

Written Evidence submitted by Small Woods (TPW0043)

EFRA Inquiry - Forest focus: can the Government deliver on tree-planting targets? MPs launch new inquiry

EFRA Select Committee to explore how meeting tree-planting objectives can benefit the economy, biodiversity and human wellbeing

Introduction

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

The targets are certainly ambitious. Although there may be some who might urge for greater ambition we believe the government and the sector needs to prove it can deliver on this level of ambition before considering any expansion of the targets.

For us, the big issue is the realism of this sort of significant expansion of forestry planting, in the absence of a complementary investment in the human (skills) and physical capacity that the effective management of this increase in forest cover would require. Our greatest fear is that this growth in woodland cover will simply lead to the unmanaged woodlands of tomorrow. 50% of our woodlands are under managed or unmanaged currently, this is an issue that already needs urgent action, significant expansion has the potential to simply make that situation significantly worse.

We would caution that the targets for increasing cover could potentially lead to an increase in imports of nursery stock. Provision to expand UK nursery capacity particularly at a local/regional level would not only increase supply it would provide an opportunity for increased rural development.

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

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

Although we do not have strong evidence on this issue, we perceive there to be less clear lines of communication between national administrations now that different organisational structures exist for forestry in each of the 4 nations. The split of responsibilities between arms length agency and government department also appears to differ between the 4 nations.

However, under the terms of the devolution arrangements, each nation is entirely within its rights to make such arrangements and it is for UK wide organisations to adapt. Whilst committee members will however be aware that this presents additional challenges for smaller NGOs.

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

The targets were unrealistic because they were never backed with the necessary range of delivery arrangements. Although a wide range of opportunities exist in theory, there are significant hurdles

and they need to be systematically addressed. Tree planting implies land use change, which needs a change in objective from the owner and/or occupier, it requires a change in the land management skills and equipment required and also a change in the timescale within which the economic returns are made.

Given the structure of land management, there is a need to think through how farmed land can be transitioned to wood/forest land. There is potentially a role for a revolving land ownership vehicle, which could be managed by Forest Enterprise that bought farmland, handled the woodland conversion and then re-introduced the land to the market as forest/woodland.

4. In relation to increasing tree planting 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?

Foresters and woodland owners will rightly look at this list and believe that they are trying to achieve objectives under each one of these headings. The balance will vary from owner to owner, from wood to wood for a wide range of complex reasons, which start with ground conditions.

Woodlands managed under the UKWAS standard are required to look at all these objectives and to make considered choices with respect to all these objectives. We support this approach and are working with FSC and others to provide a version that is more appropriate to smaller woodland owners and managers.

Our experience from our members is that the ordering of these priorities is likely to be often quite personal to the individual owner/manager.

Our view as an association is that it is critical to keep these objectives in balance. The nation needs timber, sequestration, nature, beauty, space, livelihoods, and all of these can be provided by well managed woodlands. There will be woodlands where one characteristic predominates, most often protection of nature or the production of high quality timber resources. However, we are not aware of any woodlands where it can be legitimately claimed that a single objective precludes all others. Even the most extreme of rewilding or commercial production scenarios can provide possibilities for other uses and interests as long as the owners and managers are so minded.

5. 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?

There are key deficiencies.

We recognise that there are challenges to bringing smaller woodlands into the policy framework, however, those difficulties have tended to leave the sector we represent under-represented and neglected by current policy mechanisms.

Critically, there is an insufficient focus on management of either our existing woodlands or the ones that we wish to create. It is irrational to support increased woodland cover when the capacity, skills and infrastructure do not exist to manage the woodlands we already have. There are also key deficiencies in biosecurity, pest and disease control and public understanding.

Given the challenges highlighted above regarding the difficulties of achieving large scale land use change, achieving the woodland expansion target is likely to require planting on all sizes of sites. It is likely that small woodland sites will be easier to achieve than bigger sites, to which there is inbuilt resistance from the current land management structures.

We would favour a more evolutionary process of land use change. By this we mean that we would suggest the new schemes should provide the means for farmers and other non-forestry land managers to establish woodland on small sites which can be accommodated. This would enable farmed holdings to create a more wooded landscape, at a pace that farmers can respond; providing the opportunity for the benefits of trees and woodlands to be explored within the farm.

A significant proportion of the planting target could be achieved by small woodland measures, such as increasing hedge widths, field corner planting, planting in less productive areas, water course planting, linking small woodland fragments, planting alongside existing woodlands, or simply allowing woodlands to expand by fencing out grazing pressure to allow natural regeneration.

Defra have shown an interest in increasing the focus on Small Woodlands, however, the new ELMS programme has not yet been established, so we are yet to see whether this interest will turn into real change.

November 2020