

Prepared for The Forestry Commission Scotland by Land Use Consultants

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The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Scotland) Regulations 2004
Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the Scottish Forestry Strategy

NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY of the ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT

NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Background

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is required under the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes (Scotland) Regulations 2004. It is a systematic method for assessing the environmental effects of plans and programmes during their preparation allowing for the mitigation of any adverse effects before plan implementation.

This is the non technical summary of the Environmental Report prepared as part of the SEA of the draft revision of the Scottish Forestry Strategy (SFS). It sets out a summary of the SEA process, followed by an outline of the likely significant effects of the SFS. An important element of SEA is making the information about possible effects available to the public and this non technical summary also sets out how to make comments on the SEA process.

Summary of the SEA process

The SEA process to date has comprised a number of key steps. At the outset of the assessment informal **screening** was undertaken to confirm that the SFS would require an SEA. Following this, a **scoping** exercise was undertaken to identify the method and overall content of the SEA, with a scoping report having been sent to the Scottish Consultation Authorities – Scottish Natural Heritage, Historic Scotland and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Following consideration of comments on the scoping report, the **assessment** of the SFS and a number of alternative strategies was progressed, culminating in the preparation of this **environmental report**. This report is now being circulated for further comment, and will be reviewed alongside the content of the SFS on conclusion of the consultation period. Key findings from the SEA will be monitored as the SFS is implemented.

Scope of the Environmental Report

The Environmental Report includes the following:

- Key facts about the SFS and outline of SFS objectives
- Relationship with other plans, programmes and environmental objectives
- Environmental baseline – current state of the environment and state of the environment without the SFS
- Identification of SEA objectives for the assessment
- Application of SEA objectives to a number of alternative scenarios
- Application of SEA objectives to the SFS
- Proposed mitigation measures
- Proposed enhancement measures
- Proposed SEA monitoring programme
- Next steps

Main Objectives of SFS and relationship with other plans and programmes

The vision (2025 and beyond) which underpins the SFS is as follows:

‘Scotland’s trees, woodlands and forests are a central part of our culture, environment and economy. People are benefiting widely from them, actively engaging with and looking after the resource for the use and enjoyment of generations to come’.

This reflects the continuing emphasis within the SFS on the three key strands of sustainability; social, environmental and economic. This is supported by the principles of sustainability, social inclusion, and forestry for and with people. The three key outcomes of the SFS are:

- Improved health and well-being of people and their communities;
- Competitive and innovative businesses contributing to the growth of the Scottish economy; and
- High-quality, robust and adaptable environment.

SEA Objectives

The SEA was carried out by assessment of the different parts of the draft SFS against an agreed set of objectives. These objectives were identified from a review of relevant existing plans and strategies which defines the wider policy context within which the SFS is set.

Environmental issues and likely evolution of the environment without the SFS

The SFS covers Scotland as a whole, and as a result has the potential to contribute (positively or negatively) to the overall quality of the environment at a national level. A key challenge for the strategy is the need to strike a good balance between the economic strands of forestry, while maintaining a high quality environment. In addition the SFS should contribute, as far as possible, to the quality of life of Scotland’s population. Forestry practices can create environmental issues if they are not actively managed, including damage to soils and pollution to air and water. At the same time, well planned forestry can help to improve the environment, and contribute to air and water quality. The role of forestry in responding to climate change has already been recognised, although it is important that this is balanced with other environmental objectives, such as safeguarding protected species and their respective environments.

By looking at current environmental trends, it is possible to envisage that some aspects of Scotland’s environment could continue to decline if no changes to national forestry were made, while other more positive trends may occur with or without additional help from the SFS. For example, timber transport is currently focused on road transport and without significant policy support this would be unlikely to change. This, in turn, would miss an opportunity to reduce pollution from on-road timber transport as well as addressing impacts on the quality of life of local communities. As a result, the SEA has aimed to identify the influence which the SFS could have on ongoing environmental problems and issues.

Environmental Characteristics affected by SFS

Scotland has a unique natural environment and built heritage. Many woodland areas are protected for their nature conservation value, requiring particularly high levels of protection from forestry practices or development which would reduce their quality. Forestry Commission Scotland has also been undertaking research on the ways in which new planting or changes to the structure of existing woodlands can help to create more complete networks of habitats. In Scotland, overall, there is an emphasis on increasing the share of woodlands composed of native Scottish species and broadleaved trees. The Commission also recognises the importance of reducing the number of trees in some areas, where previous planting has reduced certain habitats of a more open character (e.g. high-quality peat bogs).

Forestry can also provide important recreation opportunities, with all woodland areas now being open to the public (land reform) and many actively promoted for outdoor activities and education. The number of forestry recreation areas has increased over the years, although at times areas may not be accessible as a result of harvesting and other forestry operations.

Scotland's population is unevenly distributed with significant concentrations in the urban areas in the central belt as well as in the northern cities. Low employment is a particular concern in remote rural areas including the north west highlands. The forestry sector and associated industries provide an important number of jobs, although at present businesses and timber processing facilities tend to be concentrated close to towns and urban areas.

Scotland's water resources are in generally good condition, although forestry is the third most significant contributor to diffuse pollution in Scotland's rivers. Forestry can play an important role in slowing run off and stabilising slopes, although forestry planting and harvesting can have negative impacts on both water and soil through soil disturbance.

In Scotland, predicted changes to our climate could mean that forestry benefits from a longer growing season as a result of warmer temperatures. However, climate change in Scotland will also increase some existing environmental problems, including flooding and soil instability, changes to soil moisture, different levels and types of pests and diseases and a greater risk of storm damage. The Scottish forestry sector has an important role to play in helping Scotland to adapt to these new circumstances and helping to tackle the impacts of climate change.

Timber is transported primarily by road, although there are some rail transfer facilities, such as at Crianlarich, and sea transport from the west coast. Air pollutant concentrations vary across Scotland, with the highest concentrations in and around urban areas and major roads. Research suggests that trees can help to absorb air pollution. Other key environmental issues include the need to reduce the use of chemicals and fuel, and the importance of integrating forestry decisions with other land uses, including agriculture.

There are many important cultural heritage features, such as archaeological sites, within and close to woodlands throughout Scotland. Forestry also makes a different contribution to different landscapes across the country. This provides an important challenge for the SFS, which should aim to contribute positively to the views and character of Scotland, in a way which reflects the distinctive character of different parts of the country.

Environmental protection objectives

There are numerous plans and policies in place in Scotland which aim to protect the environment. This includes policies and programmes which have been developed by the forestry sector itself, with the aim of ensuring that it contributes to a high quality environment. 'Sustainable development' underpins most national level policies and numerous environmentally-focused plans and programmes, where possible, aim to safeguard and improve biodiversity, landscape and cultural heritage. The Scottish government has made a commitment to rural development that recognises and respects the quality of the environment, as well as plans for rural areas that emphasise the importance of considering land uses, including forestry, in an integrated way. Other key national environmental policies include the importance of reducing road transport in favour of less polluting modes such as trains and transport by water. Climate change has also led to a number of key policy commitments, including the need to reduce emissions of harmful 'greenhouse' gases and to anticipate and respond to climate change as it progresses.

Together, these policies provide a complex and challenging suite of environmental policies as the context in which the SFS operates.

Summary of the likely significant effects of the SFS

The Environmental Report has found that the SFS will have a largely positive impact on the SEA issues, although some uncertainties, arising from the level of detail within some of its policies, remain.

- Most of the policies within the SFS will support **biodiversity, flora and fauna**. In particular, the SFS will help to increase public awareness and understanding of biodiversity, while not only safeguarding existing habitats, but also improving them where possible.
- Policy aims relating to **population and human health** are also widely supported by the different elements of the SFS.
- Outcome 3 of the SFS performs particularly well in relation to supporting policy aims for **water and soil**, although there are less direct benefits from other parts of the strategy. Positive effects may occur in relation to increased education and training giving enhanced stewardship of water and soil.
- The SFS does not specifically aim to deliver **air quality** benefits and would not adversely affect this environmental issue, but there will be indirect benefits arising from activities such as the increasing use of woodfuel and biomass.
- There is a positive relationship across all three outcomes and the SEA **climate** objectives, particularly relating to adaptation, the growth of timber for renewable energy and support for the Scottish Climate Change Programme (including commitments to carbon sequestration and other approaches to climate change mitigation).
- The strongest positive impacts on **landscape** will arise from Outcome 1 of the SFS, particularly in terms of increased awareness, understanding and enjoyment of the natural and cultural heritage of the forest environment, reduced clear-felling and increasing and enhancing biodiversity.
- In terms of **material assets**, there will be a strong positive impact on the objectives supporting the rural economy. SFS aims of promoting the efficient use of resources and greater integration of land uses will also produce benefits.

Mitigation and enhancement

No significant adverse effects were identified in the assessment of the SFS, although a number of minor negative effects were identified in the initial assessment. As a result, scope for mitigation was explored, but in many cases a wider review of the SFS as a whole found that the need for additional measures was reduced by coverage under other outcomes and themes. The only area where additional mitigation may be required relates to the role of forestry as part of sustainable deer management. More detailed consideration of this issue may help to reduce uncertainties identified by the assessment.

There are a number of opportunities where SFS objectives and themes could achieve additional benefits through enhancement. These include supporting the integration of SEA themes to achieve wider benefits such as promoting the growth and management of trees which provide multiple benefits by providing both economic and natural heritage value.

Reasons for selecting alternatives

Alongside the assessment of the SFS itself, five alternative scenarios were also developed and evaluated. This underlined the importance of taking a balanced approach within the SFS, and avoiding promoting one specific policy aim to the significant detriment of others.

The SEA has been undertaken alongside the development of the SFS itself. As a result, key problems and opportunities have already fed into the development of the content and aims of the Strategy.

Monitoring

As a result of a lack of significant impacts arising during the course of the assessment no specific monitoring proposals have been identified. It is anticipated that the outcomes from the SEA and, in particular, key potential effects, can be monitored as an integral part of the monitoring of the SFS itself.

How to comment on the Environmental Report

We would welcome your comments on this Environmental Report. The Environmental Report of the SEA for the SFS was published for consultation on 6 March, and comments are requested by 29 May 2006. Details of how to comment can be found on: www.gov.uk/sfssea or by contacting:

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