

Written evidence submitted by Rewilding Britain (TPW0027)

1) Are the UK Government's targets for increasing forestry coverage, and tree planting, for England and the UK sufficiently ambitious and realistic?

We do not believe that the UK Government's targets for forestry expansion and coverage are ambitious enough to address the urgency of ecological crises in terms of either their scale or pace of change proposed. For example, 25 Year Environment Plan only made a commitment to increase woodland cover in England from 10% to 12% by 2060. And the England Tree Strategy only proposes to increase tree planting to 30,000 ha a year by 2025. These targets are woefully inadequate.

We urgently need to see an expansion of nature's recovery across Britain to match the scale of the threats from accelerating climate heating and species extinction. Rewilding Britain would therefore like to see clear and ambitious targets for increasing woodland cover that match the scale and pace of change required. We are calling for a doubling of UK woodland cover from the current 13% to 26% by 2030.

The need for a rapid upscaling of woodland creation raises the question of how this additional woodland area should be created. Most assessments talk about tree planting as if manual establishment of trees by humans is the only way that woodland can be created. But if the ambition is to create diverse, climate-resilient natural forests and woodlands, tree planting is not the only – or even the best – way.

Evidence suggests that allowing woodlands to regenerate naturally could massively increase the scale of woodland creation across Britain at a fraction of the cost of tree planting. If we let them, trees will plant themselves in their many millions over much of Britain. This will create natural forests and woodlands better able to soak up carbon dioxide, support wildlife, and adapt to a changing climate. Imported tree diseases, plastic tree guards, management costs and soil carbon loss would all be reduced. Britain's precious native woodland habitats, such as our temperate rainforests, would also be able to expand naturally across their range.

Doubling woodland cover from 13 per cent to at least 26 per cent by 2030 is achievable partly through a rapid expansion of the area of 'woodland in the making' where young woodlands are regenerating and growing into the natural forests and wildwoods of the future. We propose a Three Step Natural Regeneration Hierarchy as a practical model for decision making. This should be part of a broader rewilding approach where species-rich mosaics of woodland, scrub and grassland habitats are allowed to regenerate over large landscapes. The hierarchy starts with natural regeneration as the default approach, with tree planting as a support option where the natural regeneration of diverse habitats will not happen without it:

- **Step 1 - Let nature lead:** Allow natural regeneration as a default approach unless a natural mix of trees and shrubs are unable to establish or would take too long to arrive
- **Step 2 - Give nature a hand:** Kick-start the process by assisting natural regeneration if needed
- **Step 3 - Plant trees:** Plant locally sourced tree saplings only where still considered necessary

Natural regeneration is the most cost-effective method of woodland expansion, as well as delivering additional biodiversity, ecosystem, and climate benefits. Given sufficient seed sources and suitable site conditions, trees will plant themselves in their millions for free, and

over as large an area of land as we are willing to spare. However, natural regeneration cannot therefore be considered in isolation, it must be part of a wider discussion about integrated land use change that supports both resilient ecosystems and communities.

For all approaches, but particularly for the second and third steps where the most active intervention is required, a significant increase in funding is crucial. This should focus on coordinated land management support payments that take an integrated approach across the rural economy including farming and forestry. Provision should also be made for training of land managers, silviculturalists, ecologists, and volunteers, as well as support for UK nurseries to expand their local sourcing and growing to meet ambitious targets and reduce reliance on imported stock.

2) Are the right structures in place to ensure that the UK wide target for increasing forestry coverage is delivered?

We need to fundamentally review how we “plan” our countryside and link this to a common understanding of what we’re asking of the land into the future. At the moment we have a very uneven and uncoordinated land-use planning and regulatory process. We have (at least) 3 different process/systems - agriculture is fairly lightly regulated, woodland creation is fairly robustly regulated by Forestry Commission or equivalents (but little Local Authority involvement), renewable energy development is regulated by the Local Authority under planning. Scotland has a Land Use Strategy and is proposing to establish regional land use partnerships. England deals with issues separately e.g. through Nature Recovery Partnerships and Local Enterprise Partnerships. What is needed overall are locally led integrated Land Use Plans across the rural economy including farming and forestry that deliver benefits for people, nature and climate.

Within this we would like to see a significant increase in investment in natural regeneration from public and private financing within a supportive regulatory framework. Current funding for trees, woodland creation and forestry is complicated and uncoordinated. And yet the multiple long-term benefits of natural forests and woodlands far outweigh the upfront costs.

Integrated land management payments – for example, the future Environmental Land Management Scheme and devolved nation equivalents – should explicitly support and incentivise natural woodland regeneration and nature-enriching land uses that sustain rural livelihoods. In our report [‘Rewilding and Climate Breakdown’](#) we propose how these payments can be structured to reflect carbon sequestration and biodiversity enhancement value in different restored ecosystems including woodland. This should be supported through a coordinated regulatory approach, enabling funding mechanisms and straightforward administrative requirements.

Current policy and practice in both agriculture and conservation is also counterproductive, discouraging and preventing the natural regeneration that would enable a vast expansion of rich and diverse wooded habitats. The reaction of many across Britain to scrub is likely to be a primary reason natural regeneration fails. In some rare circumstances removing scrub can safeguard specific species of conservation concern, but in general scrub is a key transition phase of regenerating woodland. It is also an important habitat in its own right. If we can learn to embrace scrub, many more trees will plant themselves and establish successfully.

As well as rewarding farmers for agroforestry and tree planting, future policy should enable land managers to leave wilder areas unmanaged for nature.

3) How effective is the co-ordination between the four nations on forestry issues, including biosecurity, plant health and other cross-border issues?

See answer 2 for the need to take an integrated approach to land management with and across the four nations.

4) Why were previous ambitions for increasing tree planting in England not met and what lessons should be learned?

We need to set more ambitious targets to double woodland cover by 2030 and back these up with coordinated policy, regulatory and funding support. In order to meet these higher targets, and based on lessons learnt from not meeting previous relatively unambitious targets, we need to at least:

- Integrate woodland expansion targets into wider integrated land use plans and use natural regeneration as a default approach wherever possible with tree planting as a support option.
- Significantly increase public and private funding for investment in woodland expansion. Faced with the combined climate and nature emergency, we can't afford **not** to spend more money on natural forest/woodland creation.
- Ensure that the future Environmental Land Management Scheme explicitly provides funding for the natural regeneration of woodlands as well as the integration of native tree species into farming systems via agroforestry, woodlots, woodland pasture, low impact silviculture etc. In our recent report '[Rewilding and Climate Breakdown](#)' we propose how these payments can be structured to reflect carbon sequestration and biodiversity enhancement value in different restored ecosystems including woodland.
- Support the forestry sector to develop a zoned approach, combining natural forest and woodland regeneration mixed in with low impact timber production. Forestry aims should include natural and 'naturalistic' forest types and be supported by fiscal and other incentives. This should include investing in diversifying markets that support woodland biodiversity/ecosystems. For example: natural forests provide increased opportunities for nature-based tourism and associated local enterprises; carbon markets can help to keep trees standing once established; localised manufacturing and supply chains can support a move to low impact silviculture using natural broadleaves, longer-lived wood products etc.
- Increase the budget for the Nature for Climate Fund and orientate it towards the target of doubling woodland cover. While naturally-regenerating forest in the shrub phase may only store 0.6 tonnes of carbon/ha/year initially, this rises to 2.4 tonnes/ha/year as woodland becomes established and can reach as high as 6-10 tonnes/ha/year. In the UK a naturally regenerating woodland may initially sequester less carbon than a densely-packed and rapidly growing sitka spruce plantation. However, this is more than compensated for by the massively expanded area that can be regenerated, at minimal cost, with negligible loss of soil carbon and higher biodiversity value.
- Focus at least 10-20% of national flood risk management capital programmes on Natural Flood Management approaches (currently <1%) including the large scale regeneration of riparian woodland within river catchments.
- Public Land Estate and Protected Areas should lead the way and be mandated to integrate natural woodland/habitat regeneration and rewilding across at least 30% of their land area, e.g. Forestry Commissions, Ministry of Defence, council owned land, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Beauty.
- Provide high quality advisory and training in natural regeneration practices and support land managers to transition to high-nature value farming and forestry approaches. This includes creating a network of community-based trusted land-based business advisors to

help with skills, training and business development support to implement new enterprises and forms of production linked to woodland regeneration.

5) In relation to increasing forestry coverage in England, what should the Government be trying to achieve? For example, how should the following policy objectives be prioritised?

- **Mitigating or adapting to climate change;**
- **Promoting biodiversity and nature recovery;**
- **Increasing biosecurity and plant health;**
- **Improving human well-being and health;**
- **Protecting natural and cultural heritage;**
- **Food security;**
- **Creating commercial opportunities from forestry, tourism and recreation; and**
- **Any other priorities?**

Using natural regeneration as a default approach, with tree planting as a support option, can make a significant contribution to the expansion of forest and woodland habitats in Britain in a way that delivers both climate and biodiversity benefits. And yet natural regeneration is barely mentioned in UK government and devolved nation policies. While recognising the important role that commercial forestry has in the sustainable production of timber, we would like to see an increased emphasis on the expansion potential of natural and semi-natural forests and woodlands which are not primarily intended for commercial timber extraction. Woodland wildlife is dependent on native tree species, and as the Woodland Trust states: 'The UK does not have the time or resources to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises separately'³.

Natural regeneration is the process by which plants and woodlands establish naturally – seeds distributed by the wind, birds and animals, by spreading root suckers and other natural processes. There are some key advantages to natural regeneration as compared to planting trees:

- **Greater complexity and diversity** – supports a greater structural complexity and diversity of habitats, which benefits plants, animals and humans. Most of the biodiversity in Britain is associated with intricate mix of trees, shrubs and open grasslands. The habitat complexity and diversity that results from natural regeneration of woodlands is one of its key advantages.
- **Better carbon storage** - potentially higher carbon value thanks to reduced soil carbon loss and other factors. Upcoming research from RSPB shows that mixed broadleaf woodlands store more carbon than managed sitka over 100 years.¹ A study of tropical areas concluded that 'natural forests are 6 times better than agroforestry and 40 times better than plantations at storing carbon'.² So much so that the authors issued the following plea: 'We call on the restoration community, forestry experts and policymakers to prioritize the regeneration of natural forests over other types of tree planting — by allowing disturbed lands to recover to their previous high-carbon state.' Overall woodland and habitat expansion can help absorb 10% of the UK's current greenhouse gas emissions annually – some 47 MtCO₂e – as demonstrated in our recent report '[Rewilding and Climate Breakdown](#)'.
- **Increased resiliency and climate adaptation** - supports genetic mixing and the natural selection of trees best adapted to local circumstances and a changing climate. This assists the evolution of resistance to disease. Many of our trees are wind-

¹ Bradfer-Lawrence, upcoming, results referred to in "RSPB Woodlands for Climate and Nature" webinar. Oct 2020.

² Lewis, S. et al, 2019: 'Regenerate natural forests to store carbon', *Nature*, 568, 25-28

pollinated and genetic adaptations to the changing climate could spread surprisingly rapidly if natural regeneration is allowed. Increasing the quality and connectedness of habitats also allows wildlife to move and habitats to adapt as climate zones shift north. Evidence in our recent report '[Rewilding and Climate Adaptation](#)' - suggests that this could up to a fifth of species from climate driven decline or extinction.

- **Reduced risk of pests and diseases** – reduces the need to import tree saplings, and therefore the risk of introducing new pests and diseases
- **Less management, more cost-effective** - requires less management and can be more cost effective than planting, especially beyond the initial establishment phase.
- **Nature-based economies** – can support diversified economic opportunities through nature-based enterprises, production and employment
- **Ecosystems services** - provides people with clean water, flood defences, healthy soils, breathable air, health and well-being.

These multiple and interconnected benefits demonstrate how important it is that we develop integrated Land Use Plans across the rural economy including farming and forestry that deliver coordinated benefits for people, nature and climate. We need to take a long-term, holistic approach rather than prioritising specific or sectoral policy objectives.

6) Are the right policies and funding in place to appropriately protect and manage existing woodlands in England? How will prospective changes to policy and legislation effect this?

We would like to see an integrated approach to land use that: protects existing natural forest; massively expands natural woodland regeneration; and incentivises high nature value land uses that maximise species diversity and sustain rural livelihoods.

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