

**FORESTRY COMMISSION SCOTLAND  
GUIDANCE NOTE 27**

**SFGS: PRESCRIPTIONS APPROPRIATE TO SITES OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AND NATURA 2000 SITES.**

1. Introduction

This brief guidance note aims to set out the broad range of operations supported under the SFGS and comment on their likely compatibility with the conservation management objectives on these statutory sites. This guidance is intended to help to owners and agents develop appropriate SFGS applications and highlight other sources of reference.

2. Background

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are notified under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for their special plants, animals, habitats, rocks or landforms or a combination of these. Owners and occupiers receive formal notification including; a copy of the citation which details the 'features of interest' for which the site has been notified and a list of operations likely to damage the special interest.

Special Areas of Conservation (cSACs) are areas designated under the European Community Council Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and Wild Fauna and Flora, commonly known as the Habitats Directive and in the UK under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, & c.) Regulations. cSACs together with sites recognised under the Birds Directive: Special Protection Areas (SPA's) form the Natura 2000 series. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) acts as the advisor to Government in the delivery of these conservation designations in Scotland.

In the case of cSACs and SPA's, there is a requirement to conduct an appropriate assessment for all operations that are not deemed 'necessary to the management of the site for nature conservation' and are judged to be 'likely to cause a significant effect' on the species or habitats for which the site has been notified. FCS is the Competent Authority for overseeing appropriate assessments relating to SFGS applications. However, SNH should be consulted on all projects and plans on Natura sites. The impacts of a proposed operation should be judged solely against the conservation objectives for the site. Hence other objectives; recreation/ timber/ landscape are not taken into account as part of this assessment.

The Scottish Executive's policy statement on the 'Nature of Scotland' (2001) highlighted the aspiration of bringing more SSSIs under positive management. The "Natural Care" Strategy is the main mechanism for achieving positive management of SSSI's and Natura sites, of which the SFGS will be the principal source of funding in relation to woodland habitats. Management prescriptions for wood pasture have now been included in the Rural Stewardship Scheme. SNH/FCS/SEERAD liaison will be required to ensure that woodland management on designated sites does not receive 'double-funding'.

Within SFGS Stewardship Grants, work relating to woodland SSSIs and Natura sites is eligible for the 90% rate of grant where the purpose is:

- \* To improve the ecological value of native woodlands, through work related to native woodland HAPs
- \* To improve the environmental value of non-native woods and forests through work related to HAPs, SAPs, LBAPs, designated sites or species listed in the schedules of the Wildlife and Countryside Act or the EU Habitats and Species Directive.
- \* To enhance their landscape value and their cultural heritage assets.

- \* To encourage more use of alternative systems to clear-felling, where this is practical and appropriate.
- \* To improve the economic and ecological value of woods and forests by reducing deer numbers

A Site Management Statement (SMS) which details the management objectives in relation to the features of interest, is available from SNH for all SSSIs and cSACs. SMS are sent to owners/occupiers with the offer of discussing their contents. Site Condition Monitoring assessments will also be available where these have been carried out and the assessment have been discussed with owners/occupiers. Both SMSs and SCM assessments for all the features of interest on a site, are reviewed on approximately a 6 year cycle. Some sites also have more detailed Site Management Plans detailing the prescriptions and the work programme designed to deliver the site's management objectives.

### 3. Liaison between FCS and SNH

Close FCS SNH liaison will be essential to producing good SFGS applications. While reference to the site's SMS should highlight the broad nature conservation objectives discussions with local SNH staff will be necessary to translate these into practice, for example, resolving issues relating to the location and timing of operations. Ideally both FCS and SNH will be involved in pre-application discussions with the owners/ agents, which may involve a site visit. At this point SNH should volunteer additional site information such as Site Condition Monitoring assessments, NVC surveys and existing Management Agreements where these exist. This process should seek to minimise the number of concerns arising through the statutory consultation process.

Most operations would be expected to be delivered within the period of grant aid, but an agreed timetable should be discussed between FCS, local SNH staff and the owners/ agents for assessing the progress of the establishment of natural regeneration.

### 4. Appropriate Management and Prescriptions

The Forestry Practice Guide series 'Management of Semi-Natural Woodlands' and UK Forest Standard Note 5 'Managing Semi-Natural Woodland', provide broad guidance on management appropriate to the different semi-natural woodland types. However, management on SSSIs/Natura sites is likely to be geared towards less intensive and more sensitive prescriptions.

The production of a Management Plan, detailing an agreed programme of works for a minimum of 5 years, is usually a condition of SFGS Stewardship Grants and in the case of SSSIs and Natura sites the proposals must accord with the objectives set out in the SMS. The SMS may not detail what management operations are appropriate to achieve the site's objectives, but the management prescriptions in the Management Plan should be attuned to the SMS's objectives.

The Management Plan should follow the format set out in FCS Guidance Note No 12 and should;

- \* outline the sensitivities of the features of interest
- \* detail the site objectives
- \* specify the management prescriptions that are required to deliver these objectives
- \* include a requirement for survey and monitoring (where SCM has already been undertaken by SNH, this should be used to inform the review of management operations).
- \* the plan should also outline the scale and degree of intervention that is likely to be appropriate during the plan period and over a longer timescale. For example, the

Management Plan should indicate the scale and interval at which operations, such as thinning, are to be repeated beyond the period of the plan.

In the case of large SSSIs and Natura sites in multiple ownership, prescriptions for any part of the site should take cognisance of the site as a whole. Hence, applications from different owners should not cumulatively give rise to inappropriate levels of intervention. The scale of operations that are appropriate on any site should be related to the extent of that woodland type in the local landscape and also the national extent of that woodland type. This means that any intervention will inevitably need to be more sensitive in the rarer woodland types. Where woods are smaller and enclosed, there may be a greater need for intervention to ensure that there is continuity of the woodland than may be necessary in more extensive unenclosed forests, but more extensive woods may be better able to accommodate higher degrees of intervention. These issues should be considered in relation to the interests of the site.

Table 1 below, sets out the list of eligible operations under SFGS (column 3). These are grouped against the operational guidelines listed in the Forest Practice Guides: Management of Semi-Natural Woodlands. Column 4 provides comment on how appropriate these activity types are likely to be on SSSIs and Natura sites. Many issues of appropriateness will relate to the scale, frequency and intensity of proposed operations. The listed operations are not exhaustive, but include those most likely to crop up in relation to designated sites.

The comments listed in column 4 are seen very much as in addition to the minimum specifications for operations laid out in the SFGS Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet, with the specific objective of maintaining the interests on designated sites. The specification tables in the Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet should be the first point of reference.

**Table 1**

Operational Guidelines	Description of operation	SFGS Activity Type Number	Comment on application within SSSI/Natura sites
<b>Management planning, including woodland surveying</b>			
Surveys and management planning underpin all management activity on these sites.			
	Management Plan for semi-natural woodland	33	The management plan should recognise the sensitivities of the features of interest and hence the aims of management and proposed operations must accord with the objectives set out in the Site Management Statement
	Management Plan to develop alternative system to clearfell	40	As per above
	Survey of woodland condition	34	The survey should aim to identify the sensitivities in relation to the features of interest, to feed into the management plan. Check with SNH to see what survey information is already held.
	Alternative system to clearfell site survey and stand appraisal	39	As per above
	Alternative system to clearfell stand appraisal	42	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.

**Site preparation**

The impact of various ground preparation methods have been reviewed (Worrell 1996). Mechanical techniques which significantly alter drainage, lead to soil compaction or erosion, alter soil nutrient status, microclimate and mycorrhizal communities are unlikely to be appropriate on sensitive sites.

There is a presumption that natural regeneration will be preferable to planting on most sites, to which end, some sensitive screening, brushing and raking may be appropriate in good seed years. However, where direct seeding or planting is deemed necessary, some patch scarification or mounding could be considered appropriate.

On many SSSIs/cSACs, domestic livestock could be used to create niches for regeneration which may produce a more natural pattern of regeneration than through manual scarification, however, the use of livestock as a conservation tool is not currently covered by SFGS standard costs. SNH may be supportive of trials to use livestock as an alternative.

	Chemical screening	82	The widespread use of herbicides are unlikely to be acceptable due to the impacts on semi-natural ground flora, but see vegetation management under 4, 5, 6
	Linear scarifying Patch scarifying	84 85	Linear scarifying is unlikely to be appropriate, but some limited patch scarification may be.
	Continuous mounding Hinge mounding Mounding from spoil drains Hand mounding and screening	86 87 88 89	Mechanical mounding operations are likely to have unacceptable impacts on woodland soils, but limited hand mounding and screening may be appropriate.
	Brush raking	90	Mechanised brush raking may be appropriate on sites where conifer plantation is being restored to native woodland, but would not normally be appropriate in semi-natural woods.
	Drainage new drains Drainage - clearing existing drains	91 92	Unlikely to be appropriate. Only applicable in exceptional circumstances.

**Methods of Regeneration**

As mentioned under site preparation, ideally regeneration will be from natural sources, but where regeneration has been unsuccessful or it is agreed it is unlikely to be successful, planting may be considered, e.g. small scale enrichment of desirable native species where seed sources are lacking. Where planting is considered, species choice will be important, particularly at the edge of the species' distribution range e.g. pine, oak, and ash in the far north.

SFGS standard establishment costs include beating up, weeding and the application of fertilisers. Establishment specifications exceeding current forest standards may be required as part of the SFGS contract where activities are likely to impact on site interests, for example, the application of fertilisers could be prohibited in a buffer zone of 30m from watercourses in catchments important for freshwater pearl mussels; more stringent than the standard of 10m laid down in the UK Forest & Water Guidelines.

	Native woodland natural regeneration	101	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Tree shelters Spiral Guards	79 80	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Small scale planting	81	Seed should be sourced as locally as possible and ideally from the same wood. Where this is not possible, seed should be from within the same native seed and altitudinal zone (FC Practice Note 8 -shortly to be revised), unless such seed is not available.
	Planting/restocking: broadleaves	98	As above.
	Planting/restocking: Caledonian Scots pine	99	From the same native pine zone, in the case of Scots pine.

**Tree Removal Operations**

Silvicultural felling operations are generally not funded under SFGS, but are regulated either through individual felling licenses or through WGS/SFSGS contracts which include proposals to fell and restock/ naturally regenerate areas. The scale of operations which could be considered appropriate will relate to the size and sensitivities of the features of interest. For example, where there are lichen interests, cutting of all coppice stools is unlikely to be appropriate. More extensive woods in a wooded landscape may be better able to accommodate limited commercial felling without compromising the site interests.

Felling of non-natives or management for species interests/ open habitats, which could be considered necessary for the management of the site; are considered under separate headings.

**Tending and thinning**

The scale of operations which could be considered appropriate will relate to the size and sensitivities of the features of interest and the frequency of intervention. Small scale operations which do not affect the woodland structure or other interests in the long-term may be acceptable, but successive silvicultural thins across the site are unlikely to be acceptable.

	Respace natural regeneration	1	Some small scale thinning may be appropriate on some sites to promote a diverse woodland structure or for an range of species interests.
	Cleaning	2	Cleaning will be appropriate for controlling the regeneration of non-native woody species in native woodlands, e.g. Sitka spruce in oakwoods.
	Pre and non-commercial thinning	23	Pre and non-commercial thinning is only likely to be appropriate on the limited number of sites where these operations are non-damaging to the interests of the site.
	Small scale thinning	28	As above
	Cutting coppice stools	31	Applicable where identified in the Site Management Statement as the most suitable form of management for maintaining the site interests. However, coppice management should be sensitive to preserving some continuity of habitats for lichens and bryophytes.

**Removal of non-native tree species and vegetation management**

Prescriptions under this heading are generally designed to remove species which are undesirable or damaging to the site interest. For example, by altering the light regime or microclimate or by preventing the regeneration of native species. These are likely to be largely non-native species such as Western Hemlock and Japanese Knotweed, but may also include native species which have spread to the extent that they are threatening site interests e.g. bracken.

The extent and the rate of removal that is desirable will depend on the extent to which other site interests are dependent on these species. e.g. on some sites non-native trees host notable lichen species, and whether or not their rapid removal could be counter productive, for example, rapid sycamore removal can lead to it's further colonisation. When assessing these operations, consideration will be given to the overall impact on the features of interest in the mid-long term, including balancing the impacts and costs of a rapid intensive intervention against a more gradual, more sensitive approach. See guide to 'Restoration of Native Woodland on Ancient Woodland Sites' on the FC website.

In general non-chemical methods of vegetation control will be preferred, however, some chemical treatments may be considered the least invasive or most cost-effective techniques.

	Felling conifers to waste	24 25	Removal of conifers and the restoration of native woodland will be advocated on designated sites, but may need to be a staged operation to maintain the features of interest including lichens, bryophytes and ground flora (particularly on sites with richer soils). The same principles could also be applied to unwanted broadleaves such as sycamore. The method of conifer removal selected should be that which seeks to minimise the long-term impact of the whole operation.
	Felling conifers to waste and clearing site	26 27	Leaving trees on site or tree removal is likely to be preferable to burning onsite due to the impacts on soils.
	Felling and extracting conifers/ broadleaves	29 30	As above
	Bracken whipping	3	This is the preferred method of bracken control on designated sites and particularly where there are interesting fern communities which may be affected by chemical treatments. Bracken control may not be appropriate on sites important for butterflies, such as pearl bordered fritillaries or for woodland ground flora where it occurs some distance from woodland cover.
	Chemical weed control	4 5 6	Bracken control may be appropriate where it is invasive and having an impact on the interest of the site, including where it is limiting successful regeneration. Spot spray and handheld chemical applications may be considered where mechanical methods have failed or are unlikely to succeed. Aerial control is only likely to be appropriate on SSSIs/ Natura sites where other methods are not feasible due to issues of access and scale.
	Rhododendron control	7 - 13 inclusive	Control should be part of a longer term programme to eradicate Rhododendron. The overall impacts of different control methods and intervention frequencies need to be considered to help decide which will be the most effective/ least damaging in the mid-long term. The earlier Rhododendron infestations are tackled the better.
	Gorse clearance	14	Only applicable where Gorse is having a negative impact on site interests.

<b>Grazing and browsing</b>			
Achieving appropriate grazing/ browsing levels can be critical for maintaining site interests and can be complex where there are a range of interests with different grazing requirements and a range of herbivores present on a site. While reducing grazing is likely to be appropriate on sites where there is a need to establish regeneration, the total removal of livestock may not be appropriate where the site interests, e.g. open habitats or species-rich pastures within the woodland are maintained by grazing. Limited conservation grazing may be allowed under some stewardship grants (native woodland, biodiversity) where this is agreed with the local conservancy.			
	Reducing deer numbers	32	The Deer Management plan should consider what levels are appropriate to maintaining the range of site interests. See FCS Guidance note on 'Reduction in Deer Numbers Stewardship Grant (S2) and SFGS' for the requirements of a DMP.
	Rabbit control inserting box traps, gassing and shooting	44	Appropriate where numbers are such that they are threatening the interests of the site.
	Compensation for loss of grazing income	70	The total removal of livestock may not be appropriate where the site interests, e.g. open habitats or species-rich pastures within the woodland are maintained by grazing. Where this is the case SNH/FCS will need to discuss the preferred management. However, the Stewardship Grant for loss of grazing income will not be payable if any livestock is grazing the site.
	Fencing against deer	55 - 62 inclusive	See FCS Guidance Note 11 on Deer and Fencing. This sets out a presumption against fencing, particularly with regard to Capercaillie and wildland. Fencing is only likely to be appropriate on designated sites where there is no alternative and the effects of overgrazing the ground vegetation outwith the fence and undergrazing within the fence can be mitigated against in order to accommodate the range of site interests.
	Stock and rabbit fencing	47 50 - 54 inclusive	Controlled grazing may need to be maintained on some sites where it is helping to maintain the interests of the site.
	Fence upgrade	63	

<b>Management for species interests</b>			
A range of operations for maintaining species interests are available under the Stewardship option 'Improving woodland biodiversity'. As these measures are designed to benefit species of high conservation value, they are likely to be advocated on SSSIs/cSACs provided they do not conflict with the requirements of other important species or habitats.			
	Grey squirrel control for red squirrel conservation	45 46	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Marking or modification/ of existing deer fence for Capercaillie.	48 49 64 - 69 inclusive	Fence marking or modification may also be appropriate on sites notified for Black grouse.
	Deadwood management	16	Refer to forthcoming FCS guidance. As part of Common Standards Monitoring, woodlands are expected to contain a reasonable quantity of deadwood for a woodland of it's type and maturity (site specific targets are set using agreed guidance from UK nature conservation agencies). This target will generally exceed UK Forest Standards and will be higher in sites which are important for deadwood specialists.
	Ride management	15	Ride management is likely to be acceptable provided it does not conflict with the sensitivities of the features of interest and indeed may be necessary to maintain the features of interest. However, there may be issues relating to the timing of operations, for example in relation to breeding birds.
	Respace natural regeneration	1	Some small scale thinning may be appropriate on some sites to promote a diverse woodland structure or for a range of species interests.
	Re-routing of formal access	106-110 inclusive	An assessment of the need for re-routing should balance the impacts of existing usage on habitats of interest against the potential loss of habitats in forming a new route. Unless there is evidence of heavy usage, low impact path types are likely to be preferred.
<b>Open (non-woodland) habitats</b>			
These stewardship grants will provide opportunities to safeguard and enhance non-woodland habitats of interest, e.g. grasslands, mires, fens, heaths.			
	Designed Open Ground	100 103	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Blocking drains	17-19 inclusive	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Ride management	15	Ride management is likely to be acceptable provided it does not conflict with the sensitivities of the features of interest and indeed may be necessary to maintain the features of interest,. However, there may be issues relating to the timing of operations.

<b>Monitoring</b>			
Monitoring provides important feedback on the impacts of operations to help guide future management and to contribute to the review of prescriptions.			
	Biodiversity Monitoring	35	Biodiversity monitoring may be designed to look at the status of specific species or habitats or to assess the impacts/success of particular operations. Such monitoring should complement Site Condition Monitoring which seeks to provide a broad indication of the viability of the features of interest.
	Alternative system to clearfell site monitoring	41	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
<b>Recreation</b>			
Responsible public access is likely to be encouraged on designated sites (particularly those which are also NNRs), provided there is not undue disturbance to the features of interest, e.g. Capercaillie. Access will only be restricted for natural heritage reasons where this is deemed necessary.			
	Grass cutting, brashing, in recreation areas	20, 139	Is likely to be appropriate as an ongoing operation over a localised area, provided there are not impacts on the features of interest.
	Footpath construction, footbridges, boardwalks.	106-110 130-132	Careful assessment will be required to gauge the impacts of new paths and their installation on the features on interest.
	Gates, stiles and benches	111-114 127-129	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Signs, Leaflets and Interpretation	115-126	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Environmental Improvement	133	As per specifications in Standard Costs and Specifications Booklet.
	Tree safety work	134-140	Careful consideration should be given to felling of mature native trees, particularly those with standing deadwood habitats. Tree surgery or re-routing paths may be appropriate. See guidance for the management of veteran trees.

Note: The SFGS may not have standard costs to cover all the less conventional prescriptions which may be desirable on SSSIs/cSACs, e.g. ground preparation by a grazing with cattle or pigs, or prescribed burning to enhance blaeberry cover for Capercaillie.

#### References

- FC National Office for Scotland Guidance Note 11 on Deer and Fencing.  
 FCS Guidance Note 25 Reduction in Deer Numbers Stewardship Grant (S2) and SFGS  
 forthcoming FC Scotland Guidance on managing for deadwood.  
 Worrel, R (1996) The environmental impacts and effectiveness of different forestry ground preparation practices. SNH Research, Survey and Monitoring (RSM) Report (52), SNH.  
 UK Forest & Water Guidelines (2000) Forestry Commission.  
 Read, H (2000) Veteran Trees- a guide to good management. English Nature, Peterborough.