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Westminster Hall debate the Future of the Forestry Commission

Tuesday 1 March 2011

Summary

- **WWF welcomes the Government's change of policy regarding the sale of the public forest estate**
- **The proposed review of the future direction of forestry and woodland policy in England, and on the role of the Forestry Commission and the public forest estate gives, an opportunity to recognise the positive contribution forests make to the landscape, to biodiversity, to amenity and to the rural economy in England.**
- **The review needs to include a full, open and transparent public consultation on the findings of the independent panel set up by the Government.**
- **The wider benefits of forests and the expertise and efficiency of the Forestry Commission need to be recognised and protected.**

Welcome change of policy

WWF is heartened that the Government has responded positively and speedily to the wide ranging concerns about the future of the public forest estate. WWF appreciates that forests are close to people's hearts and are well used as places of recreation and enjoyment.

We know also that there is tremendous public interest in forests, trees, wood and timber. We have always had a very strong interest from our supporters on forest related issues. This has helped in our campaigning for strong legislation to prohibit the import of illegally felled timber. It has underpinned our current campaign – What wood you choose? - for growing consumer support for sustainably and legally sourced timber and timber products with in the UK and Europe.

We welcome, therefore, the proposal for an expert level review to discuss the future direction of the Public Forest Estate in England.



President: HRH Princess Alexandra,
The Hon Lady Ogilvy KG, GCVO
Chair: Ed Smith
Chief Executive: David Nussbaum

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Earlier planned sales of the Public Forest Estate.

The Forestry Commission (FC) is the UK's largest provider of recreation and currently owns 18% of England's wooded areas - 198,298 hectares freehold and 57,692 hectares leasehold. Since 1997, the Government has had a disposal policy which allows the Forestry Commission to sell a small amount of land deemed surplus to requirements as part of good asset management.

The criteria for disposal required the Forestry Commission to take public benefit into account, including considerations such as management costs and access. Ancient woodland sites, sites within national parks, community forests, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or including a SSSI can only be sold to a "safe" purchaser. Woodland SSSIs cannot be considered for sale.

This policy since 1997 has led to land sales of 7,800 ha and purchase of 5,400 ha. 3,000 ha of this newly purchased land was woods and forests and land for tree planting as green space in the former coalfields and around major cities. In addition, the freehold purchase of 2,000 ha was to allow access in priority areas. The impact has been a significant increase in public forest now located near to residential centres.

In 2010-11, irrespective of other plans, the Government target for the disposal was 15% of the total FC owned forest estate over three years, i.e. around 40,000 hectares. The expectation was to raise £100 million, with the net receipts to go to DEFRA. Due to the recent controversy these sales are on hold, pending a review of the safeguards that need to be put in place before any sale. **WWF believes that this proposed sale should now be included within the review being undertaken by the independent panel of experts.**

WWF believes that the review should also consider the following issues:

a) Forest Stewardship Council certification (FSC)

The UK Public Forest Estate is currently certified under the FSC, using the equivalent UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). The FSC is the "gold standard" of international forest certification schemes, recognised by social, economic and environmental interests alike. The UK Government, through the FC, attained FSC status across its forest estate in 1999, after months of rigorous, third party audit. The UK was the first country in the world to achieve this. In 2001 the FC was awarded a WWF International Gift to the Earth for its work on certification. This was the first for the UK and one of only 70 globally at that time. Only 16% of private woodlands have FSC certification currently.

WWF believes that it is critical that FSC certification is retained on the Public Forest Estate and that further uptake of FSC is actively encouraged among private landowners.

b) Woodland biodiversity & forest fragmentation

The FC has a legal obligation to consider the conservation of biodiversity in all that it does. Around 45 % of the FC estate is located in protected landscapes – National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). By early 2010, 99% of Sites of Special Scientific Interest managed by the FC were in favourable or favourable recovering condition. This exceeded the government target of 95% by the end of 2010, and is greater than any other public, private or charitable organisation. This is tempered by the fact that in many parts of England, the woodland biodiversity index has been declining year on year since records began. In addition progress on the commitment to convert plantations on ancient woodland sites back to the original, native cover has been very slow.

In 2001, WWF published a report, written by native woodland expert, George Peterken on, “The Fragmentation of British Woodlands.” It was clear from this report that one of the key threats facing woodland biodiversity in the UK is the fragmentation of woodland cover, due to the small average size of woodland and the large number of different owners and differing management. Average woodland size (per ownership) in the UK is generally far too small and isolated to sustain biodiverse woodlands without intervention management. Fragmentation is considered to be a key contributing factor to the decline in the woodland biodiversity index.

WWF strongly believes that large tracts of forests need to be retained and even expanded in the English landscape and that these forests must continue to be managed for multi purpose benefits. Our overseas experience has taught us that once forest cover becomes fragmented, biodiversity suffers and if ownership is similarly fragmented, the ability to undertake restoration programmes at a landscape scale (which have the best chances of success) will be lost.

c) Generating social benefits

Woodland can generate a range of social benefits helping community cohesion, promoting social enterprises, supporting healthy activity for physical and mental health, and helping combat social deprivation. Woods and forests close to where people live tend to be those providing greatest social benefits. The FC has had a policy of acquiring land in such areas. This has had a significant impact on accessibility to the Public Forest Estate for a larger proportion of the public. At the same time the Public Forest Estate has made a significant contribution to the provision of green infrastructure in growth areas.

d) Ensuring a sustainable timber supply for the processing industries in the UK

The Forestry Commission was set up in 1919 to ensure a continuous supply of timber for the UK. Nevertheless we still import around 80% of our domestic timber needs. Currently the Forestry Commission sells an annual cut, regardless of timber prices. In England the Forestry Commission owns 18% of the woodland but produces nearly 70% of England’s homegrown softwood timber. Timber prices, due in part to the global trade in illegal and unsustainably produced timber and wood products, have been depressed by an estimated 16-18%.^{1 2}

There is clear evidence from the Silvanus Trust’s, “South West Woodland Inventory” (published in 2009), of the problems of timber supply from private woodlands in the UK. Private landowners do not harvest timber when the prices are low, leading to problems of supply and oversized logs - unsuitable for processing in the UK. This has serious implications for the UK’s domestic processing industries, as well as for its global environmental footprint overseas as the UK already imports around 80% of its timber and wood product requirements.

e) The FC’s regulatory and timber production roles

The claim that there is a conflict of interest in combining the regulatory role of the FC in determining felling licences and management grants with the role of timber producer cannot, in our view, be seriously supported. Currently the Authority and Enterprise sides of the Forestry Commission are clearly demarcated, with different offices and different staff. The Public Forest Estate is independently audited by a third party (through FSC certification against the UKWAS standard) to ensure responsible management.

¹ Seneca Creek Associates; “Illegal Logging and Global Wood Markets: The Competitive Impacts on the US Wood Products Industry.” American Forest and Paper Association. November 2004

² FAO; “Best Practices for Improving Law Compliance in the Forestry Sectors.” FAO Forestry Papers 145; 2005

f) International links

WWF believes that the UK Government, through the Forestry Commission has played a leading role in the success of several initiatives including the Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative³, which now has many exemplar projects and the support of several governments. The Read Report on combating climate change⁴, was the first national assessment of its kind in the world and aimed to provide a better understanding of how UK forestry can adapt to and improve its contribution to mitigation of climate change. The study is already attracting interest from other countries keen to form their own climate change plans and policies. Work done into community and social forestry, particularly on the management of small woodlands has provided invaluable demonstration work for appropriate management tools and infrastructure for community forest projects overseas. There is also an important opportunity for the FC's plant health inspection teams to play a key role in the successful implementation of the European Union Timber Regulation which will outlaw the import of illegal timber and wood products into the UK.

WWF believes that due consideration must be taken of this important work in the ongoing deliberations of the management of the PFE and future of the Forestry Commission. It is precisely the ability of the organisation to deliver both policy and practice and for the one to inform the other, which has been one of its strengths to date.

An ability to combine policy and practice in the UK has important resonance for our international development work on forests. It is also important for meeting the UK Government's binding European and international biodiversity commitments. These commitments include the EC Habitats Directive and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), as well as voluntary commitments under the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) and the Ministerial Conference for the Protection of Forests in Europe (MCPFE).

The way forward

The independent expert panel will advise on the future direction of forestry and woodland policy in England, and on the role of the Forestry Commission and the Public Forest Estate. **WWF believes no final decisions should be taken until there has been a full, open and transparent public consultation following the publication of the findings of the independent panel.**

WWF will seek to ensure that the wider benefits of forests, and the expertise and efficiency of the Forestry Commission are recognised and protected. In particular we will work to ensure that the present Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification of the whole public forest estate is maintained.

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1961-2011: 50 years of conservation. WWF works in over a hundred countries to protect the natural world, tackle climate change and promote sustainable consumption.

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³ <http://www.ideastransformlandscapes.org/>

⁴ http://www.tsoshop.co.uk/gempdf/Climate_Change_Main_Report.pdf