

January 2018

Towards a Common Countryside Policy

Confor Westminster Conference 29 Nov 2017

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I am grateful to the Forest Industries Education and Provident Fund for helping towards the cost of my attending the Westminster conference. The conference attracted high-profile delegates from sectors of forestry, farming and conservation which made for lively debate, but also demonstrated that a lot of common ground already exists between the different organisations that have a stake in the post-Brexit rural debate, highlighting the need for collaboration between groups.

Will Ashley-Cantello of WWF-UK was the first speaker to talk about the idea of a “cross-sectorial approach”, but this was echoed by many others over the course of the day. Stuart Goodall’s call for a resurgence of farm forestry was underlined by Minette Batters (deputy president of the NFU) who talked about how trees are integrated in to her own farm business. Later, Beccy Speight (CEO of The Woodland Trust) called for collaborative landscape level action, which was supported by Mike Tufnell of the CLA, whose concept of “land management contracts” included provision for large-scale, collaborative agreements between landowners.

A highlight of the day for me was Stuart Goodall’s excellent account of productive forestry in the UK. Delegates hurried to snap photos of the infographics included in his presentation, which illustrated (among other things) the contribution that productive forestry makes to biodiversity conservation in the UK, and the relative lack of public-sector funding that it receives for doing so.

It was also interesting to hear from John Wilding (Clinton Devon Estates), and Andy Howard (Pennine Biomass), giving accounts of their recent experiences navigating the grant system and dealing with regulators.

The day was concluded with a political panel chaired by Chris Davies MP, in which representatives from the Conservatives, Labour and the Green Party demonstrated that support for forestry exists across the political spectrum. James Greenwood (the Green Party representative) acknowledged that other mainstream parties are ‘catching up’ with his own party on forestry policy and planting targets.

To sum up, the conference was a thoroughly interesting day, which will hopefully pave the way for more collaboration between rural interest groups and ultimately bring about new policy which works for all. I hope to attend more events like this in the future.

