At the Royal Highland Show in June 2009, I had the pleasure of presenting the first annual review of Scotland’s Environmental and Rural Services to a busy SEARS tent.

That report showed how far the nine partner organisations had come in working closely together to deliver for Scotland’s land managers.

A year later, a richer understanding is emerging of the benefits brought about by the SEARS changes.

Further reductions have been made on inspections, resulting in more time saved for customers, continuing fee waivers and modest, though encouraging mileage and CO₂ savings.

Good progress continues on biosecurity, co-locations, and reducing bureaucracy. Preparatory work also began late on in 2009 to develop a pilot of the ‘rural hubs’ concept, to further improve access to services.

The doors opened by the SEARS partnership have made measurable improvements to how we operate in rural Scotland and I expect this work to progress well over the coming year.

Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Minister for Environment.
Introduction

Scotland’s Environmental and Rural Services (SEARS) is a partnership of nine delivery-focused bodies within the Environment and Rural Affairs portfolio:

- Animal Health
- Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA)
- Crofters Commission
- Deer Commission for Scotland (DCS)
- Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS)
- Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA)
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)
- Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (SGRPID)
- Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)

By adopting the SEARS approach, the partners aim to improve the experience of services they provide to rural land managers. SEARS was launched at the Royal Highland Show in June 2008. The first SEARS Annual Review covered the period from the launch to the end of March 2009. This review presents progress during the financial year 2009–10, and briefly outlines planned work for 2010–11.

This review is likely to be of most interest to those with prior knowledge of SEARS, in particular partner staff, customers and stakeholders. However, we are aware of interest from the Scottish Parliament, specialist media, students, researchers, internet browsers – there have been visitors to the SEARS web portal from over 100 countries – and other public bodies and government departments. For whatever reason you are reading this review, we hope you find it interesting.

Farmland at Clunie, Tayside and Clackmannanshire.
SEARS Highlights

Rationalised inspection activity
- 4,996 fewer inspections or visits to land managers from the SEARS launch (June 2008) to the end of March 2010

Streamlined bureaucracy
- 2009 Agricultural Census reduced in length by 70 questions
- 8,700 farmers with minor holdings exempted from annual survey in 2009
- Around 3,000 farmers removed from the January 2010 sheep count

Enhanced biosecurity
- Biosecurity protocol introduced for SEARS bodies in July 2009
- Protocol since adopted by Scottish Agricultural College (SAC) and Historic Scotland
- Contingency Plan template for disease outbreaks in intensive pig and poultry premises published

Listening to customers
- SEARS opportunities shaped by findings from surveys of 3,500 rural land managers
- Offered regular update seminars to stakeholder representatives
- Biosecurity Contingency Plan developed in direct response to industry feedback
- January sheep count reduction followed suggestion of the National Farmers Union of Scotland
- Receiving feedback and suggestions from five regional meetings of the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association (SRPBA)

Improved access to services
- The first year of operation of the purpose-built Links Building at Golspie
- SEARS staff moving into buildings already occupied by other partners at Inverness, Oban and Edinburgh
- SEARS partners now co-located in 18 locations in total

Reduced charges
- Recurring savings of around £130,000 for 2009-10 and beyond

Carbon savings
- Combining inspections has reduced CO₂ emissions of SEARS partners by around 26 tonnes
Public value

- More advice on good environmental practice through combined visits and knowledge transfer

Time savings for customers

- Combining cattle inspections and TB or Bluetongue vaccinations saved customers time in handling livestock – customer research estimated saving as equivalent to £500 per visit
- Streamlined internal consultation processes reduced time customers waited for approvals, by up to 28 days
- Customer research reported customers using the facility to change personal details with up to nine SEARS partners through a single contact
- Overall, customer research indicated a drop in time spent on paperwork from SEARS partners of 11.4% over the previous year
- This finding equates to an estimated 200,000 hours of time freed up for rural land managers to devote to more productive activity

Reduced environmental risks

- Silage, slurry and agricultural fuel oil, CAR engineering and diffuse pollution general binding rule inspections undertaken by SGRPID staff have helped rural land managers reduce the associated environmental risks

Roe deer
Reducing Burdens

One of the early objectives of the SEARS Programme was to reduce the burden of separate service-generated inspections and visits to rural land managers. As the Programme has evolved over the past two years, detailed feedback from customers and stakeholders suggests that much of the inspection burden comes from outwith the SEARS partners. Rural land managers frequently cite visits from local authorities, quality assurance schemes and supermarkets in this respect. That said, the SEARS partners remain committed to combining and reducing inspection activity where appropriate. Building on the reduction of 2,048 inspections in 2008-09, the SEARS partners have conducted a further 2,948 fewer inspections in 2009-10.

Customer research, discussions with stakeholders and staff within SEARS partner bodies all suggest there is scope and a need to reduce the burden of bureaucracy on rural land managers. A delay in the process of determining licences applied for was seen as a key area that SEARS partners should address so that rural business opportunities were not unduly delayed. The simplification of guidance and application forms was also felt to be important. A number of SEARS outputs have helped address these areas of concern:

Consultation principles

SEARS partners have produced a set of key principles to be followed in any consultation between partners. The principles apply a discipline which, when followed, will reduce the time taken to formally respond to any consultation. They are designed to avoid unnecessary delays and have been agreed and embedded by all SEARS partners. For example application of the principles to the consideration of a response to Environmental Impact Assessment consultation or an application to SEPA for a licence for engineering works within a Special Area of Conservation should now receive a quicker decision.

Controlled Activities Regulations and Pollution Prevention and Control applications to SEPA

Applications within or with the potential to affect designated sites such as Special Areas of Conservation or Special Protection Areas demand very detailed consideration to ensure they do not affect the designated special interest.

By reaching agreement with SNH on licence level activities in or near these designated areas, SEPA is able to provide a quicker response to land managers who apply for a Controlled Activities Regulations or Pollution Prevention and Control licence. It is estimated that around 35 such applications are made to SEPA on an annual basis. By avoiding the need for consultation with SNH, in each case the time taken to reach a decision can potentially be reduced by up to 28 days.

Farmers wishing to realise the value of certain organic wastes through their application to land are required to register the activity with SEPA under the Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994. A 50 Ha limit per application exists, raising concerns from the sector about the need in certain circumstances to make multiple registrations each attracting a separate registration fee. SEPA and SEARS partners working with the sector have developed what the Scottish Government’s Environment Minister referred as the “one farm one form” approach at last year’s Royal Highland Show. However, the new model requires a legislative change and amendment to SEPA’s charging scheme to reflect the streamlined process improvement, and both are currently the subject of consultation.
SEPA has agreed to carry out the inspection of international catering waste from sources such as ports and airports. These inspections will cover the process from source to land filling on behalf of Animal Health during routine planned visits. Whilst the number of potential inspections saved is 28 per annum, the opportunity provides modest efficiency savings and continued protection for the livestock sector.

**Reviewing Paperwork**

Since its launch in 2008, SEARS has focussed increasingly on reducing bureaucratic burdens placed on land managers by the Scottish Government’s rural and environmental delivery bodies. Research undertaken in 2008 showed that land managers spent an average of 1.83 hours per week completing paperwork related to interactions with the SEARS organisations, and that some considered this a more onerous burden than inspections.

Whilst this burden compared favourably with that typically placed on other sectors, SEARS was keen to look at ways to streamline and simplify land managers’ paperwork without reducing the quality of services offered or the effective delivery of regulation. It looked at three areas:

- **Improving access to services**
- **Reducing paperwork necessary to access services or in response to a legal requirement**
- **Simplifying paperwork and making it more customer friendly**

The latest round of customer research surveyed over 1,000 rural land managers. They reported an 11.4% reduction in time spent on bureaucracy generated by the SEARS partners. Over SEARS shared customers as a whole this represents around 200,000 hours freed up for more productive activity.

**Avoiding duplication**

Borders farmer Nigel Miller said: “One of the real issues for all of us is paperwork and being diverted away from the real job. The less days that we spend going through paperwork and double checking what we record anyway, the better. In the past, we’ve found that a lot of our record-keeping was being checked two or three different times by two or three different people on two or three different days each year. It’s common sense and a catch-all approach. Rather than having a whole series of visits, you get one visit, and it’s hopefully all over in a oner. From the farmer’s point of view, no inspection is good news, but at least it concentrates the pain and you’re not impacted by a continual series of inspections.”

**Improving access**

During 2008 a new approach was developed to customer call handling, offering more ways in which the customer could get in touch with a SEARS organisation. This was known as the “One Door Any Door” approach, and, amongst other things, it offered access to SEARS organisations through a single web-portal. In the last year, the portal has been reviewed to ensure that all SEARS services can be accessed through this ‘onedoor’, with 208 separate forms and services now available online in one place at www.sears.scotland.gov.uk. Use of the portal is increasing, with around 3,000 customers visiting and around 3,800 staff hits over the past year.
Reducing paperwork

All SEARS forms, whether offering access to services or as a result of data requests, were assessed for their impact on the customer. Those that research showed were particularly problematic or time-consuming for the customer, or those that were used by a high number of customers, were reviewed to see if they could be reduced or even removed altogether.

This work is ongoing, but in the last year SEARS has worked with the Scottish Government’s Rural & Environment Analytical Services (REAS) to:

- Exempt 8,700 farmers with minor holdings from the 2009 Agricultural Census, with some of the data (approx. 61%) instead being captured from the Single Application Form (SAF)
- Remove approximately 3,000 farmers from the January sheep count
- Remove 70 questions from the 2009 Agricultural Census (by pre-populating the forms with information from the SAF)
- Reduce the number of sections in the Tenanted Land Survey from seven to six, and remove a further six questions from the remainder of the form

Many of the SEARS partners are engaged in applying the SEARS approach to internal processes and the resulting forms. For example, an online interactive application process has been introduced, reducing the total number of SNH Licensing forms from ten to three.

Simplifying paperwork

One concern expressed by stakeholders, especially with regard to regulatory burdens (e.g. censuses and other compulsory data requests), is the complexity of the language used. Official paperwork and guidance can sometimes be unclear in explaining why information requests are necessary.

SEARS is looking to improve the language used in such paperwork and, working with REAS, has already revised the Tenanted Land Survey form and covering letter, rewording them and making them less complex and cluttered. The covering letter has been reduced from 239 words to 185.

SEPA have also subjected 147 of their standard letters to plain English reviews. Many of these are used in correspondence with land managers.
Public Value

The SEARS partners are committed to working together to provide more joined-up services for Scotland’s Land Managers and to reduce the regulatory burden. However, the principles of public service delivery are also at the heart of the SEARS approach. An important part of this involves focusing on real improvements to the public value of the services we deliver.

The opportunities delivered through SEARS provide many examples which demonstrate the improvements that have been provided for the customer through the SEARS partners working hand in hand.

These include financial benefits to the public purse through sharing premises and equipment; environmental benefits through raised awareness of environmental issues and reduced carbon emissions; and health benefits through heightened awareness and consistency of approach to biosecurity. Economic benefits are also provided through more efficient consultation procedures between the partners, leading to earlier decisions on applications for consents.

For example, SEPA have provided training to its partners’ staff to enable them to carry out checks and to offer guidance on risks and mitigation to land managers on the Diffuse Pollution General Binding Rules. The rules were implemented in 2007, with a programme of visits to monitor compliance integrated within the other partners’ inspection regimes. The training and the combining of these visits within existing inspections – particularly those of SGRPID – has raised awareness of Diffuse Pollution generally. More specifically, it has also emphasised the contribution that reductions in Diffuse Pollution from agricultural sources will make to achieving Scotland’s Water Framework Directive targets. This greater awareness among the industry will lead to further improvements in the quality of Scotland’s waters for all users, with consequential economic benefits through the enhanced reputation of Scotland’s environment for both tourism and business. It is considered that this level of impact could not have been achieved without the close working together between SEPA, the other SEARS partners and stakeholders which has been facilitated through SEARS.

Scotland has set itself challenging targets to reduce CO₂ emissions. The reduction of some 5,000 inspections since SEARS was launched has led to reductions in business mileage across the partners and consequential reduction in CO₂ emissions. Whilst these are very modest at around 26 tonnes a year, the reductions are a welcome step in the right direction.

Case Study

An SGRPID officer had an inspection to undertake on a remote hill location which involved a lengthy drive along a hill track. SGRPID have no off-road vehicles based in his location, however through involvement with SEARS partners he was aware that Deer Commission Scotland (DCS) had a pool of off-road vehicles. Contact was made and it was quickly agreed that the vehicle could be made available to SGRPID for the day. Previously, this inspection may have involved either a lengthy walk or SGRPID hiring a suitable vehicle. Relationships built up through SEARS have led to a saving to the public purse on this occasion, raised awareness of similar opportunities to share pool vehicles and allowed an inspection to be completed in an efficient and effective way with an earlier result for the land manager concerned.
Case Study
A tenant farmer in Perthshire, as well as talking up the introduction of online application forms, was also pleased with the idea of joint inspections. Without prompting, he mentioned that when he had been scheduled for a TB test somebody had informed him it would be an opportunity to inspect the animals for ear tags etc.

He said: “If you are doing an inspection for TB or something like that, the Department should know this and be able to pinpoint it with the animals around. It’s such a hassle herding animals through the raises… if somebody wants to come and inspect ear tags [at the same time] they have got to be right to be quite honest.”

He said that doing both inspections at once would add about an hour to the TB test, but for an extra hour on one inspection he has potentially saved three days of work which means saving having to pay one employee and saving time for himself and his wife.

The severe winter weather over December 2009 and January 2010 caused difficulties for many rural businesses. The lengthy period of snow and frozen ground caused serious problems for farmers who found slurry stores overflowing due to the lack of suitable ground conditions to carry out spreading. This led to emergency requests from farmers to spread slurry in contravention of either Nitrate Vulnerable Zone or Diffuse Pollution Regulations. The close working relationships which had been built between SGRPID and SEPA staff through SEARS helped to ensure that the two organisations could quickly agree on the action to be taken. This meant an early response could be provided to farmers and stakeholders on action which could be taken during the exceptional conditions. The proportionate response also mitigated the risk of environmental damage through uncontrolled action being taken by farmers.

Case Study
An interviewee with three estates across the country has seen an improvement in communication and relationships between the SEARS partners and recently experienced a joint cattle inspection and groundwater authorisation inspection.

He said: “It could probably save us two hours. Probably £100 off the top of my head; if you said £50 per hour you wouldn’t be far off.”

As far as the joint cattle inspection was concerned he said that it was a very good idea that SGRPID had advised him when they were doing any major livestock handling operations and that they would then try to come down to suit the workload. He is responsible for over 500 cattle across two properties so there is always a lot of work going on. He said that one of his challenges is to differentiate between a “major handling situation” and “ordinary work”. The participant said that the sort of savings generated by one of these joint cattle inspections could be quite considerable, adding “Yes, if we can tie it in with another operation, it certainly saves us time and money …you could be talking about the best part of £500 for a day’s work.”
Evidence-based policy development

Listening to our customers

SEARS places a great deal of importance on securing customer and stakeholder input. This is key to successful delivery of improved services and a reduction of burdens and the evidence base has been growing. Throughout this year, we actively sought customer feedback and carried out research in early 2010 to supplement studies in 2008 and 2009. Staff visited individual rural land managers on a one-to-one basis to talk through forms and processes customers are exposed to. Staff also engaged with regional groups to openly discuss customer needs.

Research evidence base

The three customer surveys have now involved over 3,500 rural land managers using questionnaires. In addition focus groups covering all parts of Scotland were used to debate views and suggestions for improvement, each facilitated by George Street Research. In 2010 the survey engaged with “opinion formers” from across the rural sector to explore their views on SEARS as well. These surveys suggest:

- Awareness of SEARS continues to increase
- Overall satisfaction with how service generated visits are being integrated has improved since 2008
- Awareness of the role of SEARS in driving these improvements is high among those directly affected
- Registration and reporting, including inspections, were the most common sources of frustration amongst customers
• Sharing of data and data collection by relevant bodies is an important area in which to avoid duplication, but at the same time customers expect legislative requirements relating to privacy and personal data to be met

• Land managers' satisfaction with the contact they have had with the SEARS organisations has increased over the last two years.

Listening to stakeholders

The surveys were supplemented later in 2009 by offers to meet representative organisations to discuss how SEARS could respond to common problems raised by their membership. During the summer, staff gave presentations to five regional meetings of SRPBA to outline SEARS' aims and achievements. These were well received, and it was clear that the reduction in inspections and the growing culture of a single service across the partners was both noticed and appreciated by customers.

However, it was also clear that more effort on reducing burdens is needed. For example, whilst the biosecurity protocol was welcomed, SEARS was challenged to encourage other organisations visiting rural land managers to adopt it as well. This is something we are responding to in the next phase of SEARS. This widening of SEARS was raised in the context of inspections too, with SEARS partners only responsible for a proportion of checks carried out. A significant part of this is instigated by quality assurance schemes, local authorities and supermarkets. Addressing this type of burden is a challenge for the future, especially as the influence of the SEARS partners with these bodies is limited compared with that of rural land managers themselves. Nevertheless, we continue to be willing to work with these organisations if they choose to review their inspection activity.

It became clear from the regional meetings with the SRPBA and from the 2009 customer survey that customers were not automatically averse to regulation, or to inspections. These are seen as a key part of maintaining quality in Scotland's food and agricultural sector. Rather, customers felt SEARS partners should improve the explanation for having an inspection and address current forms and guidance that do not articulate this well.

Throughout 2009-10 two stakeholder events were held to provide the opportunity for stakeholders to feed back on SEARS changes and proposals. Invited and participating organisations included the National Farmers Union of Scotland (NFUS), SRPBA, Confederation of Forest Industries (ConFor), the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association, the Association of Deer Management Groups, the Scottish Countryside Alliance and the Scottish Crofting Foundation. Senior stakeholders' views were also sought as part of the 'opinion formers' component of the latest customer research.

Notwithstanding this progress, challenges remain. Some customers remain unaware of new services provided by SEARS. For instance there is relatively modest use of both the 24/7 contact centre and the facility for customers to update their contact details once only on the web portal, rather than contacting each and every one of the partners individually. Better promotion of SEARS, its achievements and the new facilities it offers is a task for 2010.
Consistent biosecurity

Helping the Scottish agricultural industry protect itself against animal disease is a key part of our role, and within SEARS we have been leading work to promote high standards of biosecurity.

Notifiable Disease Contingency Plan Template and Guidance

This document has been developed and produced in response to a direct request from the operators of Intensive Agricultural Installations holding Pollution Prevention and Control (PPC) permits. The development of this package benefitted throughout from the input and assistance of the customers.

Under a condition of PPC permits (issued by SEPA), operators of large pig and poultry farms are required to have plans in place to minimise the potential environmental impacts which would arise as a consequence of an outbreak of a notifiable disease on their premises.

In addition, Animal Health and the Scottish Government are keen to promote greater resilience within the industry by encouraging operators to prepare disease outbreak contingency plans at a farm or business level.

The document is intended to provide operators of PPC installations with a template to allow them to comply with their PPC permit and produce their own contingency plan for dealing with the outbreak of a notifiable disease on their premises or elsewhere in the UK.

The document is for use by operators, and provides both information and a framework for the development of a plan. Support from SEPA and Animal Health will be offered to help with the completion of the plan. The plan belongs to the operator and can be changed or altered to meet the specific needs and circumstances of the business. Customers can then use this information to form the basis of a site-specific contingency plan.

The document is specifically designed to:

- inform farmers of likely consequences of an outbreak of disease on their premises
- encourage improved biosecurity measures
- help prepare businesses for an outbreak on premises, or the imposition of movement controls
- provide a single source of information to allow Animal Health to deal quickly and efficiently with an outbreak and return units to productivity as quickly as possible
- ensure measures are put in place to prevent pollution of the environment or harm to animal or human health.

Furthermore, for those farms registered under PPC Regulations, the document provides producers with information on how to meet their statutory obligations and a clear way of dealing with effluent or washings.

Along with site-specific contingency plans and the basic principles outlined in a herd and flock health plan, SEARS partners have also published common biosecurity protocols. These are used when visiting land owners, making our customers aware of what they can expect from us as well as something that can be used for guidance for individual use. Ultimately, our aim is to work together to protect Scotland from disease and ensure a sustainable economy for Scotland’s long-serving agricultural industry.
Common Sense

East Lothian farmer Kelvin Pate said: “SEARS guidelines are common sense. You wash your clothes and your footwear when you arrive on a farm and you do the same when you leave. If you use disinfectant, that kills all the bugs, and by doing that it stops a huge expense to a farmer’s business because of the disease that could come onto it.”

Communicating the SEARS approach

Communicating the work of SEARS took an important step forward in the spring of 2009 with the appointment of a dedicated communications manager. This has driven forward improvements in the way SEARS is communicated.

A new communications strategy has been put in place, reinforcing land managers as our principal audience, but also keeping communicating with staff high on the agenda. The strategy identified a number of useful channels, some old and some new, to communicate with these key audiences.

Keeping the public informed

Media relations work, around key SEARS landmarks such as last year’s annual review, the launch of the biosecurity protocol and the animal disease contingency plan framework, received positive coverage in the pages of The Press and Journal, The Courier and The Scotsman among others. Coverage such as this helps increase the profile of SEARS among a key customer base.

The work of SEARS also featured on the pages of SEPA View and on the Scottish National Rural Network (SNRN) website, with more placed articles planned for the near future.

With the partnership seeking opportunities for closer engagement with local authorities, an invitation to showcase SEARS at the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) ‘Benchmarking Best Practice’ event in February 2010 was most welcome.

A short film was produced featuring contributions from a number of land managers with experiences of SEARS. A number of local area office staff were on hand to help, alongside SEARS Programme Chair and Scottish Government Rural Director, Peter Russell.

With the film having been screened at the SOLACE conference, it is now available to watch via the SEARS web portal and the Scottish Government’s YouTube channel.

A Twitter page was set up to cover issues around both SEARS and SRDP. With more than 200 ‘followers’ having signed up, it has been viewed as a success in communicating to key audiences, and its work has been widened to cover rural issues more generally.

An events strategy has also been drawn up to ensure joined-up thinking at rural shows where SEARS will be promoted by individual bodies within the partnership.
Keeping staff informed

Staff news on SEARS returned, in the form of monthly news updates hosted by the web portal. Issues covered included Programme Board proceedings, SEARS landmarks and good examples of working with stakeholders.

The regular news updates were not the only change to the portal. A number of tweaks to make it more user-friendly have also been made.

Links to the portal from the websites owned by the nine partnership bodies are now more visible, with links also now embedded in the Scottish Government’s rural newsletter and the weekly ezine produced by the SRPBA.

Finally, it should be noted that each member of the partnership has placed SEARS principles at the heart of its communications work.

The communications teams of each organisation are now working closer together than ever to ensure joined-up communications through a number of groups and joint working at events.

Listening to staff

And communications, of course, is not just about projecting. The most important element involves listening to your audience. In creating a survey for staff across the family, that is exactly what SEARS has done.

Overall, 737 staff from across the SEARS family responded and aired their views on topics as diverse as working with land managers, impacts on their job, the web portal and the development of the rural hubs proposal.

The findings indicated that awareness of SEARS and its objectives was high. However, as one would expect from an initiative that transfers complexity from customer to staff, some colleagues feel their job has not improved since SEARS was introduced. The views of staff are essential to the workings of SEARS, and views on rural hubs and the web portal have been particularly helpful in shaping work in those areas.

Native woodland planting site at Loch Katrine.
### Management of Rural Land Assets

SEARS partners have been joining up more effectively on the management of rural land assets. These assets of the SEARS organisations are now all held in one place. FCS already had a map of all of their land, and they have added in details of all the land held by the other SEARS partners. This will be updated annually every March by FCS following feedback from partner bodies. This development makes it easy to see at a glance all the rural land across Scotland held by Scottish Ministers.

SGRPID, FCS and, to a lesser extent SNH, are also all responsible for the management of crofting land. It was recognised that management could be more efficient if all the land was looked after by a single organisation. With SGRPID having by far the largest area of crofting estate, legal and administrative processes are underway to identify a method for it to take on ownership of FCS and SNH crofting land.

All organisations have agreed that when they run procurement exercises for assessing development potential, they will include all the other SEARS partners in this. This will help achieve continuous improvement in the performance of land assets. A good example is work done by FCS to assess the potential of wind farms and hydro developments. The contract has been set up in such a way which allows other partners to use it. SGRPID are already looking at the potential for their estate. FCS are also procuring commercial advisers in respect of telecommunications mast sites, and, again, this service will be available to all partners.

### Extending the SEARS approach

Although SEARS is a joint venture of the nine SEARS partners, effective links have been established with other organisations as SEARS opportunities have been developed:

- **The SEARS Biosecurity Protocol has been adopted by Historic Scotland and SAC with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) also having expressed an interest.**

- **Work is just beginning between the SEARS partners, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives to explore the potential to join up in spreading good practice at a range of events.**

- **Historic Scotland have been observers at the SEARS Programme Board since the summer of 2009 and are considering ways to formalise links to the SEARS partners. There is already evidence of strong joined-up working between SEARS partner SNH and Historic Scotland on linking promotion of the natural and built environment.**

- **SGRPID, whilst undertaking cross-compliance inspections, carry out food hygiene inspections as part of cross compliance requirements. Since 2009 SGRPID have also carried out feed hygiene inspections for the FSA during these visits. In 2009, 242 of these combined inspections were undertaken.**

- **As neither the FSA nor local authorities, who used to carry out the work on behalf of the FSA, are SEARS partners, this combination of inspection activity is not contained in the overall calculation of inspections reduced.**

- **Early discussions have taken place with SOLACE and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) to explore how their office networks and those of the SEARS partners might be used together to mutual benefit.**
Colleagues in other administrations have expressed interest in how SEARS partners have approached improving customer experiences. Briefings have been given to Natural England, the Rural Payments Agency, the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). In Northern Ireland, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development made the following comment about SEARS in its report on agricultural regulation: “SEARS represents an important initiative, providing easier access to information, co-ordinating and reducing the number of separate inspections and reducing the burden of information provision.”

Regular briefings have been provided for Scottish Government policy divisions to promote the concept of ‘SEARS-proofing’ policy development.

A commitment to training and development

Transferring responsibility for inspection activity requires careful planning, good training and receptive trainees. Knowledge transfer is one of the key building blocks to the success of SEARS. During the year SEPA has developed and delivered the following training to SGRPID frontline staff at nine separate venues throughout the country to enable them to carry out inspections on behalf of SEPA:

- 66 staff on the inspection of groundwater licences
- 32 on diffuse pollution general binding rules and CAR engineering regime
- 137 on Silage, Slurry and Agricultural Fuel Oil regulations

As a result SGRPID staff have submitted an impressive 2,352 inspection reports to SEPA during the last 12 months.

In March, SEPA also developed and delivered CAR engineering and Diffuse Pollution General Binding Rules (DPGBR) training for 48 FCS/FES staff to use in day-to-day visits to forestry sites. Further training and refresher training is planned for the coming year.

Improving access to services

The difficult economic climate made it challenging to progress potential co-location projects over the last year as capital to fund development was not easily available within either the public or private sectors. Despite these circumstances work on Inverdee House, a new building to house SEPA, SNH and JNCC (Joint Nature Conservation Committee) in Aberdeen progressed well. Work started on the building in 2009 with a ground-breaking ceremony attended by Richard Lochhead, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment. Although some difficult weather conditions were experienced during the construction phase, the works were completed in time to move SEPA staff into the building as planned, during February 2010. SNH and JNCC staff followed. Inverdee House has exemplary environmental credentials having achieved BREEAM Excellent standard and an A-rated Energy Performance Certificate.

Elsewhere, the focus was more than ever upon making the best of what is already available.
For example, during late 2009 the number of SNH staff based at Silvan House in Edinburgh increased following the closure of the Dalkeith office and the relocation of the Forth and Borders Area staff who worked in Lothian.

Early in 2010, staff from the Crofters Commission moved into Great Glen House, Inverness. Great Glen House is the headquarters building for Scottish Natural Heritage and Deer Commission for Scotland, and also accommodates staff from Paths for All, University of Highlands & Islands and the Moray Firth Partnership.

Nick Reiter, Chief Executive of the Crofters Commission, said, “We moved into Great Glen House on 1st March and are already finding the sharing of resources of great benefit. There will be significant savings to the public purse and real gains in efficiency. We are also now in one of the most energy-efficient and green buildings in the UK. It was quite daunting starting to clear out our old premises at Castle Wynd, after 40 years, but staff met the challenge with good humour, patience and a very positive attitude.”

Breaking the ground at the new shared office, Inverdee House, Aberdeen.
What we didn’t do and why

Feedback on last year’s review suggested that this section was well appreciated, both for candour and bravery! So we have decided to repeat it this year, although thankfully there is less to report.

- While business cases were developed for a number of potential co-locations, we were unable to develop those that required significant capital investment due to the scarcity of funding.
- We started from the intuitive position that it should be possible to reduce the number of forms SEARS partners asked rural land managers to fill in. However, it became clear that customers understood the rationale for very specific forms and did not want reduction if it meant more complicated and longer single forms. So we re-focused efforts on improving the guidance on how, why and when to fill in forms.
- Initially, there seemed to be some scope to make implementation of Natura Directives more consistent. However, the customer-facing improvements were already being addressed through other SEARS work (e.g. consultation principles) and internal work in SNH.
- We had high hopes that a single record check for RPID and local authorities might be possible. However, detailed investigation revealed negligible duplication. To progress would have consumed a greatly disproportionate amount of resource for very limited customer benefit.
- At first, we thought there might be some potential to rationalise the inspection regime around organic waste to land. Closer inspection revealed little or no opportunity to combine inspections or time saving for customers.
- We tentatively explored the public value that could be secured through better climate change signposting for land managers, but found the proposal ahead of its time.

The climate change signposting opportunity was about exploring the possibility of SEARS partners signposting land managers to the Energy Savings Trust, Carbon Trust or Farming for a Better Climate website, if the opportunity arose during a routine visit. During detailed research, it became clear that there were a number of climate change initiatives developing including the development of a Rural Land Use Strategy, and that the opportunity was ahead of its time. In recognition of this, the opportunity has been put on hold pending further development of the initiatives already under development.

Cross-compliance for agricultural irrigation licences came into effect in January 2010. SEPA hold 822 abstraction for irrigation licences, and these are inspected by SEPA each year for compliance. The opportunity exists for SGRPID staff to undertake some of these inspections and the list of licence holders is to be matched against inspections SGRPID are likely to carry out, but it is felt the overlap might be quite low and the opportunity for a reduced number of separate visits or inspections will also be quite low. In these circumstances, it has been decided that, for the coming year, SEPA will continue to carry out the inspections including the verifiable standards for cross-compliance and provide the results to SGRPID.
Next Steps

In the next phase of the development, SEARS will seek to –

- Embed what has already been achieved or started to ensure the SEARS approach is at the core of rural service delivery in Scotland
- Continue to deliver significant reductions in the number of separate inspections and visits
- Simplify paperwork and make it more customer-friendly, providing both clarity and context for land managers
- Reduce process delays further so that partner organisations and customers experience minimal bureaucracy
- Produce a year-in-the-life profile of administrative burdens by sector which will help inform further work in reducing such burdens
- Extend use of the best practice approach to data sharing and consultation processes
- Use data from other sources, e.g. the cattle traceability scheme, to further reduce statistical burdens
- Encourage wider adoption of the biosecurity protocol by other non-SEARS delivery bodies
- Pilot the concept of rural ‘hubs’ at six SEARS family offices in the North East, starting in July 2010
- Revisit opportunities on hold such as Climate Change Signposting and CAR Irrigation Licence Cross Compliance inspections
- Significantly overhaul the SEARS web portal to make it more user-friendly and maximise its public value
- Deliver Scotland’s Protected Places communications project, covering natural and built heritage protected places, scheduled for summer 2010 following agreement with Scottish Ministers

Hanging Banners at Great Glen House, Inverness.
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Opposite: Red squirrel