

# The resilience of the Welsh forest industry

**Robert South**

looks at the future of an industry which is to become his professional home for decades to come

Stepping back from my day job as a forest manager based in Wales, with specific responsibilities for harvesting and marketing, there is no doubt that the industry is important to Wales. It offers an annual value of £528m to our economy (Woodland for Wales Indicators), mainly in rural areas, 11,000 people in employment and generates 1.4m tonnes of softwood timber per annum, of which only 52% is from the public estate with the remaining 48% from the private sector.

Resilience in the context of change Addressing resilience is a key priority in our industry, Described best as a system's ability to persist and maintain function during a period of change. Yet government seem less willing to consider and address the resilience of the industry itself. What are these changes in our system? To name but a few:

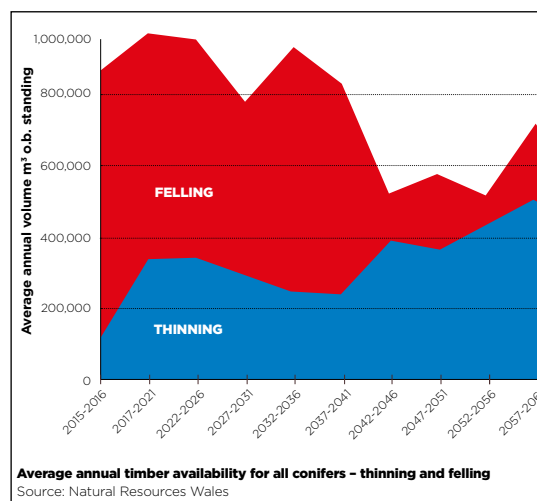
- Changes in the political landscape.
- Changes in the rural funding structure, following Brexit.
- The impact of increased regulation.
- Climate change affecting species selection, and growth rates.
- The risk of a pest or disease affecting timber stock.
- Changes in local, national and global product demand.

Industry threat #1: Timber availability As it stands today, we have a little under 30 years - one rotation of improved stock spruce - to address this issue; can we solve the puzzle? Well yes.

We know from experience the effects of policy change, such as the Broadleaf Policy in 1985, or the removal of tax concessions in 1989. These have been a key driver in the demise of commercial planting, as is why we find ourselves looking at a bleak future. Our ability to influence change within our industry is limited and dependant on the change we are dealing with, changes in product demand is reacted to rather than influenced. Climate change, pests and diseases are a global issue that requires global intervention to solve. At local and governmental level, we can influence how money is spent and how regulations are approved and enforced.

## Ecosystem services

As part of the *Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2016*, looking to our future is what we are all supposed to be doing. As planting in Wales currently stands, we are miles behind our target, with every planting scheme becoming a challenge to get approved. And the regulator expecting foresters to address every concern raised, from any stakeholder, however spurious it may be. Yet in the fashionable term of the day, *Ecosystem Services* which the gov-



ernments and regulators seem to love, it is overlooked in the context of a large plantation, with the concept being bent to favour poorer species selection offering little in the way of a resilient industry for the future.

The ecosystem services provided by large spruce plantations is larger than most give them credit for, such as:

- Provisioning services, including offering a usable product with no waste, energy production, employment and financial security.
- Regulating services, including carbon sequestration, embedding carbon, nutrient cycling, air purification, noise reduction and water management.
- Cultural and supporting services, such as biogeochemical processes essential to life and high biodiversity value around forest edges and open rides; I think we can all agree that Coed Y Brenin and Llandegla are beautiful places.

In addition, the UK has not seen any significant planting since the post war mass planting, and lack of education of the public leads to them being scared of change and as a result objecting. As an industry the marketing of what we do is terrible, if we want to achieve something great we need to shout about it and educate the masses.

Let us be the generation that changes the attitudes of the masses and builds a resilient economy without subsidy, drives for lower carbon, cleaner air, better policies, skilled jobs and a brighter future.

*Robert South, an Msc Forestry student at Forester and Bangor University DL, is a recipient of the Confor Education and Provident Fund.*

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