

# PM's tree-planting pledge to cost £15bn

Landowners say grants must be doubled if they are to meet Boris Johnson's ambition of 30 million trees a year

Jonathan Leake Environment Editor

Boris Johnson's pledge to plant 30 million trees a year could cost taxpayers £15bn over three decades, with most of the cash going to big landowners and farmers.

The money would be needed to pay the owners of land first to plant trees and then to maintain them, says the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), which represents the owners.

In a submission that includes the first costings for the prime minister's tree ambition, the association will tell ministers they must double public payments for woodland care from £80 to £160 an acre before landowners will do as Johnson asks. The calculations, equivalent to 40p per tree per year, are supported by independent experts.

It means that instead of getting about 20p per tree annually for 10 years, as at present, owners would get 40p a year for three decades. This would pay for planting a mix of conifers and broadleaf trees to raise Britain's woodland cover from 13% of the country to 19%, locking up carbon and combating climate change.

"People are not planting enough trees because it costs too much," said Mark Bridgeman, president of the CLA, whose 31,000 members own or manage half the rural land in England and Wales.

"If farmers and landowners are to be persuaded to plant trees, they need a grant for the cost of planting and subsequent annual grants to look after them."

Landowners already get up to £2,720 an acre for tree-planting, so the government target of 30,000 hectares (74,000 acres) of trees a year would cost just over £200m a year for 30 million trees.

However, said Bridgeman, few of his members would join such a scheme because, once trees are planted, the £80 an acre to maintain them is too little and ends after 10 years. "It takes 30 or more years for trees to mature, so they would

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Edward Milbank says tree planting will fail without big maintenance grants

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have at least two decades with no income plus maintenance costs."

He is to tell ministers that the maintenance grant must double, be guaranteed for 30 years and be linked to inflation.

Bridgeman argues that such an increase reflects the true cost of managing woodland. The biggest expenses include controlling pests such as grey squirrels, which strip the bark from trees, either by trapping and shooting or, in the case of deer and rabbits, building and maintaining fences around plantations.

It means Johnson's scheme would rise in cost as the area of woods expanded. By 2050, landowners and farmers would be receiving £848m a year for trees. Over 30 years they would get £15bn.

Such proposals would be controversial for handing taxpayers' money to aristocratic landowners and risk unintended consequences. Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers' Union,

said: "While planting trees and hedgerows is an important part of British farming's net zero ambition, we must not compromise food production."

Forestry experts support the CLA calculations. Simon Lloyd, chief executive of the Royal Forestry Society, said it was far less than the £3.9bn given to farmers annually by the EU.

Sir Edward Milbank, who manages 3,000 hectares of woodland in Cotswolds, said Johnson's tree pledges would fail without bigger maintenance grants. "Woodlands are expensive to maintain."

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said the government would shortly publish a new English Tree Strategy to accelerate woodland creation by ensuring landowners and farmers were "rewarded fairly".

It added: "Our woodlands are vital for timber, wildlife, capturing carbon and our environment."