Nursery resilience and

HOW ARE THE TWO CONNECTED? **MATT HOMMEL** TAKES A CLOSER LOOK AT A HOT TOPIC BEING DISCUSSED AT MANY LEVELS

The advice from forest pathologists is unequivocal; imported trees pose a risk to the UK's biosecurity. This is a clear message which calls for a simple solution: rule out imports and grow all our trees in the UK.

Whether, or not, this over-simplistic strategy is the answer, the reality is that market factors affect nursery businesses so profoundly that we cannot simply discuss the short-term availability of home-grown stock. We must also question the long-term survival of our domestic growing capacity and the implications its loss would have on the nation's biosecurity – nursery resilience.

A well-known challenge

In terms of forest establishment, market stability comes from access to a stable, predictable planting grant. Growers need to predict demand years ahead, in order to collect seed and sow the crop; an investment in cash and assets which, once made, is locked in and must deliver commercial return.

In today's complex and fast changing world, policy needs to be nimble to survive. Grant schemes necessarily change and adapt to deliver policy but changes are often sudden, creating acute practical difficulties for nurseries. Market hesitation, postponement of planting, cancelled orders, or last minute changes to plant specifications can all occur at a critical points in the seasonal cycle sometimes with severe and lasting impacts on a nursery's trading performance.

'Grow only what you know you can sell' is a strategy applied in varying degrees by nurseries to cope with this pressure. The overall effect is that if demand suddenly increases, indigenous growers have insufficient home-grown stock online leaving no alternative but reactive sourcing outside the UK.

So what's the solution?

1. Buy only from nurseries who grow and source responsibly – a simple concept but market failure favours the unscrupulous.
2. Find a way to stabilise the grant long-term or provide an alternative to give landowners the confidence to plant and plan their planting, not just for the next couple of years, for the next 20.
3. Build on the Phytothreats model, to strengthen the link between research and industry allowing pathologists to work with growers to gather live data and provide a secure and supported first line of defence against unknown pathogens.

What about the unscrupulous?

4. Develop and incentivise a collaborative approach to assuring continuous improvement in quality and traceability across the growing sector.
5. Lead the way by specifying and valuing these attributes in public and private sector procurement - favour competent growers acting professionally and select against those that aren't. Beware of selecting only on price based on poorly defined specifications.

At the moment, nurseries shoulder all the risk of growing trees in the face of uncertainty, whilst also facing the buckshot end of the legislation created to combat emerging disease. If we are to increase our home gown capacity and make such controls effective we need to first address this fragility by collaboration, working together to share the risk. Healthy industry, Healthy trees

Matt Hommel MSc MICFor is managing director of Christie-Elite Nurseries Ltd

Improving nursery resilience against threats from *Phytophthora*

Phytothreats workshop, York, 06 October, 2016

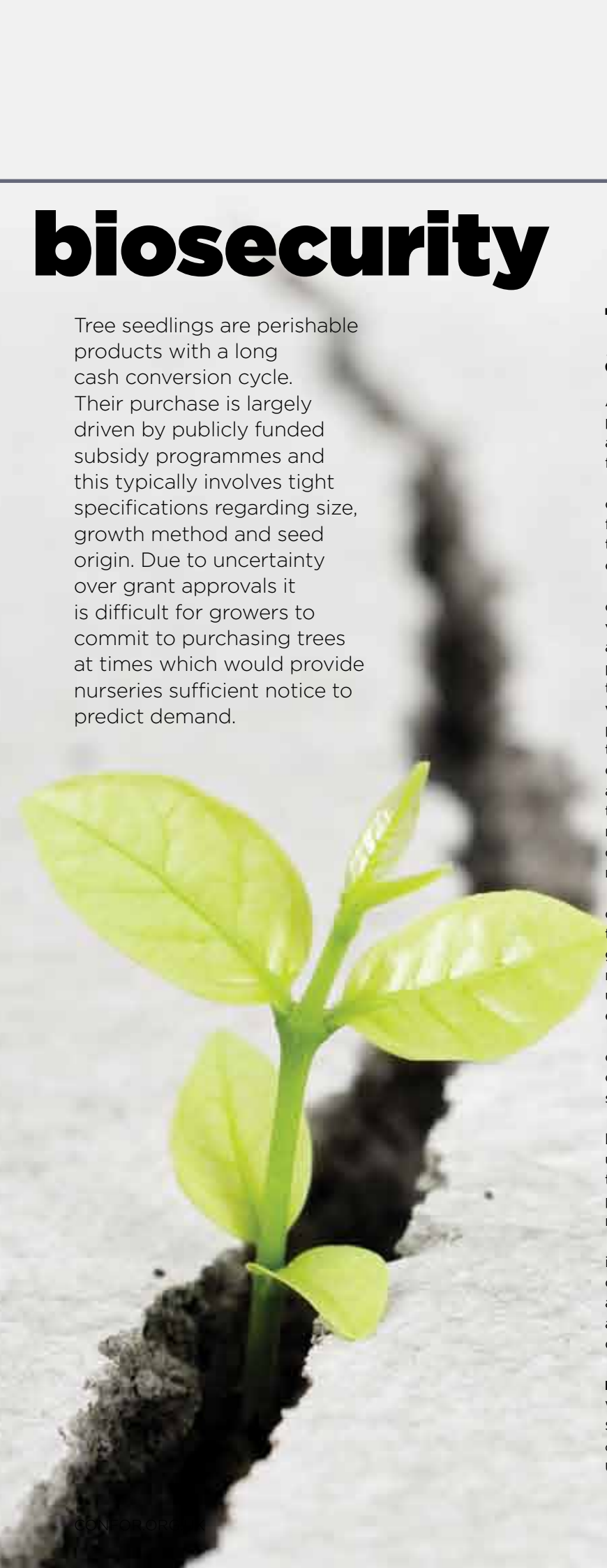
The objective for the meeting was scene setting and building relationships, bringing people together from a range of backgrounds to share opinions on managing disease risks, not only to trade but also to our forests and woodlands as a result of spread within the trade.

A panel of speakers from the forestry and landscape sectors gave their views of what they see as being the main threats to their businesses and across the trade. This set the platform for much useful discussion which carried on throughout the day.

The afternoon session focused on the feasibility of an accreditation scheme designed to reduce *phytophthora* problems in the industry, and how it could possibly work in practice. Susan Frankel from the US Forest Service, California gave an informative presentation citing some of the devastating experiences in the USA from the spread of *phytophthora* infections and explaining the Systems Approach to Nursery Certification Scheme (SANC), in operation for the nursery industry in the US. A presentation by Giles Hardy, Murdoch University followed, giving an explanation of the Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme in Australia (NIASA) and the various horticultural and biosecurity measures involved to help reduce risks there.

biosecurity

Tree seedlings are perishable products with a long cash conversion cycle. Their purchase is largely driven by publicly funded subsidy programmes and this typically involves tight specifications regarding size, growth method and seed origin. Due to uncertainty over grant approvals it is difficult for growers to commit to purchasing trees at times which would provide nurseries sufficient notice to predict demand.



The dilemma of predicting and meeting demand

A recent paper funded by the Forestry Commission, forming part of a wider research project into forest genetic resources and their deployment, under climate change looked in further detail at this range of issues:

Tree seedlings are perishable products with a long cash conversion cycle. Their purchase is largely driven by publicly funded subsidy programmes and this typically involves tight specifications regarding size, growth method and seed origin.

The main problem nurseries encountered was that consumer confidence was typically very low, such that it was very difficult for customers to commit to purchasing trees at times which would provide nurseries sufficient notice to predict demand. The nurseries normally received orders for the season they were already in, often with no more than two weeks' notice, despite the fact that it can take 1-3 years to produce a tree seedling for planting in the field. This is due to uncertainty over grant approvals caused by bureaucratic difficulties in the processing of applications. Delays in grant approval are commonplace but are worsened by the fact that priorities change on a regular basis (ie every time a new grant scheme is introduced). This means that it is very difficult for nurseries to accurately predict what will be required.

This situation means that when nurseries under-estimate demand, trading among nurseries must take place. Many of the nurseries contacted suggested that undersupply of a given product was often synchronised across the domestic nursery sector, meaning that when a given species was unavailable in one place, it was likely to be unavailable elsewhere in GB too.

In this situation, the only remaining option to supply customers is to discover whether large nurseries in other countries can supply the product and to import the planting stock from overseas.

Great Britain is very lucky to have an engaged and highly knowledgeable forest nursery sector yet their work is largely unheralded. Nurseries in the private sector are exposed to the highest level of risk in the supply chain. Their ability to produce planting stock is crucial if planting targets are to be met and is clearly in the public interest.

There does not currently seem to be a lack of capacity in the domestic nursery sector. The problems they face are driven by an unstable policy context at a national level and, at the level of individual schemes, by uncertainty over grant approvals, which make it excessively difficult to predict demand at the time of sowing.

Paper citation:

Whittet, R., Cottrell, J., Cavers, S., Pecurul, M and Ennos, R. 2016. Supplying trees in an era of environmental uncertainty: Identifying challenges faced by the forest nursery sector in Great Britain. Land Use Policy 58, 415-426.