

The Doddington test: is England open for new forest creation?



Confor joined an MP on a visit to Doddington North Moor, the largest productive planting proposal in England for 20 years, and a local sawmill which supports the plan.

David Lee reports.

It's a bitingly cold early spring day on a Northumberland hillside. A man and a woman are leaning on the bonnet of a car, poring over a sheaf of papers, including a series of multi-coloured maps.

The man is Andy Howard, the driving force behind the proposed forest at Doddington North Moor, which could become the largest productive planting site in England for two decades.

He turns regularly to gesture towards the hillside, which is pretty much featureless apart from a group of derelict farm buildings at the end of a primitive track. As he explains the numerous challenges of modern forest creation, the woman listens patiently, asking questions and piecing together the ensemble cast of government agencies in the Doddington saga, and how they interact.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan, MP for the sprawling Berwick-upon-Tweed constituency at the north-eastern corner of England, is no stranger to forestry. She is vice-chair of Westminster's all-party group while her husband John is from a long family line of estate owners who have understood the economic value of tree planting.

One of the main frustrations of Andy Howard, and many others like him, is the apparent inability of modern-day governments to grasp the economic value of contemporary forestry, and the need to provide continued supplies of wood to the country's sawmills and panel board businesses.

Confor's Chief Executive Stuart Goodall, the third person on the cold hillside, has arranged the MP's visit to Doddington to highlight the need for large planting schemes to be approved if the Government is to get anywhere near its modest target of 11 million trees during the lifetime of the 2015-2020 parliament.

"We need to embrace high quality schemes like Doddington, which will have significant economic, environmental and social benefits," says Mr Goodall.

Andy Howard says he has been staggered by the level of support in the local community during the consultation process, including the nearest high school Glendale - just ten minutes away in the town of Wooler - which is enthusiastic about the proposal for mountain bike trails, opportunities for forest education and improved access to a bouldering site on the moor.

There are also positive benefits for biodiversity - the scheme will extend one of the region's red squirrel buffer zones - and for flood mitigation. There is a lack of detailed empirical evidence about how such upland planting schemes impact on water quality and water flows in the river catchment below - and there have been positive noises from the Environment Agency and Forestry Commission England about using Doddington as a test-bed.

Employment

The scheme would also provide short and long-term employment - and a guaranteed timber supply to local sawmill A&J Scott Ltd, which is only 15 minutes up the road in Wooperton.

A&J Scott is the second largest private employer in the whole of Northumberland, with up to 150 staff at any time. Supplying long-term feedstock into the mill from a site close by would be an enormous long-term confidence boost to the family firm, says Chairman Andy Scott, son of the founder.

His own son Robert is the current Managing Director, and Andy's eyes are already on his grandson Alfred, who is almost two: "When he grows up to



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ANDY HOWARD

run the firm, Doddington could be Alfred's forest. If they can get planting within the year, we could have a crop when he's in his 30s!"

As she watches logs being processed from the hi-tech control room at A&J Scott, Anne-Marie Trevelyan recognises the clear correlation between new planting and investment in the mill. Operations Director Francis Wilbur explains that technology is moving all the time and that constantly upskilling staff - in new technology but also in traditional saw milling techniques - is an ongoing process.

Mrs Trevelyan thinks Doddington could be a significant new productive forest - supplying timber to mills like Scotts, providing great habitats for people and wildlife and making a real impact on climate change and flooding.

The principal stumbling block in progressing the Environmental Statement, within the Environmental Impact Assessment process, appears to be discussions between Natural England and the Forestry Commission on the status and condition of parts of the property. The hillside has some areas with protected habitat status - although two ecological surveys have shown it is deteriorating by the year, into scrubby bracken and little else, and has very minimal public value.

If approved, Doddington would see more than 600,000 trees planted - more than a quarter of the 2.2 million England needs to plant every year to 2020 to hit its 11 million target in the lifetime of



this parliament. At the moment, the target is being missed by a very substantial margin.

"We need Doddington to go ahead," said Stuart Goodall. "If it does, it sends a very positive signal that England is open to well thought-out, contemporary planting schemes. Doddington is a modern, multi-purpose scheme - 276ha of planting on a 354 hectare site, with productive conifers on just over half of the land area."

Supportive Scotland

Yet Andy Howard has been left with the feeling that he has to prove that planting trees is not a bad use of the site. "The presumption seems to be that trees are somehow a last-resort land use, despite all the benefits," he says. "Scotland has a much clearer and more supportive system for new forest creation - and that means more investment in forestry will go over the border into Scotland."

However, Howard acknowledges positive changes which have helped get the project moving. It wouldn't have happened, he says, without the Woodland Creation Planning Grant, an initiative championed by Confor which de-risks the application process by providing upfront funding. And he is already looking at the prospect of using funding from the £19 million Woodland Carbon Fund, which was also pushed strongly by Confor, if Doddington gets the go ahead.

Andy Howard (right) shows Anne Marie Trevelyan MP the proposals to plant a large new productive forest at Doddington North Moor

Anne Marie Trevelyan MP with Andy Scott, Chairman of A&J Scott Ltd, at the Scott sawmill in Wooperton, Northumberland.

Andy Howard hopes that Doddington will be approved in time for first planting this winter, but much depends on whether government agencies can recognise that the overwhelming benefits of applications like this deserve support - giving it fair and balanced consideration, not perpetuating a culture of looking for reasons to say no.

It will be a real test of whether creative new afforestation schemes are welcome in England, of whether this cold hillside, and others like it, can be transformed into places for people, wildlife and future employment.

