Submission to Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into sustainable timber and deforestation

The Royal Forestry Society (RFS) is the largest education charity dedicated to promoting the wise management of trees and woods across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Across this area, RFS members are collectively responsible for the stewardship of the vast majority of managed woodland.

We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence for this inquiry.

Key points

1. The UK is one of the largest importers of timber, second only to China, which leaves a significant (exported) environmental footprint. We should seek to reduce the UK's dependence upon imported timber products.

2. Forests in the UK are dependent upon a relatively small suite of tree species, leaving them exposed to the increasing range and potency of threats. We should seek to improve the resilience of UK forests by, amongst other measures, reducing the dependence on this limited range of trees species.

3. Although tree planting in the UK has increased in recent years, we are still not meeting Government targets in any part of the UK. We should step up efforts to reduce or remove the barriers to achieve these targets.

4. Getting more woods into management could help meet energy needs and would bring a range of other benefits for wildlife, carbon sequestration and recreation opportunities.

5. The policy framework, across multiple departments and administrations, could do more to support forestry.

1. **UK's dependence upon imported timber products**
   The UK imports over 80% of its timber, so even if domestic demand for timber products were to remain stable in the medium term, we should be seeking to meet our own timber supply needs. This can be achieved by increasing the area of land committed to productive forestry and accelerating the rate of progress to this end. We should expect demand for timber to continue to grow over the medium and longer term (even if economic growth is weak in the short term) if as we should, continue to replace unsustainable materials (e.g. plastics, metals and aggregates) with timber products.

2. **Resilience of UK forests and species choice**

We should seek to strengthen the resilience of UK forests by reducing dependence on the limited range of trees species, and other measures, e.g. to improve the structure of forests (refer to links below).

We are still dependent upon on relatively few species, leaving our forestry industry exposed e.g. to risks from changes in climate and pests and diseases. We need to make sure tree species chosen for our future tree stocks will, in all likelihood, produce quality of timber we need and suitable for UK conditions, resistance to disease etc.

In England, the Woodland Resilience Implementation Plan (WRIP) could provide the framework to address this and other issues related to resilience of our forests but will need resources and sustained political will to succeed.

Nurseries will only grow what there is a demand for and need assurances and confidence in market for new trees. There is in-built risk associated with any newer species. As well as further research, Government intervention, to help de-risk newer species or incentivise them more is needed.

Further reading:
managing for resilience case studies
woodlands planted for resilience

3. **UK Tree planting targets**

Tree planting rates have increased in recent years, but not by as much as needed to address UK timber needs or to meet UK government's own planting targets. There are many aspects to this – land availability, planning, labour supply, tree supply etc. Having devolved administrations can hinder the development and implementation of a coherent plan or delivery for the UK.

In England, the England Trees Action Plan (ETAP), launched in 2021 is still being implemented and it is early to be judging the success of the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO), but planting in England is currently well below target. In England, there are some excellent examples, e.g. the National Forest, where sustained effort can transform the forest cover of an area within a generation. We need to be better at learning from our successes, as well as mistakes.

The Wales Climate Change Strategy (2010) describes an aspiration to create 100,000 ha of new woodland by 2030 (i.e. 5,000 ha p.a.). In 2021, the Welsh Government committed to planting 2,000 ha p.a., increasing to 4,000 as soon as possible, but which would still fall below the earlier target set in 2010.

In 2020, the Dept. of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in Northern Ireland, launched Forests for our Future programme, and set a target of 900 ha woodland creation per annum (current actual fig. 200 ha p.a.) for next 10 years as contribution towards achieving UK Net Zero targets.

The Scottish government appears to be more wedded to climate change commitments than other administrations, and as a result, is faring much better than other parts of the UK in working towards planting targets and showing what is possible elsewhere.

4. **Woods into management**

Though not as easy to implement nor economically viable without support (e.g. through land grants such as ELM) energy generation could/should be a good way to get more woods into management, which would bring many additional public benefits. Around 40% of our woods are unmanaged or under managed, which means we are not maximising the potential of our woodland resource for a range of ecosystem services.

In the current energy crisis, getting more woods into management, would be a logical and relatively easy step to take to improve our overall fuel security and improve our woodlands contribution to tackling climate change (managed woods are more productive and will sequester more carbon) and biodiversity loss (managed woods are nearly always superior to unmanaged woods for supporting wide range of woodland flora and fauna), amongst many other well-documented benefits.

5. **Policy framework**

Forestry could, and we believe should, be seen as a key sector to help lead a green post-covid, post-Brexit recovery and move the UK nearer to being a sustainable, net zero, circular economy. However, because the forestry sector is relatively small (in financial terms) compared with other sectors of the economy, it is not given the attention and support it merits. Different government departments are responsible for different targets and aspects of regulation with regards forestry across the UK, and the devolved administrations complicate the picture further. This fragmentation of the policy framework often fails to provide the right environment for our forestry industry to fulfil its potential.

The forestry industry is perfectly placed to help the UK meet its net zero targets, replace dependence upon unsustainable materials, enable agricultural transition, help reverse declines in biodiversity etc. but greater and more sustained commitment is required to meet the planting targets, get more woods into active management and to address critical gaps in skills and capacity.

Royal Forestry Society

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