

Crofting: a year past, the future to fight for

At this time of year we look back over the past twelve months at what has happened and been achieved, and look forward to what we resolve for the year ahead. Last week the Scottish Crofting Federation said thanks to the out-going chair, Fiona Mandeville, as she stepped down on completion of her two year tenure. Fiona handed the role to Russell Smith who will be planning his two years ahead.

The Federation has achieved a great deal in the past two years, not least the pledges made by the SNP in their manifesto and recently confirmed by the Cabinet Secretary for crofting, Fergus Ewing MSP at the Cross Party Group on Crofting. The pledges mirror the 'Five Actions for Crofting' published by the SCF just before the Scottish election last May and the 5 priorities identified by the Scottish Government's crofting stakeholder forum.

Crofting is very much back on the Scottish Government's agenda with the promise "to modernise crofting law and make it more transparent, understandable and workable in practice". This will be no mean feat. The failings of the law, of the regulations and of the regulator have been highlighted by the issues surrounding the management of common grazings and the validity of the Crofting Commission. This stramash has been going on for most of the year and is yet unresolved as we approach Hogmanay. It brings to mind Burns' wise words: *The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley, an' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, for promis'd joy!* But, if we want a Commission that is fit for purpose, it is for good crofters to populate it. The elections are in March.

The Croft House Grant Scheme has been a target of SCF lobbying since it replaced the Croft Buildings Grant & Loan Scheme. This year saw the government act at last, introducing a substantial improvement in the grant rates that are targeted to assist those most in need of help. We await the promised re-introduction of the loan.

Scottish Government will also explore mechanisms to make more publicly owned land available to new entrants, a long running campaign of the SCF under the 'call for the creation of 10,000 crofts'. We need good law to be attractive to use for new crofts. The government has also promised to introduce a new entrant's scheme for crofting and to explore the creation of new woodland crofts.

And at last the 'National Development Plan for Crofting' asked for by the SCF in the previous government session, is closer to becoming a reality.

I list all these as it has been a remarkable year for crofting. But we will particularly look back at this year for the European referendum. With the prospect of leaving the European Union, one of the few certainties is that support to agriculture and particularly to crofting will have to be fought for. Being the only organisation solely dedicated to representing crofters means that SCF will have to fight hard to avoid being marginalised by big farmers in other parts of the country. I reiterate what the new chair of the SCF said: "Crofters need to stand together under one banner so that our voices can be heard". If we fail to stand united: *An' forward, tho' I cannot see, I guess an' fear!*

All good wishes for 2017.