

How can farmers and landowners be motivated to plant more trees to deliver a wide range of benefits, especially mitigating climate change?

Alex Malkin

1.1 Introduction

Whether intentionally or not, the title question leads one to believe that a lack of motivation on behalf of landowners and farmers is a major barrier to afforestation in the UK and all of the associated benefits this would bring. In my experience working in the forestry industry, this certainly isn't the case and we need to consider whether we are asking the right question. A more pertinent question may be; how can the industry capitalise on the existing motivation of landowners and farmers when considering afforestation? In this essay, I will cover the issues of converting motivation into physical planting, mainly from a Welsh perspective as that is where the majority of my experience lies.

2.1 Realistic Expectations

There are many ways in which we can motivate farmers and landowners to plant trees but we must be realistic as to what approaches motivate them on a scale that would lead to the significant planting required to combat climate change. Yes, we can appeal to people's good nature and highlight the environmental benefits of planting trees, which are many and varied. We can preach climate change statistics and governmental targets until we are blue in the face and we will gain some support from those land custodians who have a strong moral compunction.

However, in reality the key to tree planting on a large scale will be through reducing current regulatory barriers and providing significant financial incentives - more specifically, financial incentives in the form of grant-aided projects that are deliverable and wide-reaching.

2.2 Falling Short

In Wales there has been a grant system supporting woodland creation for nine years. Over the last four years, every grant application window has been massively oversubscribed, yet the Welsh Government has somehow failed to spend all of the funds allocated to the forestry sector.

In the most recent window for woodland creation grant applications in Wales [this refers to the

first window in 2019], more than £11 million of funding was applied for from a potential pot of £1 million. These statistics highlight in no uncertain terms the problems the industry is facing.

The issue currently is not a lack of motivation for planting trees, but a lack of funding available and the somewhat grim statistic that of those who apply for funding, less than 10% are successful. The majority of successful applicants have been forced to resubmit their grant applications time after time in the hope of being accepted and in my experience, it takes a landowner with considerable motivation to do so.

It would seem sensible then to suggest that the most effective way to create motivation would be to avoid repeatedly disappointing those who have expressed an interest. News travels fast in the farming community, especially bad news, and currently there are very few good news stories involving new planting to be told.

I have witnessed first-hand how successful planting operations can turn previously sceptical farmers and landowners into incredibly valuable spokespersons who can promote the benefits of planting amongst their peers. Historical conflict between farmers and foresters often means that farmers are more receptive to hearing success stories from other farmers rather than a forester who is in essence trying to sell a product. In brief, success breeds success, the key to maintaining and creating motivation amongst farmers and landowners is deliver on the promises made by the industry and avoid any further damage to the industry's reputation.

Sadly if a landowner or farmer is motivated to plant trees and willing to go ahead without the help of grant funding, their woes are far from over. They now face the issue of gaining permission to plant from the regulatory body in charge of their respective region. Here in Wales, the body in question is Natural Resources Wales (NRW).

In order to meet the various governmental targets linked with tree planting, it is important we focus on trying to create plantations of scale. Small farm woodlands, shelter-belt planting and small agroforestry schemes can be fantastic for habitat creation, biodiversity and farm diversification but alone will have little impact on carbon sequestration and reversing climate change.

Large-scale planting on high-quality agricultural land might appeal to the silviculturist in us and get us excited about potential species mixes and untold yield classes but put simply we can't eat trees. Therefore, we have to look to the marginal land which is often hill ground - land that is of very low output agriculturally, yet is capable of growing high-quality trees.

With Brexit and uncertainty of future funding for agriculture, there is certainly motivation from farmers and landowners who own marginal upland land to plant trees as well as a long list of investors looking for land to purchase and plant. So we have the land, the capital and the motivated landowners but still we are not planting trees to the level required.

The next hurdle to overcome is gaining permission to plant. In Wales, the general procedure

involves requesting an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) decision. During this process, the regulatory body will analyse the planting plan, land type in question and consult with the relevant stakeholders before deciding whether or not the proposal can go ahead without a full EIA.

If the result is positive and the work can commence without an EIA, then the project will generally go ahead. This invariably leads to heavily conifer-based plantations as the landowner or investor needs to maximise the potential return due to the lack of grant funding. If the result is negative and an EIA is required, the project goes no further due to the cost of an EIA and the uncertainty as to whether that expense will yield any return. At this point, you have to ask how determined the government is to encourage tree planting or is it simply a throwaway statement to appease the public and appear environmentally aware?

2.3 An Arduous Journey

If we look at the process a farmer or landowner has taken to get to this point only to then be told they can't plant any trees, is it any wonder we are falling short of national targets? We started the process with a highly motivated individual with land to plant and a desire to do so. We then forced them to submit grant application after grant application to no avail until they lost all hope and resigned themselves to planting trees without grant.

Usually, this is the end of the story but those few who carry on unperturbed then have to apply for an EIA decision, jump through the hoops required of them and pay an advisor to create and submit the application on their behalf before being told that they require a full EIA which will likely cost them tens of thousands of pounds with no guarantee or even an indication as to whether they will receive permission to plant as a result.

All of this whilst reading about the government's commitment to plant more trees in the daily paper and how farmers must do more to help the environment. If I was a farmer or landowner I would be finding it rather hard to stay motivated where tree planting was concerned and it's safe to say I wouldn't be singing the praises of forestry to my neighbours either!

3.0 The Way Ahead

To conclude, in order to motivate landowners to plant trees we need to first satisfy those who are already motivated. We need to match the supply of grant funding to the demand among landowners. We need to ensure that grant systems in place are deliverable and follow realistic timeframes unlike the situation in Wales in 2017-18 where grant contracts were given in December and January and all capital works had to be completed by the end of March which led to landowners pulling out for fear that they wouldn't be able to complete in time - and massive issues with resource availability and tree supply.

We need to combat the attitude of regulators and make them understand that in order to meet national planting targets, compromises will have to be made between conservation, tree

planting and agriculture and that a black and white decision-making process will not yield the results required by the nation.

It is not the lack of motivated landowners and farmers that is holding up tree planting in the UK, it is the inability of the forestry sector to satisfy those motivated individuals due to the restraints placed upon us by poorly-managed grant schemes and ineffective regulatory bodies. Success breeds success and good news travels fast. It's time we as an industry had more good news to share.

- Alex Malkin was working for Tilhill when he entered the competition and is now at Norbury Park, Staffordshire.

