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Ar faidhle/Our ref: 2015/0032685

27th October 2015

Roderick

Thank you for your e-mail of 17 September, following on from your Members' Business Debate on Wednesday 9 September on seal deaths and population decline.

I was disappointed that I could not attend the debate in person due to other commitments. I know, however, that my colleague Dr McLeod, Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, was pleased to contribute in my stead. She thought that the debate was interesting and informative.

For my own part, I particularly welcome the broad consensus demonstrated during the debate for the sound science being delivered by the Sea Mammal Research Unit at the University of St Andrews on seal conservation and management issues. This has always provided the basis for informing Scottish Government policy in these areas.

There are indeed some aspects of policy on seals that remain controversial and it is therefore important that the best available science informs these.

As Dr McLeod mentioned during the debate, all fish farms included in applications for a seal licence already employ at least one and many a range of non-lethal alternatives. All use tensioned nets, almost half use Acoustic Deterrent Devices (ADDs), a third use seal blinds and a fifth use anti-predator nets.

The use of such measures has contributed to the overall reduction of 55% in seal shooting since the system was introduced in 2011 and especially to the 66% reduction in seal shooting at fish farms.

There are, however, a range of views on the effectiveness of the various non-lethal measures and, it is important to note, none have to date entirely eliminated the risk of seal predation. Seals are highly intelligent mammals with a capacity to circumvent such deterrents.