

Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum – 14 April 2011

Peatlands Park, Dungannon

Present:

Declan Looney (DL) - CHAIR- NIEA
Jon Lees (JL) – NIEA
John Griffin (JG) - FS
Rachel Bain (RB) – Ballymoney, Coleraine and Limavady BC
Mark Hamilton (MH) – LVRSG
Allan Galway (AG) – Belfast Zoo
Anne McComb (AMcC) – Tollymore grp.
Janette Adams (JA) – Tollymore grp.
Julie Corry (JC) – Omagh DC
Christine Butler (CB) – DARD
Michael Griffith (MG) – Belfast Zoo Vet
Christine Doherty (CD) – Derry City & Strabane Councils
Stuart Jennings (SJ)- NT
Joe Dowdall (JD)- Glens Group
Ken Moore (KM) – NIEA
Rose Cremin (RC) – Fermanagh DC
Colin Reilly (CR) Forest Service
Richard Kernohan (RK) – Forest Service
John-Joe Cassidy (JJC)– Forest Service
Alyn Cairns (AC)– Belfast Zoo
Charlie Cole (CC) – Abercorn Estates
Denis McBride (DMB) – Glens Wildlife Group

Apologies

Mike Meharg – NIEA
Ruth Wilson – Antrim BC
Rose Muir (RM) – LVRSG
Christine Butler (DARD)

10.30 - Opening and welcome by Declan Looney

DL asks everyone to introduce themselves to the group as there are a few new faces.

Minutes of the previous meeting 12/10/10:

ACTION POINT 1: Orla Maguire to let the NIEA know when the project is a), tendered and b), finished and the report is available.

Orla has sent her apologies and this action will carry forward.

JL spoke to Nicole Robinson of RPS who has stated that the report is nearly complete.

ACTION POINT 2: NIEA/FS to meet and discuss this plan further.

This is to be discussed later.

ACTION POINT 3 DL/JL to discuss with QUB & Moredun research options for red squirrel/grey squirrel antibodies

See below

ACTION POINT 4: JL/DL to contact Forest Service RE: who owns the sporting rights on the Belvoir Park estate.

JL/JG This is ongoing.

ACTION POINT 5: JL to talk to Craig Shuttleworth about capture and captive conditions.

JL The zoo have been in contact with Craig and I have sent him an email asking several questions and I am awaiting a reply.

ACTION POINT 6: For all – supply zoo team with Squirrel groups information including contact information and area of work. Also the Zoo would like ideas and narrative for posters to be included within this exhibition. Including information on the groups and their work.

NO ONE HAS SUPPLIED THE ZOO WITH STUFF YET!

ACTION POINT 7: For all – At date yet to be announced in 2011 Belfast Zoo would like as many Forum members as possible to be available for this event to help out and attend the weekend at the zoo.

FEED BACK TO CATHY MORGAN AT THE ZOO ASAP

ACTION POINT 8: Zoo staff to advise the forum via JL of the times and dates of these events as early as possible.

DONE

ACTION POINT 9: For CB to look into the mechanisms of modifying the squirrel conservation options under NICMS specifically could the feeder designs be changed to NISF preferred specifications or did it have to remain as the design specified in the NICMS manual.

CB was not able to attend this meeting, this action with carry forward.

ACTION POINT 11: JL to arrange sub-group meeting. Not done due to other work commitments. See below.

Today's business.

There was a short discussion raised by CD and RC during the run through of the previous minutes that requested more information about cross border activity and input from NPWS.

Action Point 1 DL to speak with NPWS to coordinate cross border work especially in north and west.

DL: explained that a Queens/Quercus bid to obtain NIEA research grant aid money has been successful and the fine details of the project are being hammered out.

The full details are still under development but the key points are:

**Measurements of the viral load carried by the greys and reds.
Mode of viral transmission.**

Practical measures that can be applied from what is learnt from the above.

RK: QUB Neil Reid to coordinate with FS at the planning stage to obtain correct FS permissions etc.

Action Point 2. DL to ask Queens to coordinate with other research institutions eg. Moredun Research Institute and Forest Service at planning stages.

Squirrel Pox

The Tollymore Group noted ill squirrels in early March and the first dead squirrel was found in the forest on the 17 March and handed in to Forest service. This animal was sent to Moredun Research Institute the following week, delayed by the holiday and weekend for testing. Colin McInnes advised the group and JG of a positive test for Squirrel pox.

On the 25 March an emergency meeting of FS, NIEA and the Tollymore Group met in Castlewellan (the minutes will be circulated with these minutes).

- All dead red squirrels will be tested for pox.
- TRSG agreed to remove all feeders but to continue to feed by scattering the food on the ground.
- NIEA agreed to issue licences to those that required them to trap and cull diseased red squirrels infected areas.
- NIEA agreed to attempt to purchase remote cameras for monitoring. (*This action has been carried out and monitoring is ongoing*).

There was a press release that was developed following this meeting which was released on Friday 01 April 2011 ~ this press release took a little longer than we would have liked due to the mechanics of two government departments. Coverage was relatively poor with the BBC carrying the story on TV and on line.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-12935115>

New threat for Red Squirrels in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's red squirrels have been dealt a major blow with the recent discovery of a fatal squirrel disease. ~ Friday, 1 April 2011

"This is the first recorded instance of a red squirrel dying from this disease on the red population is under extreme pressure at the moment as a result of the population explosion of the grey. The diseased red squirrel was first spotted by members of the Tollymore Red Squirrel Group. We would ask the public across Northern Ireland to be vigilant and immediately report any red squirrels showing signs of the disease to the NIEA wildlife team or to a member of the NI Squirrel forum."

The decline of red squirrels in the UK is blamed primarily on the effects of squirrel pox as well as the loss of habitat and competition from grey squirrels.

A spokesperson for the Forest Service, which is a member of the NI Squirrel Forum added. “ We are hoping that the early detection of the disease by the Tollymore Red Squirrel Group will help to limit the impact of this outbreak. We are continuing to work with NIEA and the Tollymore Red Squirrel Group on the implementation of control measures.”

TRSG put out their own press release which had good local coverage in the local media.

CD reported that local Derry papers had covered the story.

GRSG also put out a press release on grey control in light of the pox outbreak.

Grey Control.

DL has spoken to the NI Director of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation BASC about trying to encourage their membership to cull grey squirrels. This is a two stage approach with gentle encouragement from BASC for members to shoot greys on sight as and when they see them and it is safe to do so. Secondly we will meet again with them to see if we can develop a more constructive resource that would allow BASC members to team up with squirrel groups and provide a resource to dispatch squirrels. BASC are keen to develop this relationship and the NIEA will meet with them in the near future to develop the ideas further.

DL, asked if there was any objection from NISF to using BASC as a resource.

MG and AMC raised the issues about Shooters being able to distinguish the difference between reds and greys? They also asked if NIEA/NISF would be providing any official training to support this programme.

DL: agreed to discuss this training need with BASC at the meeting.

CD asked about developing a NI wide campaign to highlight squirrel pox and to control grey squirrels using the LBAP officers and a NIEA / NISF designed leaflet

2011 is the centenary of the introduction of the grey squirrel into Ireland and this something that we should use to campaign to remove them.

Action Point 3. Design an information leaflet on the squirrel pox and solutions to be designed by NIEA with help from NISF.

JA: local councils are still not doing enough to control grey squirrels on their land.

DL: there is some difficulty with public perception.

AC: The zoo did some research on this with its visitors and found that many people are uncomfortable with the killing of greys. Despite being interested in preserving reds. Belfast zoo is owned by Belfast CC and the councils do have a key role to play.

JC: Pest controllers have a forum – perhaps someone from the NISF some address that group?

AC: education is key?

JC: Get councillors on board. Grey squirrels are becoming a pest issue in Omagh.

JD: It is up to us to change the public perception. Use a focused approach with the gun clubs, making use of competitions and bounty schemes.

DL there have been many well documented failures of bounty schemes and the long term benefits are limited. Competitions are probably more controllable, but NIEA has no money for prizes.

JG: Grey only areas would be targeted to maximise the number of greys being caught rather than targeted control at interface areas.

JD: Any killed grey is beneficial.

DMB: Posters could be displayed in multiple public locations including council buildings. Groups could form cooperatives to work with local land owners.

There was some discussion on the promoting the use of firearms for squirrel dispatch and there was concern that body fluids from sick squirrels could contaminate the ground or foliage leading to further infection.

RK: don't get hung up on mess with shooting as there is rarely too much when the squirrel is taken with a shot gun or air rifle.

RC: you need to pick a day for a campaign and training etc.

DL: the Zoo, the LBAP Officers are key plus BASC and Countryside Alliance etc.

- There needs to be a strong message.

JD: The sub-group must concern on grey squirrel control.

CC: The Game and Wildlife Trust do promote pest control and could be brought on board?

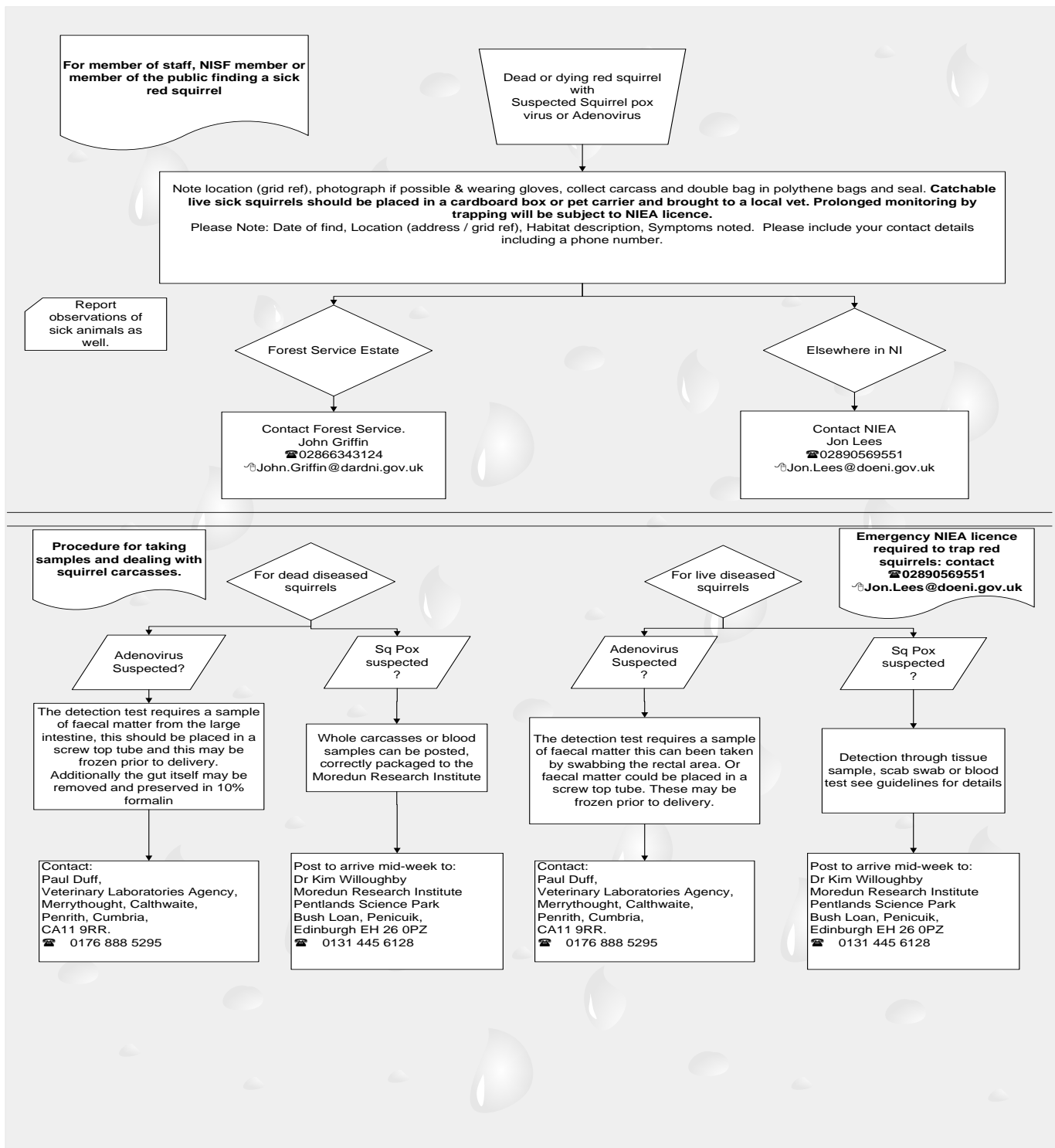
JC: Questionnaire for local councils?

JA: Do all public bodies have a duty to protect biodiversity?

DL: WANE act – Biodiversity duty is coming soon under the WANE Act, possibly the Autumn?

Pox virus and Adenovirus plan.

JL: John Griffin and JL have met and been developing the pox plan, it is still a work in progress. We have tied down some of the procedures and in light of the recent pox outbreak we are re-examining aspects of it as we are learning fast the best methods to carry out certain tasks. NIEA is attempting to purchase equipment to form testing kits.



Group News

Lagan Valley and Belvoir Red Squirrel Group – Mark Hamilton

Update on progress with monitoring and supplementary feeding:

Continued work on transects carried out by Lagan Valley Regional Park volunteers. Sightings infrequent but reds still being seen. Sightings seem to fluctuate, but food still being taken from feeders. Decrease in red sightings with higher grey sightings but reds still apparent

Group activities:

Member difficulties. At present there are just two active members. We are hoping to add to this by including the volunteers who have expressed an interest in becoming members. So we hope that at our next report the group will be bolstered.

High level feeder: Our proposal to have a high level feeder, to serve as a public viewpoint to see red squirrels, has run into difficulties. This is for two reasons. There has been a land slippage in the area where we were proposing to establish this, and we are awaiting a report to fix the zone. Also, there is now a secondary concern regarding *Phytophthora ramorum*, a fungal disease which attacks primarily rhododendron and in particular Japanese larch. If this manages to reach Belvoir Forest this could wipe out the main food source for reds. We are concerned that this would be the finish of the red population, and this would negate the need for the high level feeder. With this in mind, there is an urgency to consider planting of other tree species in this area, to compensate for this eventuality.

Desktop Survey: RPS Environmental Consultants have been commissioned to provide a recommendation for the management of Red squirrels in the Lagan Valley area. This should be complete by the end of April. The recommendations will look at, among other things, public opinion, local land managers and owners awareness and willingness to contribute, sustainable long term management, supplementary feeding, future monitoring and grey squirrel impact and control.

We will provide the Red Squirrel Forum with the results of this study.

Three main threats for red squirrels in the Lagan Valley at present are:

Grey squirrel population
Squirrel pox
P. ramorum

Tollymore Red Squirrel Group – Anne McComb

9th February [Mourne Landscape Unit Forest Management Plan–Forest Service \(FS\) Planning Review](#)

Tollymore Red Squirrel Group (TRSG) were invited to comment on the possible impact of the above plan on red squirrel conservation in the Mourne Area.

16th February [Charitable status granted](#)

HM Customs granted charitable status for tax purposes to Tollymore Red Squirrel Group

March – Imagine films spent time at Tollymore filming red squirrels for a forthcoming ‘Spring Watch’ type programme.

9th March [Irish Zoo Convention](#)

Meeting at Belfast Zoo Presentation of the work of Tollymore Red Squirrel Group and Forest Service (DARDNI) to conserve the red squirrel.

26th March [Ourbreak of Squirrel Pox Virus in Tollymore Park](#)

Moredun Labs confirm that a dear red squirrel found in Tollymore Forest Park had died of squirrel pox virus

+Note that all planned events are now suspended for the present as members of the group try to reduce the impact of the squirrel pox virus on the red squirrel population of Tollymore Park

By the date of this meeting TRSG and FS had mailed 9 red squirrel carcasses and some grey blood samples to Moredun for analysis.

“The first dead squirrel appeared on the 17 March. From about the 10th March JA saw an injured squirrel which had a damaged tail and looked as if it was suffering from mange. On Friday 18th March JA was concerned about a couple of squirrels which were visiting her garden feeders. On Monday 21st JA noted 2 sick looking squirrels in her garden. One disappeared shortly afterwards. One of which spent a lot of time drinking vast quantities of water. This animal was very weak and was caught by JA and subsequently euthanized by the vet after examination. This animal has been sent to Moredun for testing. A grey squirrel was trapped in JA’s garden on 24th, dispatched, blood taken from this animal will be tested for pox antibodies as soon as possible”, *extracted from emergency meeting on the 24 March.*

Glens Group - Joe Dowdall.

Since the last meeting the Glens Red Squirrel Group has continued its program of feeding and observing Red Squirrels in the Glens area. There have been a number of sightings of Grey Squirrels in Glenariff, Ballycastle and Glenarm. A total of 6 Greys have been either shot or trapped and disposed off. Two meetings in Enniskillen to initiate a Red Squirrel Group were attended by the Chair and Secretary of the GRSG.

There are ongoing discussions with the Forest Service regarding improving co-operation in regard to the operation of Feeders in Glenariff, Ballycastle and Ballypatrick Forest. A successful conclusion to the Glenariff talks has been delayed by the discovery of P Ramorum in the Forest. The Group is developing a number of “Red Squirrel Trails” to encourage the public to go out and see Red squirrels. A wider initiative a “Glens Red Squirrel Safari” is being discussed to provide an attraction to tourists in the Glens and so encourage support from various funding bodies. The Group have attended a number of local events and meetings and provided information on Red Squirrel Conservation. There are ongoing Feeder workshops being held and various Fundraising activities are planned. With the outbreak of Squirrel Pox in Tollymore the Group have stepped up a gear and are starting a drive both north and south of the mid Glens to increase membership, raise awareness and encourage people to report sightings of Greys.

Planned Activities

Event	Location	Date / Time	Lead Member
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Public Meeting	Carnlough	28 th April Glenlough CC	Joe
Walk. Glenarm	Glenarm Forest & Estate.	1 st May	Joe
Trapping Training	Shanes Castle	TBA (May)	Brendan
Walk; Ballycastle	Ballycastle Forest	May 7 th	Daniel
AGM	Ballyeamon Barn	Camping 11 May 7.00pm	ALL
Treasure Hunt	Laragh Lodge Glenariff	4 June 8.00pm	Joe

West Tyrone Red Squirrel Group – Julie Corry - NISF meeting 14th April 2011

Members and support

- 2 meetings and 1 training day have been held since last meeting
- We are rotating our meetings between Baronscourt Estate, Drumquin Community Centre and Beltrim Estate, Gortin, due the wide ranging area members cover and to gain more support.
- Whilst we have a mailing list now of 30 members (including Government staff – FS and NIEA), about 8-10 are fully ‘signed up’ to action.

Grey Squirrel Control

- It was agreed this is the main way forward for this group. Most members are landowners with either reds and greys onsite or just greys but within periphery areas. All are keen to trap and dispatch but need access to traps and training to use. It was agreed a trap loaning scheme could be set up to get things moving with the view to purchasing traps through the group later on. Between several members, there is a no. of traps available. Some members expressed an interest in purchasing their own.
- A training morning was organised at Baronscourt Estate on March 19th to show interested members how to set traps and manage the controlling of greys. Several members were present as well as other red squirrel groups. The session was useful to explore differing approaches and to learn the history of grey squirrel control at Baronscourt.
- More work is needed to target landowners with woodland in the Drumquin – Baronscourt – Gortin belt. Charlie Cole ground truthed the presence/absence of coniferous and deciduous woodland in the area.

Education and awareness

- It was recognised that not all members want to be or have the resources to be involved in grey squirrel control and are interested in raising awareness and education. Katie Rutledge is keen to promote red squirrel conservation through local school projects she runs. Likewise we have had expressions of interest re the same for the Strabane area.

- Julie continues to run press releases about issues on behalf of the group.

Supplementary feeding

- At present, only residents on the fringes of Baronscourt Estate are feeding reds, as far as we are aware. Guidance will be given accordingly.

Recording and reporting

- It was agreed that more effort to report sightings of both red and grey squirrels should be encouraged. Members should speak to residents and landowners and gather local records. All records should be forwarded to Julie Corry, who will coordinate the creation of a West Tyrone squirrel records database and map.
- Few sightings over winter but of note were pine marten sightings at Lough Bradan.

Funding and partnerships

- Some early discussion on possible partnerships took place and queries on The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. It was agreed to discuss this with the NISF first before any further action.

Our next meeting will be scheduled for May 2011.

Derry Red Squirrel Group – Christine Doherty

Derry have held two meetings and set up 6 feeders. The group have ~50 recorded red squirrel sightings. They have entered into partnership with QUB Department of Geography and an MSc project is pending.

Grey control is an issue as there are no members who are prepared to do the killing although they are prepared to set and monitor traps. Therefore a BASC contact prepared to help would be very useful.

Red squirrels are crossing the border between counties Londonderry and Donegal – highlighting the need for cross border cooperation. Partnerships with Donegal CC and or NPWS.

Prehen - a previously red area is now mostly grey squirrels.

Fermanagh Red Squirrel Group – Rose Cremin

A very new group formed on 08 February 2011 following a public meeting that attracted an impressive 40 people. Where talks were given by Jon Lees (NIEA), John Griffin (FS), Stuart Jennings (NT) and Joe Dowell (GRSG).

From that meeting a second was held a few weeks later were the turn out was 16 plus two children with a number of people unable to attend but keen to register their interest.

There would seem to be a core of 10-12 people who are very focused and keen to drive the group forward, this group also has key support from local FS staff and NIEA staff.

The group are somewhat spread out across the county which may prove a problem, there are two or three key hubs that should allow some work to be done.

They are keen to get involved in cross border work, work with the National Trust and private land owners including Lord Brookeborough who has expressed his keenness to get involved in the group in the future.

The next meeting is scheduled for the 14 May at the Derrygonnelly field study centre.

Phytophthora ramorum – John-Joe Cassidy (Forest Service)

John-Joe gave an in depth and informative talk on the spread of disease through Northern Ireland's forests.

P. ramorum aka sudden oak death, sudden larch death. *P. ramorum* is a fungus like pathogen which can attack a wide range of trees and other plants. A fungal disease previously thought to be of American oaks and *Rhododendron* Spp.

2009 Japanese larch were identified has being infected in SW England.
2010 the infected was confirmed in Ireland and Wales in this species.

FS has 2500Ha of Japanese Larch on its estate which is about 4% of the stock.

It was confirmed for the first time in a Japanese larch plantation on the Antrim plateau in August 2010.

Nine woodland sites in the North of Ireland have now been diagnosed with the disease:

Six Forest Service sites are affected.

- Woodburn
- Ballyboley
- Bohill
- Glenarm
- Capanagh
- Glenariff Forest Park

Three of the outbreak sites are in private ownership.

Both Forest Service and the private woodland owners have been required to fell infected larch at the affected sites and to put in place necessary biosecurity measures. In addition, Forest Service has stepped up surveillance of its forests on a country wide basis as a precautionary response. In addition to ground inspections, the Department has also conducted an aerial survey across its forest estate. As a result, a small number of additional sites are being investigated.

<http://www.dardni.gov.uk/plant-health-p-ramorum>

Biosecurity is important as the spores can live for 2-3 years in the soils. Therefore keeping boots and clothes clean and not transferring soils off site. The fungi can be killed by an alcohol based disinfectant.

The fungal spores spread mainly by water droplets and mist.

The presence of Rhododendron appears to be a key factor in the presence of the disease.

There is continued monitoring by Forest Service using helicopters and ground truthing.

Where an outbreak is expected DARD Quality Assurance Branch should be contacted Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Quality Assurance Branch, Room 1019, Dundonald House, Upper Newtownards Road, BELFAST BT5 7DZ, Tel: 028 90524611.

<http://www.dardni.gov.uk/p-ramorum-disease.pdf>

Belfast Zoo News – Allan Galway

AG thanked TRSG for attending the Irish Zoos Forum meeting and talking about their work.

The Red squirrel enclosures are under construction and £18,000 has been earmarked so far.

Interpretation work has been started but input needed from the NISF and the groups.

ACTION POINT 4: Information to be fed to the zoo staff about the squirrel groups including contact information or website addresses.

Red squirrel weekend will be held on the 6&7 of August 2011 – representatives of the groups and NISF are very welcome to attend and assist the zoo staff.

The squirrel trail will be officially opened at a later date with an appropriate press release etc.

With the understanding that this is first phase of what is hoped to be a much bigger project.

2 red squirrels (1 male and 1 female) are being sought and these animals will be viewed from 3 purpose built hides.

Joe Dowdall asked to speak about Grey Squirrel control and points raised in this discussion document.

The recent discovery of Squirrel Pox Virus in Red Squirrels in South Down must now make us all review the whole business of Red Squirrel Conservation. It must be said that the sad fact of the matter is that the transmission of the disease to the Reds was only a matter of time and now that it is among them we must decide on what actions to take.

Factors to be considered.

1. Public Relations
2. The Red Squirrel
3. The Grey Squirrel
4. Education
5. Communication
6. Stakeholders
7. Focus Group for Grey elimination
8. Resources
9. Technical and Scientific expertise
10. Recording and assessing effective controls

Public Relations The hard fact that Grey Squirrels will have to be killed must not be shirked or glossed over. A strong case must be put forward from the word go and the reasons must be fully explained and no apologies made.

The Red Squirrel The good work Groups and Agencies are doing must not falter and this must play a large part in the PR drive. The public must be engaged fully with the Red Squirrel and more opportunities must be provided for positive inter action.

The Grey Squirrel We simply do not know enough about the Grey Squirrel. To achieve an effective result we must have dedicated people directing an elimination program.

Education This must be a multi strand approach. Engaging the public with positive PR concerning the Red and setting up a network of people and Groups that will report sightings of both Red and Grey.

Communication This is probably the most important factor we need to deal with. We must agree a plan to get information out to the public and then set up the machinery to take in filter and act on reports and sightings. Good communications is the oil that the machine will run on.

Stakeholders All Landowners are stakeholders; large areas of the country are divided between, The Forest Service, Water Service, UWT, National Trust, Estate Landowners, Golf Clubs, Gun Clubs, BASC (NI) and Farms etc. We need to engage them all. Some we have on board already others like Farmers can be approached through the Ministry of Agriculture and the Farming Unions. Again linking through an Education and Communication process we can Target and deliver positive action in certain areas in a calculated joined up approach.

Focus Group for Grey Elimination This Group will be a mix of our Stakeholders who will be focused on a step by step plan to eliminate the Grey Squirrel by all legal means.

Resources We must look to our Stakeholders and calculate the cost of running this operation to eliminate the Grey Squirrel. We already know the cost of not successfully dealing with this problem the question is can we afford not to carry this through. The argument for funding must be made and all of our stakeholders must be prepared to contribute. Who among us wants to put a price on the survival of the Red Squirrel?

Technical and Scientific expertise We must engage the researchers who are working with the most up to date discoveries both on a Vaccination for the Pox Virus and the development of immune-contraception for Greys.

Recording and Assessing effective controls It is vital that all actions taken against the Grey Squirrel are monitored and reported on so be effectively assessed. Best Practice standards should be employed at all levels.

It was agreed that a sub-group be convened and control strategies and publicity be dealt with.

ACTION POINT 5: for All would all interested persons wanting to take part in the sub group please make themselves known to JL asap.

AOB

It was generally agreed that the NISF website was not being maintained and updated regularly. JL explained that government cutbacks have lead to the loss of staff who carried out this role, but he endeavoured to develop the website further.

Action point 6: Would all members feedback to JL about the venue and location for this meeting to help him choice venues in the future.

Action point 7: Folks I feel we need an identity badge or logo, it needs to look sharp when scaled down to about 8x8cm for letterheads and slightly larger for documents etc, so if any of you are budding artists or have friends or relatives who are skilled with a paint brush or photoshop (**and will do it for free!!!**) please feel free to submit your logo designs to JL. Ideally as soon as possible as we could incorporate it into the Zoo information boards which explain the work of the NISF.

Next meeting: **Thursday 13 October 2011**

Time and venue to be determined depending on your feedback.