

Sent: 01 December 2008 13:18

To: Rumbles M (Mike), MSP

Subject: Proposed Leasing of National Forest Estate

Dear Mr Rumbles,

I telephoned your surgery last Friday, and the lady I spoke to suggested that I should put my concerns in an email to you, so that these concerns are clearly detailed.

As you know, I work as a ranger for the Forestry Commission, and have done for the last 13 years in the fields of education/recreation/communities and now conservation. My concerns are linked to the recent suggestions that 25% of the forest estate should be rented out on 75 year lease to commercial timber harvesting companies. At the moment I am off on maternity leave, and my baby is due in 2 weeks, so you'll understand that this is taking top priority for me just now. However, I feel it is essential that I raise my concerns with you, so you can investigate it further. I will try to be as brief and concise as I can. My concerns are as follows:

1. My main concern is that we must expect that a commercial timber operation will put commercial gains above environmental or social objectives. However tightly contracts are drawn up, I believe that social needs and environmental needs will lose out against commercial gains, when compared to the current situation. For example:

Although the location of environmentally sensitive areas could be detailed on a contract (raptor nests or badgers setts, for example) with instructions to avoid these areas, it is not possible to know which areas will be used in the future. Some raptors will build a nest in a weekend, and the avoidance area for nest disturbance can be up to 500m or more, and these restraints continue for up to 4 or 5 months in some cases. I really cannot see a purely commercial company actively looking for these nests, in the first place, and then pulling the plug on an expensive harvesting operation, because of some bird of prey that no-one else may know about.

2. Communications links will inevitably be slower than is currently the case. If we do become aware of species or habitat restrictions which have suddenly arisen, it can be essential to react quickly before these sites are damaged or the species or habitat is disturbed. Quite obviously the current set-up, where I can either walk into the office or telephone one of my harvesting colleagues immediately, is far faster than any process where contractors would have to be contacted. These same concerns exist for social aims, public access and safety. FC also has to be open, and responsive to local communities. A private company does not.

3. Over the last 13 years I have seen a great improvement in how the Forestry Commission is regarded by community and conservation groups, many of whom now hold FC Scotland in high regard. This is because of continued efforts by FC Scotland staff. Conservation and Social aims are funded, indirectly, by timber production revenue. If this revenue is removed into a lump sum,

01.12/2008

ist in Treasury accounts, conservation and social aims are bound to suffer, as staff will have to be reduced and project money cut.

4. I believe the whole concept to have been poorly thought through in terms of finance. Leasing out a forest area for 75 years might bring in a lump sum of money. But given the fluctuation in timber prices, which any contractor bidding for the lease contract would be well aware of, it is not likely that this sum would be higher than the annual market rate when this was spread over 75 years. Meaning - there would be no financial benefit for the people of Scotland.

5. I understand that FC Scotland is committed to providing the timber industry with a certain amount of assured timber each year - whether the price is good or bad. This allows mills and further processing units to plan confidently for their future. If our major production forests are leased out, how will local mills cope? Again, I can't see a purely commercial lease operator felling timber and selling at low prices where that is the market value, as the FC are required to do. Surely they would simply keep the trees as a standing crop until the market prices had risen again?

6. The area proposed for leasing is 25% of the forest estate. This equates to some 160,000ha - or an area larger than Aberdeenshire.

I am proud that our forest is a National Forest, belonging to all the people of Scotland. Here in Aberdeenshire, the forests of Dumfries and Galloway belong to us just as much as the nearby forests of Blackhall or Kirkhill do. I believe that under the current system, the people of Scotland have a greater say in it's management than ever before, and that the wildlife and habitats in the forest have a greater degree of protection than ever before. I was pleased when FC Scotland received an award from the World Wildlife Fund for being the very first National Forest to win FSC status. I do not want to see this eroded by a proposed leasing system which would bring no benefits (not even financial benefits, after the issues have been accurately costed out) and would risk the essential forest aims of social benefits for the people of Scotland, and environmental protection for its wildlife and habitats.

I hope that you will be able to investigate this further. I urge you to look closely into the theoretical financial benefits, which I believe to be poorly considered and inaccurately devised. And from your past support of local communities and wildlife protection, I know that you will balance this against the very real risks to our communities and wildlife. This proposed leasing is a retrogressive step to 20-odd years ago, when FC forests were run for timber production alone, and public access and wildlife concerns were tolerated at best.

Thank you for reading this,

Yours

Louise Simpson