The England Tree Strategy

WHAT DOES CONFOR WANT FROM IT?

Introduction

Government is consulting on a Tree Strategy for England which will set policy direction in coming years. Confor was one of the key organisations consulted before the draft strategy was issued. This briefing sets out what Confor is seeking from the strategy, on behalf of its members.

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, 730 of those are in England, representing the whole forestry and wood supply chain.

Expanding and connecting our trees and woodland

The Tree Strategy must increase England's woodland cover, which at present stands at 10%, one of the lowest rates in Europe. It must therefore deliver sustained and increasing levels of new woodland establishment year-on-year. Government has set a 30,000 hectare per year UK planting target by 2025. This target came as a direct result of Confor's paper that set out targets for the UK. Calling for woodland establishment to scale up to 10,000 hectares per year by 2030 in England.

As the recent 20-year review of the South West Forest shows, too much tree-planting in recent decades has been short-sighted. Trees have been planted to meet government targets, with little understanding of, or support for, their ongoing management.

Protecting and improving our trees and woodland

The Tree Strategy must take woodland creation policy beyond simple hectarage targets for planting to purposeful woodland establishment. All woodland creation should be designed to be resilient and deliver benefits such as carbon sequestration, increased biodiversity, soil and flood management, places for people, on-farm benefits, and a sustainable timber supply. The Strategy should make use of the extensive scientific evidence and professional knowledge in the UK to ensure woodland creation maximises the benefits delivered on a given site.

The Tree Strategy must mark a departure from policy which plants trees and walks away.

The sustainable management of economically profitable wood-producing forests is overseen by the public sector through the requirements for Management Plans as part of felling license regulation under the UK Forestry Standard, as well as by consumer society through certification by the UK Woodland Assurance Standard. However, woodlands which are not producing timber are often neglected and degrading in condition. These include ancient woodlands and a large area of younger broadleaf woodland planted over the past 100 years which has lost, or never had, an economic purpose.

The Tree Strategy must include funded policies to bring these 'wasted' woodlands back into management. This is demonstrated by evidence presented in Confor's report, *Biodiversity, Forestry and Wood*, which also shows that in many woodlands this investment can repay in jobs and GVA through sales of wood and other forest products.

The key first steps for bringing woodlands into management to fulfil their potential are:

- Support for grey squirrel and deer control
- Support for woodland management skills
- Support for woodland infrastructure including access and roading

Supporting our economy

The UK is the second biggest net importer of timber in the world, its global footprint only exceeded by China. Less than 20% of the wood we use is grown in the UK, most of it in Scotland.

The UK aims to become a zero-carbon society by 2050. This will require a massive increase in energy-efficient housing and low-carbon electricity to replace fossil fuel, and a decrease in carbon-hungry materials such as steel, concrete and plastic. All of this requires a huge increase in wood, which must be supplied without exploiting the natural forests of the world, or reducing access to sustainable timber for developing countries.

The Tree Strategy must meet this demand through ambitious proposals to grow and harvest more of our own wood supply, through sustainable forestry schemes, short rotation forestry, and short rotation coppice.

These kinds of forest are valuable crops which can diversify farm income streams while delivering significant on-farm benefits including biodiversity, shelter for livestock, soil conservation, air quality improvements and flood prevention.

New research done in Scotland and associated interactive map demonstrates the immediate on-site carbon benefits of establishing this kind of forest on agricultural land, besides yielding the essential material for building a zero-carbon society.