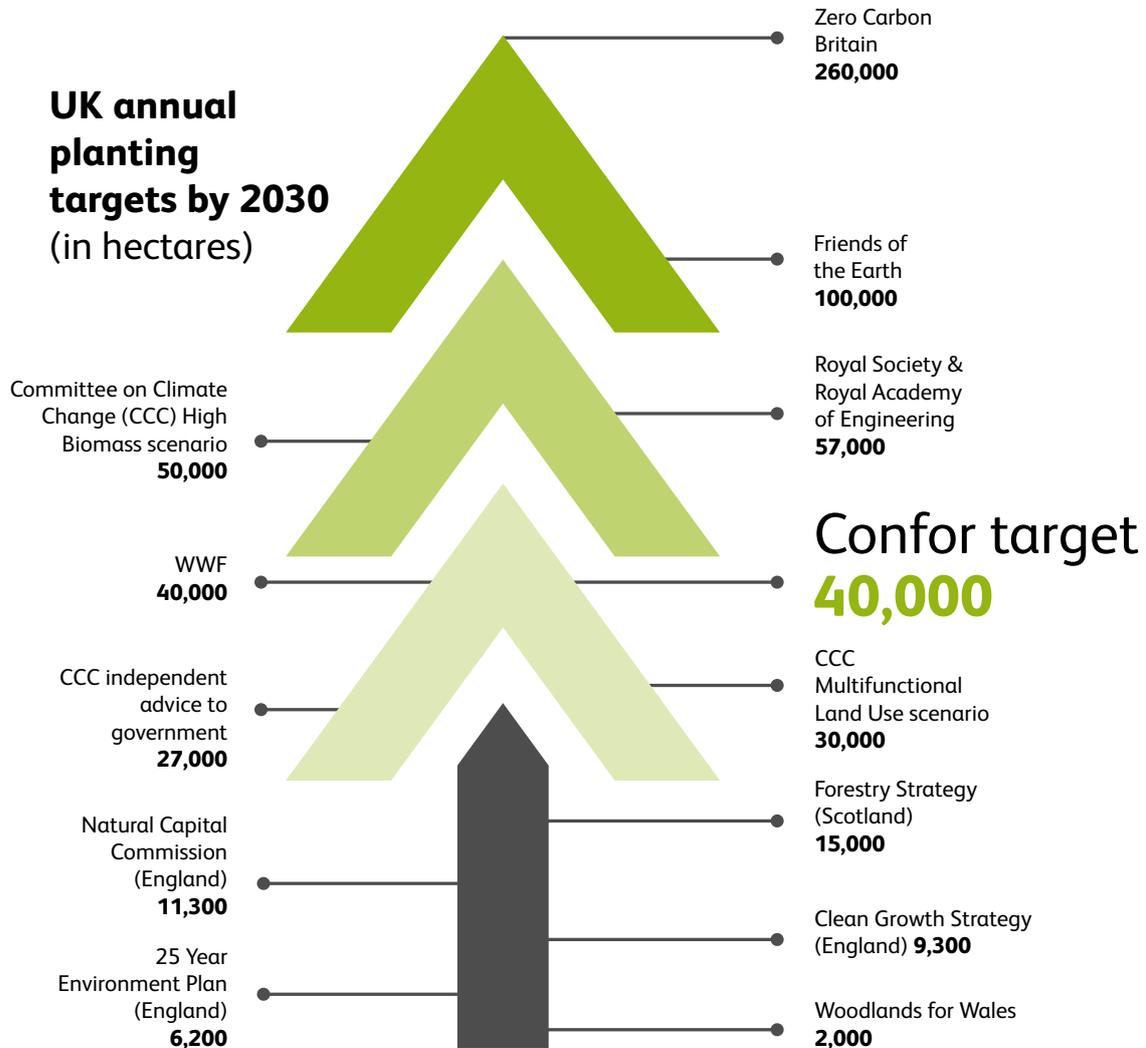


Woodland carbon targets for the UK

Confor calls on governments across the UK to set targets for woodland creation totalling 40,000 hectares a year by 2030, to make the substantial contribution needed to reduce atmospheric carbon



BACKGROUND

The case for forests and timber to tackle climate change is escalating. The UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments have all set targets significantly higher than recent planting rates, while scientific and environmental bodies are calling for substantially greater ambition (above)¹. The carbon connection between planting trees and using timber has also become widely recognised. Harvested timber can multiply the carbon benefit of a forest:

- Sustainable management including timber harvesting accelerates the rate of carbon sequestration in the forest.
- Carbon is locked up for longer in timber products such as buildings.

- Timber substitutes for carbon-intensive alternative materials including steel, concrete, plastic, coal and oil.
- Home-grown timber relieves the pressure on global forests from increasing timber demand, driven by growing economies and a desire for low-carbon materials.
- Wood at end of life can be recycled and used to save more carbon, for example as biomass fuel, chip board, or biochemicals.

However, UK forest cover at only 13% is far below the European average of 42%², and England, Wales and Northern Ireland are likely to have suffered net deforestation in the past decade, with the greatest losses in timber-growing forests.

1. The Committee on Climate Change, *Biomass in a low carbon economy* (2018); Royal Society and Royal Academy of Engineering, *Greenhouse gas removal* (2018) p.95; Friends of the Earth, *Why the UK should double its forest area to combat climate change* (2018); Edwards, T, et al, *Land Stewardship: a blueprint for government policy*, Scottish Wildlife Trust (Edinburgh 2017) p.11; Centre for Alternative Technology, *Zero Carbon Britain*, 2013.

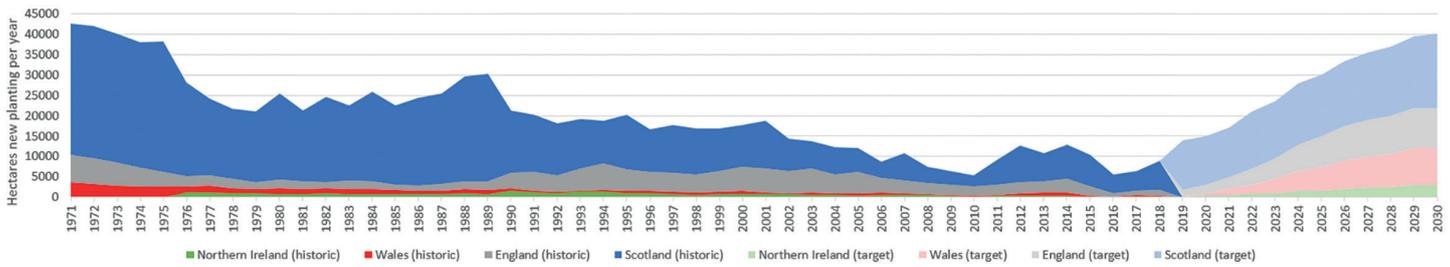
2. *Eurostat*. France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and Austria for example, all have forest cover of over 30%.

CONFOR'S TARGETS

Confor welcomes the calls to scale up woodland creation, and in this paper sets out new targets which we believe are ambitious and achievable. Confor proposes scaling up woodland creation in the UK to 40,000 hectares per year by 2030: 18,000 in Scotland, 10,000 in England, 9,000 in Wales, 3,000 in Northern Ireland.

In Scotland, these targets align with and build on Scottish Government ambitions to plant 15,000 hectares by 2025. In England, it delivers the 2015 Confor and Woodland Trust recommendation to plant 7,000-10,000 hectares, albeit a decade late. In Wales, the 2010 target of 5,000 hectares is back on track by 2023, followed by a scaling up of ambition in line with the excellent natural opportunities for forestry in Wales and substantial interest in woodland creation. Similarly, in Northern Ireland the current target of 1,000 hectares is reached by 2022 and then progressively increased.

Historic and target woodland creation rates



	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	Total 2020-30
Scotland	12,000	12,000	14,000	14,000	15,000	15,000	16,000	16,500	17,000	17,500	18,000	167,000
England	2,000	3,000	4,000	5,000	6,500	7,500	8,500	9,000	9,500	10,000	10,000	75,000
Wales	500	1,500	2,000	3,500	5,000	6,000	7,000	7,500	8,000	9,000	9,000	59,000
N Ireland	500	500	1,000	1,000	1,500	1,500	2,000	2,500	2,500	3,000	3,000	19,000
UK	15,000	17,000	21,000	23,500	28,000	30,000	33,500	35,500	37,000	39,500	40,000	320,000

Why not higher targets?

There are practical constraints to woodland creation. Although land availability and political will in England, Wales and Northern Ireland could potentially change rapidly, experience shows it would still take some years for any new woodland creation scheme to scale up delivery, and for landowners to take up the option to plant. There are also significant technical constraints:

- **Seed availability:** The UK barely produces enough seed for the amount of woodland being created and restocked at present, particularly for native woodland, when demands for seed of local provenance and specific species are increasing. Expanding seed production capacity must be addressed urgently, but it takes 20 years to develop a seed orchard. Some woodland regeneration can occur through natural seed banks and dispersal; but much of the UK has been deforested for too long for this to be an option, and the resulting woodland may not meet local requirements.
- **Nursery capacity:** The risk of introducing pests and diseases means that importing nursery stock has very limited suitability. It takes 2-3 years to grow trees from seed to be ready for planting, and previous boom-and-bust scenarios have resulted in significant stocks being destroyed. Moreover, significant upscaling of capacity would require time for nurseries to gain confidence to expand and then invest in land, equipment and training new staff. UK forestry relies on a small number of fairly large nurseries, so the failure of one (for example due to a plant health issue) would create a huge gap in capacity.
- **Skilled people:** Around 800 planters would be required to create 40,000 hectares of forestry, in addition to those employed in restocking. The sector has traditionally relied heavily on attracting

people from beyond the UK, and time is required to train new recruits. Policies which use the capacity we have more smartly will be vital to scaling up our woodland creation.

Planting is not the end of the story

Too much woodland in the UK, particularly broadleaf, is unmanaged or undermanaged. Managing existing woodland for carbon has several benefits: there is far more existing woodland than any potential new planting scheme could create; established trees, when thinned, sequester carbon far more rapidly than newly-planted ones; there are none of the complexities of land use change which new woodland creation involves; and the co-benefits (improved biodiversity, amenity value etc) are immediate. Measuring carbon in existing woodlands, and rewarding landowners for management to increase it, will be an essential part of a woodland carbon strategy which delivers immediate and substantial carbon benefits, alongside new woodland creation.

Conclusion

Forestry and timber is a vital element in the decarbonisation of the UK economy. Not only is it one of the most cost-effective options, and the only proven technology for large scale greenhouse gas removal, it also provides the vital feedstock for decarbonisation of the construction, energy and materials sectors.

However, forestry is not a magic tap which can be switched on tomorrow to provide an unlimited solution to all our carbon problems. It requires knowledgeable policymakers to invest wisely in growing our future forests as a matter of urgency, as part of a comprehensive decarbonisation programme.