

National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS) – North Sutherland forests;
Applicant – North Sutherland Community Forest Trust

FDM Comments

1) Would the proposal be significantly detrimental to the management of the national forest estate?

FDMs response – No. The areas NSCFT are interested in have been declared surplus under the FES repositioning scheme .

2) In your opinion, does the community body have the capacity to manage the land?

Could you please describe and elaborate on any material aspects of the application, in particular the existing management agreement?

FDMs Response – The NSCFT have applied to purchase 3 separate areas of land, each for a very different purpose. I will comment on each separately.

Clearance villages at Rosal and Trudescaig – These sites are of cultural importance both locally and internationally and attract a significant number of overseas visitors. Over the years the Rosal site has been developed by FES and now incorporates a car park, a path network and interpretation. There are local concerns as to what might happen to these sites if the land were to pass into private hands, hence the strong community support for this part of the NSCFT's NFLS bid. The sites are currently in good condition and for the next few years should require only minimal maintenance which is well within the capacity of the NSCFT.

Land at Dyke for woodland croft development – again this is something that is well within the remit of the NSCFT. Many of the Trust's members are crofters and know and understand the crofting system well and as such they should be well placed to take this initiative forward.

Forsinain Plantation – It has always been the NSCFT's ambition to own its own woodland. Originally their focus was directed towards Borgie Forest but with the development of their sawmill at Forsinain, acquisition of part adjacent Forsinain plantation seems a more logical step. This area of plantation will only require minimal maintenance for the next few years and so, for the short term at least, I feel the Trust has the capacity to manage this area of woodland.

My concerns however are with regards to the longer term management of the plantation and the links to the sawmill. To date the mill has had a chequered history and has only been operating spasmodically. In part this has been due to problems with sourcing timber but even when timber was available the mill has struggled to run on a sound economic footing. This situation may well change if the Trust are successful in gaining funding for a project officer who can spend at least part of their time working as a dedicated mill manger however, unless that happens I fear that the mill has only a limited future.

The main premise of the NFLS bid is that the plantation will give continuity of timber supply for the mill. Personally I'm not sure that this is the case. Forsinain Wood is an even aged plantation that does not lend itself to thinning and that will all reach maturity at approximately the same time. This will result in a large volume of timber becoming available for a short period but with nothing much in the mean time. This may or may not be an issue but given that most of the Flow Country plantations will also be maturing at about the same time, timber supply may not be such a problem in the future.