



BY EMAIL: forestrypanel@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Secretariat to the Independent Panel on Forestry
Defra
Nobel House
17, Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

13th June 2011.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Independent Panel on Forestry – Call for views

Attached is the response of the Cotswolds Conservation Board to the Independent Forestry Panel's call for views.

The Cotswolds Conservation Board was established by Parliamentary Order under Part IV of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The duties of the Board are:

- To conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB
- To increase the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB, ensuring these are compatible with its conservation and enhancement.

In carrying out its twin duties, the Board shall seek to foster the economic and social well-being of its local communities

The Board welcomes the Panel's call for views and the opportunity to assist the Panel's understanding of the place that forests and woods have in the AONB. Our views are offered from this perspective, though obviously much that we say about trees in the Cotswolds is true of other areas too.

If you wish to clarify or discuss further any of the above comments, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

Mark Connelly
Land Management Officer

Conserving, enhancing, understanding and enjoying the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

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Independent Panel on Forestry – Call for views

This response is from the Cotswolds Conservation Board, the statutory body established in 2004 to promote the conservation and public enjoyment of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

1. What do forests and woods mean to you?

Woodland covers about 10% of the Cotswolds AONB and is a major component of the Cotswolds landscape, forming an important element in defining landscape character. Forests and woods have an important role to play in the future for the Cotswolds environment and economy and for society. Of particular importance are the ancient woodlands, which are rich in biodiversity and provide evidence of historic human activity. Some of the most impressive woodlands in the Cotswolds are the nationally important beech woods along the crest of the Cotswold escarpment and the oak/ash woods to the north and east of Bath providing a setting to the World Heritage Site.

A significant benefit associated with woodlands in the Cotswolds is access for people. Most access to or through woodland is by the public rights of way network, including the Cotswold Way National Trail. However, there are a number of woodlands owned by public bodies, Wildlife Trusts, the Woodland Trust and the National Trust with open access, and some private landowners in the Cotswolds are also generous in allowing public access. Among areas open to the public are the Cotswold Commons and Beechwoods National Nature Reserve, a superb example of Cotswold beech woodland.

2. What is your vision for the future of England's forests and woods?

To be of most value for people, wildlife, landscape and environmental services, forests and woods usually need to be managed sustainably— though there are nature conservation reasons why some woodlands should have minimum intervention. Whilst incentives for managing woodland are available through the English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) and Environmental Stewardship (ES), the key incentive is economic viability. Where woodlands have retained an economic function – usually for timber, wood fuel and shooting – they are normally well-managed. Unfortunately, most woodland is under-managed or not managed at all. A significant issue is the lack of viable markets for principal woodland products, due to cheaper imports and the tendency to use non-renewable materials such as concrete and steel in construction. Wood fuel has the potential to reinvigorate woodland, but there are limitations and risks if wood is harvested and extracted in an unsustainable way.

Therefore our vision for England's forests and woods is:

That England's forests and woods are beautiful, rich in wildlife and valued by society – and supported through responsible management that helps ensure their healthy status and, where appropriate, realises their economic potential in a sustainable way.

3. What do you feel are the benefits of forests and woods?

Society

The benefits to society are wide ranging. Visual and physical access to woodland has proven health, well-being and spiritual benefits to society. This is increasingly being recognised, and the recent UK National Ecosystem Assessment (UK NEA) report has attempted to put a monetary

value on it. The vital place that nature, including woodlands, can play in terms of enriching human experience is also a key theme in the Natural Environment White Paper (NEWP).

Forests and woods should also play an increasingly important role in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change. Benefits include: carbon sequestration; slowing down water flow and increasing soil permeability during extreme weather events; providing climate space for biodiversity; moderating climate in towns and cities; and supplying a carbon-neutral, renewable energy source.

Natural Environment

In some parts of England, forests and woods are an essential part of local landscape character, giving identity and a sense of place. They are, for example, very important on the Cotswold escarpment. But it is equally important to recognise that the absence of woodland can also define an area's identity; examples of this include the open landscapes of the Cotswolds high wold.

Woodland, particularly ancient semi-natural woodland, is of course important for biodiversity. In the Cotswolds 30 woodlands have been designated as SSSI or SAC, and two are managed as National Nature Reserves. Much of this biodiversity is solely reliant on the woodland habitat and would be lost without appropriate woodland management – though in some cases only the lightest of management touches is required.

The economy

Direct benefits to the economy include woodland products such as timber, firewood and venison, as well as woodland-based tourism. The financial benefits, particularly to the rural economy, from income generated, are now fairly well understood. A study published by the Forestry Commission and South West RDA in 2002 valued the woodland and forests of the south west as being worth £575 million annually to the region's economy. Woodland based recreation and tourism was the largest single benefit, followed by direct products such as timber, firewood and venison and then sport, nature conservation, education and healthy living.

Indirect benefits of woodland include offsetting health costs, and the provision of environmental services as highlighted above.

4. Solutions and good practice

Solutions must be based on a full understanding of the importance of forests and woodlands, but also of the threats to them. It is disturbing that many ancient woodlands are still at risk from development. Trees everywhere could be at risk from climate change, with the associated heightened dangers of fire and disease. There are also underlying social issues – for example, the declining first-hand experience that people have of nature means that an understanding of the value of forests and woodlands cannot be taken for granted. So there is a need to act quickly on the many excellent proposals in the NEWP, especially those that aim to rebuild the connection between nature and people; nowhere will the benefits be felt more than in our forests and woodlands.

To maximise the benefits of forests and woodlands, they also need to be sustainably managed, and subject to mechanisms for conserving and enhancing biodiversity. Financial incentives through the EWGS and ES are available but uptake by woodland owners, particularly of smaller woodlands, can be low. This not generally because of a lack of interest by owners, but rather a lack of confidence and the assumption that woodland has no economic value and will look after

itself. Projects like the current *Cotswold Ancient Woodland Project* demonstrate that woodland owners will enter EWGS where they are given information, guidance and encouragement, supported by direct assistance in making an application. The key has been to provide these advisory services at no cost to woodland owners. The project is funded through a partnership between the Cotswolds Conservation Board, Forestry Commission and Woodland Trust. An assessment of project achievements has demonstrated benefits of bringing woodland under effective management through EWGS agreements that far outweigh the project cost.

Woodland has an important role in the development of wildlife corridors and stepping stones as advocated in the Lawton report and the subsequent Natural Environment White Paper. The management of forests and woods should take into consideration the management of other key habitats such as grassland and heathland. A good example is the beech woodlands along the western side of the Cotswolds which are in a mosaic with unimproved, floristically rich, grasslands. The two habitats need to be managed together to ensure a smooth transition between them and to ensure the creation and management of rides and glades, vital for species such as the Duke of Burgundy butterfly.

The economic potential of new wood fuel and firewood markets provides a great opportunity, particularly for under-managed woodland, to deliver a range of benefits. However, as stated above, there are risks and limitations. The principal risk is that as demand grows, woodland will move from being under-managed to being over-managed, with a resultant loss of biodiversity and landscape value. For example, an estate in the north Cotswolds installed a wood fuel system about five years ago, but it discovered that if it relied solely on its own woodland to supply the boiler with wood chip, this woodland would be 'decimated' within 20 years and other woodland income streams would be lost. Consequently, the estate has chipped only low grade wood and has bought in wood of a similar grade from surrounding woodland owners. Without this enlightened management, both biodiversity and the long-term value of other woodland products would have suffered.

Wood fuel has great potential to bring redundant coppice woodland back into production. The effects of this on the cost and availability of traditional coppice products, such as hurdles and stakes, would need to be evaluated. There is a risk that, without intervention, traditional coppice species will be replaced by high yielding hybrids providing relatively few biodiversity or landscape benefits.

While in general there is a strong case to extend woodland cover in England, there are areas where the creation of new woodland would have a negative impact on landscape character and biodiversity; for example, if trees are planted, or encroach naturally, upon floristically rich grassland or on the open landscape of the Cotswolds high wold. To encourage and guide good decision making, the Cotswolds Conservation Board published a *Guide to Woodland Planting and Management*, based on the Landscape Character Assessment for the Cotswolds AONB. The guide highlights both where woodland creation would be appropriate and inappropriate within the 19 Landscape Character Types making up the AONB. The guide is used by the Forestry Commission when considering applications for Woodland Creation Grants.

Finally, we believe that there is a continuing need for a strong national forestry agency to manage nationally important forests, provide strategic leadership and undertake research, for example, to address increasing threats from tree pests and diseases (such as red band needle blight and *Phytophthora ramorum*) and the impacts of climate change. Within the Cotswolds one special function that such an agency should undertake is the continued running of the national arboretum at Westonbirt.

5. Priorities and policy challenges

In the view of the Cotswolds Conservation Board, the priorities are to:

- Conserve and enhance biodiversity through woodland management and creation.
- Conserve and enhance landscape by increasing understanding of landscape character and the use of local Landscape Character Assessments to guide woodland creation to appropriate locations.
- Protect ancient semi-natural woodland through strengthened controls – in principle no further loss of these should take place, except in exceptional circumstances
- Restore degraded and/or planted ancient woodland sites.
- Ensure the sustainable management of forests and woods through grants and impartial advice.
- Continue research into the benefits of woodland, especially with regard to mitigating, and adapting to, the negative effects of climate change.
- Continue nationally-led research on tree diseases and pests.
- Stimulate markets for local woodland products.
- Ensure public sector procurement favours UK timber and other woodland products.
- Develop woodland management skills to meet demand.
- Develop policies and guidance for pest control, including deer and squirrel management.
- Prioritise woodland creation which provides significant ecological connectivity.
- Emphasise trees and woods as a central component of Green Infrastructure around major settlements. Establish a new programme of tree planting and woodland creation in and around towns and cities to improve quality of life and mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.
- Reconnect people and woodlands and boost the positive impact of woodlands on people's lives. This can include social and physical activity, access and environmental volunteering opportunities
- Maintain and where possible extend public access to woodlands and forests. Extending public access to privately owned woodland should be achieved by incentivising woodland owners, rather than through broadening the 'Right to Roam'.
- Encourage partnerships between the public sector, private sector and NGOs in woodland management. Partnerships should also include local communities where feasible.
- Maintain a strong, national forestry agency to lead the above.