

Confor response: Defra Nature Recovery Network Discussion Paper

Confor is the not-for-profit organisation for sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses in the UK. We have more than 1,500 member companies representing the whole forestry and wood supply chain. Confor focuses on the strategic issues that are vital to the success and sustainable future of the sector. These include helping to build the market for wood and forest products, creating a supportive policy environment and helping members to become more competitive and successful.

The need to reverse the decline in UK biodiversity is urgent; and this must be done as an integrated part of the development of sustainable UK production. Unless we improve the balance between the food and materials we produce and consume, we risk simply 'offshoring' biodiversity decline to countries where production is less well regulated.

Principles of the Network

The discussion paper sets out key principles for a Nature Recovery Network. Since 1997, these have all been delivered in productive forestry through the UK Forestry Standard¹:

- 1. Integrated delivery of multiple environmental outcomes:** Forestry designs in at least 25% the area managed for biodiversity, and net gain in carbon, flood prevention, water and soil quality, landscape and access. Older forests are restructured to this standard at harvest and restock.
- 2. Socio-economic benefits:** Forestry and timber processing create significant rural employment, and provide a business income on land which would otherwise require ongoing subsidy to manage.
- 3. Shared endeavours:** After the initial woodland creation support, management for biodiversity is delivered by the owner out of business income. Most productive forests are independently audited annually according to the international FSC or PEFC sustainability standards.
- 4. Designed using local expertise, with input from stakeholders:** The forest will be designed by a professional with a deep local knowledge and experience of forests, landscapes, ecosystems and communities. Substantial engagement with community, access, heritage and wildlife organisations is required when new woodland is designed or major operations undertaken. These play a substantial role in shaping the forest.
- 5. Sustainable, long-term management:** The owner's financial interest in the forest is long-term, over 30-40 years, and will be managed through a long-term forest plan agreed with the government to ensure harvesting and restocking does not compromise the long-term environmental and social value of the forest.

A Nature Recovery Network should have at its heart the creation of a network of new productive woodlands. Standards for management of other types of land in the network should be no lower than for woodlands.

Network Structure

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uk-forestry-standard>

The draft suggests that only certain areas should be in the Network. There seems no good reason why all land should not meet standards such as:

- At least 25% of land actively managed primarily for biodiversity.
- Substantial stakeholder engagement.
- Net carbon sink.
- Net improvement in soil, water, air, landscape and access quality.
- Improving condition of designated sites and populations of target species.
- Long term management plans agreed with government and stakeholders.
- Independently-audited certification.

These principles form the baseline for good practice in timber production; this should be the baseline for land use throughout the country.

Creating 180,000 hectares of woodland by 2042

Woodlands are not only vital habitat for biodiversity. The UK is the second biggest net importer of timber in the world, after China. This puts immense pressure on land globally, whether timber is produced from managed natural forests or plantations. Pressure to reduce carbon-intensive and polluting materials such as concrete, steel and plastic means timber use is likely to rise, even if a more circular economy means overall resource consumption declines.

UK forestry is amongst the best managed in the world, and England is one of the least afforested countries in Europe. Producing timber at home ensures transparent, short supply chains from nursery stock to finished timber product.

Confor has proposed a pathway to meet the 180,000 hectare target:

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029-2042
Hectares	2,000	3,000	4,000	5,000	6,500	7,500	8,500	9,000	9,500	10,000

After many years of low levels of woodland creation, this scaled approach will be necessary to build up seed sources, nursery stock, land availability, and management and contracting capacity in the sector.

The chief barrier to woodland creation has been the demand for far higher standards, particularly for biodiversity, than in other land uses. This makes it extremely difficult to switch land use to forestry, as the burden of proof that trees will be beneficial is so high. Raising the baseline requirements for all land uses would lower this inequality, and level the playing field for woodland.

Confor would be happy to provide further information on development of the forestry standards over the past 20 years, to inform thinking on the Nature Recovery Network.

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