three years there have been around six meetings in Argyll, Lochaber and Perthshire with 188 farmers and crofters attending.

These workshops have worked well due to the balance of practical and technical information supplied on the day. The workshops have all been held on-farm at sites where bracken is an issue. There was a mix of speakers providing the background to the plant, the conservation benefits of controlling this invasive weed and best practice control methods. The regulations on spraying and possible need for EIA screening were also all included. These were backed up by practical demonstrations of ground based machinery such as crushers, weed wipers, flail movers, sprayers and aerial based options using helicopters.

Local contacts have ensured that the workshops have been supported by local machinery suppliers who could demonstrate latest technology and helicopter companies who could explain the thoughts behind the low drift nozzles they operate.

These workshops have been aimed at farmers and crofters who were entering into SRDP-RP contracts to help them achieve the conservation aims of their contracts. Also the general land manager, who wishes to bring bracken infested (almost abandoned) land back into agricultural production, has benefitted. All this came at a time when one of the main bracken chemicals was under threat of being removed from the market and so farmers and crofters were understandably concerned.

Although the correct choice of primary treatment of bracken is essential, the story does not stop there. Follow up treatments are also critical to keep the plant from recolonizing land. Follow up treatments include the removal of dead bracken litter, grazing livestock on the land, through to secondary treatments with weed wipers, toppers and crushers.

The following photos show the impact of bracken treatment on a site on the Isle of Mull.

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Overall these workshops have been very successful for several reasons:

- They have raised awareness of the detrimental value of bracken to both conservation and agriculture.
- They have brought specialist knowledge into remote areas.
- They have given farmers and crofters the chance to see the latest machinery and techniques.
- There should be a long term benefit as farmers and crofters now have a much better understanding of long term bracken follow up, not just the primary treatment.
Fun with Food and Farming in Caithness

In October 2013 an event was held at Quoybrae auction mart with a total of 107 primary school children from Halkirk, Canisbay, Bower, Crossroads and Castletown schools in attendance. Five different ‘stations’ were established covering dairy, beef, sheep, vegetables and cereals/ploughing. The children visited the 5 different stations for 30 minutes each to learn more about the different aspects of food and farming.

At the beef station the children learned about the different cuts of meat, the record keeping required to be undertaken by the beef farmer and also the general husbandry tasks required as well as what the animals are fed. This type of information was replicated by other volunteers on the other stations. The ploughing section was new this year due to the Scottish ploughing championships taking place in Caithness for the first time in their history.

Safe Islander Event

Each year Orkney Islands Council runs an event for all first year students (approximately 250 pupils) at the High Schools in Orkney. This event is a multi-agency safety awareness event. The purpose of the event is to provide children with life skills that may keep themselves and others safe in the future.

At the event they learn about personal safety, how to react appropriately to dangerous situations, understanding the role of emergency services and how to contact them and how to avoid becoming a victim of crime. SAC Consulting has run the Farm Safety element of this event for the last two years and will do so again in September 2014.

Last year children were divided into groups and were shown pictures of ten things you may see or find on typical Orkney farms. They were then asked to rank the pictures from ‘very dangerous’ to ‘not at all dangerous’, the children then talked through their reasons. The law regarding quad bikes and helmets and things such as being a passenger in a tractor was also explained. Also discussed were the dangers of walking through fields of livestock, being around moving farm machinery and the very real danger of gas poisoning from slurry. Although some children taking part may never be on a farm, farming is such an important part of the community in Orkney - the biggest employer in Orkney after the public sector.

“When moving from primary to secondary school, children generally start to become more independent and are often expected to cope increasingly on their own. This event aims to raise awareness of threats and dangers, in a fun and interactive way, as they move into a more self-sufficient time in their development.”
For further information on the Support to Remote Areas delivered as part of the Scottish Government's Veterinary and Advisory Services programme please contact your local office:

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