

Tree planting in the UK - Westminster Hall Debate - England

7 December 2016

Introduction

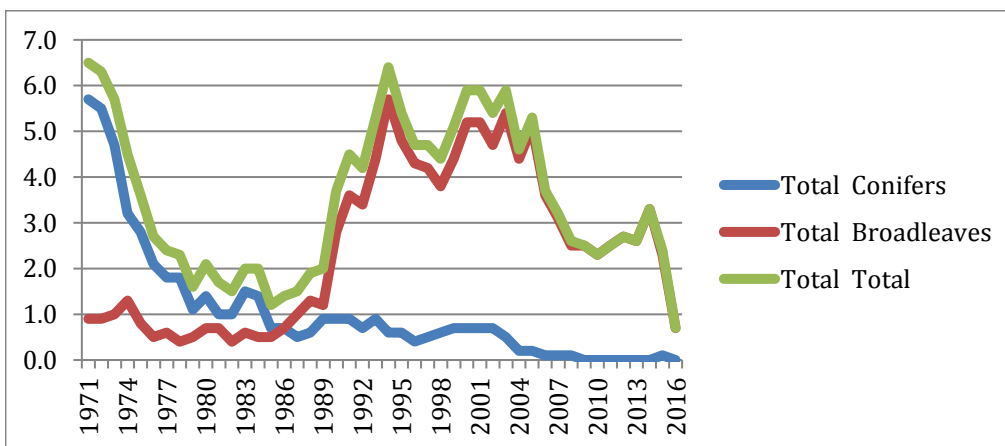
This note has been written for English MPs ahead of the Tree planting in the UK Westminster Hall Debate to be held on Wednesday 7 December, secured by Chris Davies MP. This note sets out Confor: Promoting forestry and wood’s (Confor) position on tree planting in England and complements the briefing prepared for MPs by the Commons Library.

Background and current new planting situation

Historically new planting in England has followed a “boom and bust” cycle. New planting fashions were product orientated: ship building oak; beech for furniture production; most recently mixed broadleaves to satisfy environmental/ecological demands.

More recently new planting has followed fashions in planting grants which is shown in the rapid reduction of conifer planting as a result of “native” broadleaves being favoured. More recently a reduction in all new planting is the result of an overly bureaucratic grant scheme. Total forest area in England is now at 10% of land cover¹, one of the lowest in Europe.

Fig 1. New planting (in thousands of hectares) in England since 1971²



English forests comprise an extremely diverse resource from productive, mainly conifer forests; large mixed conifer/broadleaf private estates; fragmented farm woodland and urban forest. Forest use is equally diverse from traditional production forestry (both conifer and broadleaf) to recreational use, and ownership is spread between public sector, land holding estates, NGOs and the small-scale leisure market.

¹ Forestry Commission Statistics 2016

² Woodland Area, Planting & Restocking, 2016 – Forestry Commission

This year has seen the lowest rates of new planting in England in a generation.

Today’s needs

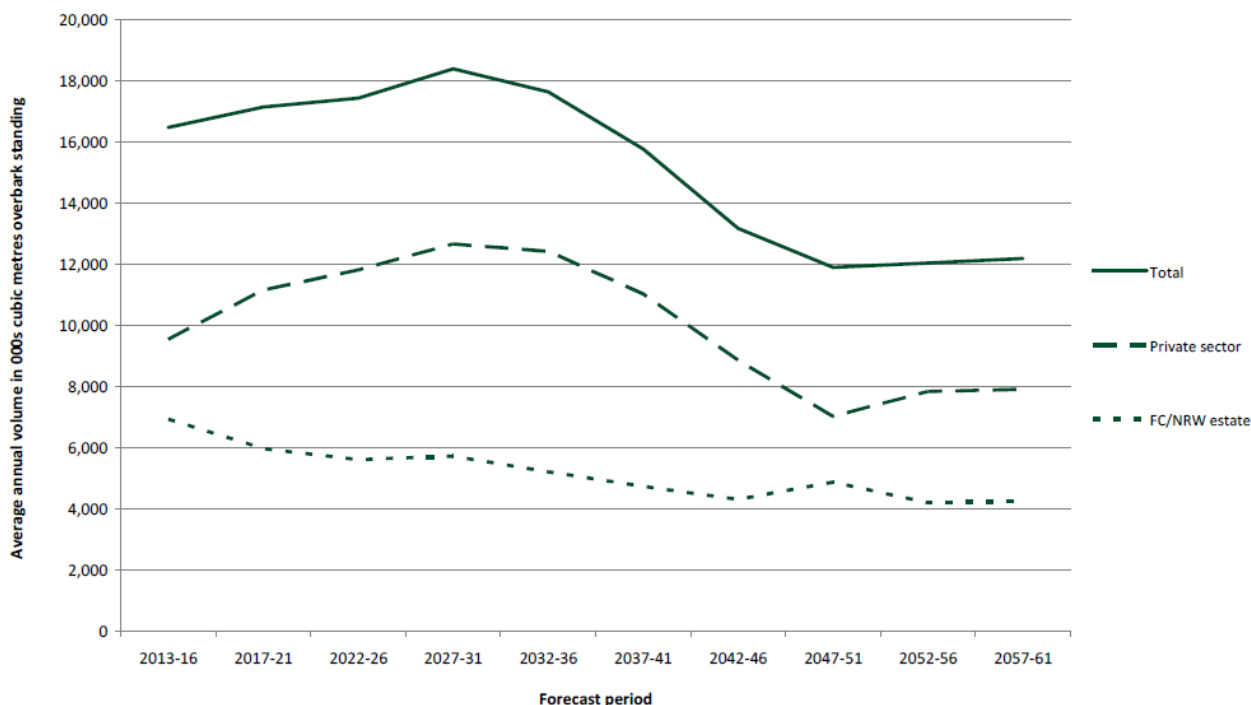
Markets for timber are expanding; construction is increasingly timber orientated; the landscape value of forests is recognised as is the role of forests in flood alleviation and prevention.

It is easy to say that timber production should remain concentrated in the traditional heartlands of Scotland, Wales and Northern England, however over a 50-year period we can expect oil prices and transport costs to rise whilst technology will allow cost-effective timber processing on a variety of scales. Timber for biomass, a high volume low value commodity is increasingly sought after by consumers and is a product that demands localised growing and distribution. If the government wants to encourage low-carbon economies, substantial new planting throughout England is vital. The predicted decline in timber availability from the 2030s onwards can be offset now, but only with new planting.

Fig2. 50 year forecast for hardwood and softwood availability



³ 50 year forecast of hardwood and softwood availability, Forestry Commission 2014



The government's own planting aspirations for England are for 12% forest cover by 2060 which means planting 5,000ha per year; a target widely seen as unrealistic without significant financial incentives and a fit-for-purpose grant scheme.

Though already diverse, there is growing recognition that resilience needs to be at the heart of new planting alongside choice of suitable tree species planted at scale. This means resilience to climate change, disease threats, weather patterns and market conditions. Variety of species and variety in planting geography will be vital to ensure a sustainable and increased resource for future generations. The mechanisms for this must be put in place now that makes new woodland planting as a land-use option attractive in a situation where land-use pressures include agriculture, urbanization and land prices in the most densely populated country in the United Kingdom.

Further information

For more information on tree planting in England please contact:

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