

FORESTRY COMMISSION REGIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Introduction

1. The England Forestry Forum asked for information on the Forestry Commission's Regional Advisory Committees at its first meeting in July 1999. This paper summarises the legislative basis, purposes and composition of the Committees.

Legal Basis

2. Section 37 of the Forestry Act 1967 (as amended) requires the Forestry Commissioners to maintain Regional Advisory Committees. Whilst the Commissioners may ask the RACs for advice on the performance of any of their functions, Section 37 of the Act implies that the main role of RACs is to advise on applications for felling licences.

Functions of the Regional Advisory Committees

3. The Regional Advisory Committees (RACs) are appointed by the Forestry Commissioners under the Forestry Act 1967. Following a review of their remit, the Commissioners have agreed that their functions should be:
 - to adjudicate in disputed applications for grant aid or for felling licences and in disputes by the statutory bodies arising from Forest Enterprise design plans;
 - to advise on a small number of specific topics and issues which Commissioners will select, focusing on regional issues or implications;
 - to inform the Commissioners of matters of regional or local concern on which the RAC considers it necessary to comment.
4. The Commissioners would normally seek the RAC's views on proposed changes to the RAC's structure, composition or remit, or to Commission's grant schemes and felling licence procedures and the associated consultation arrangements.

Composition of the Committees

5. There are three Regional Advisory Committees covering the Forestry Commission's Conservancies in England and consisting of up to 12 members appointed by the Commissioners. The composition of the Committees is designed to achieve a spread of interests in the Region. Members may include representatives of the forestry industry, environmental interests, woodland owners and others who it is considered can contribute effectively to the work of the Committee.



6. Members are appointed in their personal capacity, whether or not they are nominated by representative bodies. Members are expected to be well informed of the interest they represent (for example the interest of woodland owners, the timber trade, wildlife, archaeology etc) but not to act as official representatives of their nominating bodies. The Chairmen are consulted on all Committee appointments. Members, including the Chairmen, are normally invited to serve for three years and the service is normally restricted to two terms, although exceptions might be made in special circumstances.

Communications

7. This is an important function on which the Regional Advisory Committee Chairmen work closely with the Chief Conservator for England to ensure good two-way communications between the Committee and the Commission. Together they should ensure that matters of particular concern to forestry interests in their Regions are made known to the Commission's headquarters, and that the Committee is kept informed of the Commissioners' policies and the work of the Commission.
8. The Chairmen have direct access to the Commissioners who from time to time (at least once a year) will call meetings of the Chairmen to discuss with them matters of particular importance. The Commissioners arrange for the Chairmen to be briefed by the Chief Conservator's office (and exceptionally by Headquarters) on matters of importance to the Committee's work, and to be consulted on special matters on which their views would be helpful.
9. The Chairmen should keep in close touch with the members of their Committees and consult them as necessary on particular issues. The Chief Conservators and the Committee Chairmen determine the frequency of the Committee meetings.
10. The RAC's role is advisory, not promotional or executive. Committee Chairmen need to draw a distinction between their position as the Commissioners' advisers and their activity in other capacities. Chairmanship of a Committee is not an impediment to participation in other forms of public work or in the work of forestry and countryside organisations, but the position imposes some obligations. Confidential information received by the Chairmen from the Commission is not to be disclosed, and public criticism of the Commissioners would not be compatible with the Chairmanship of one of their Committees. If Chairmen wish publicly to express a personal opinion on a Forestry Commission matter, or on the Commission's policies, they are free to do so but should make it clear that they are not operating in their capacity as Committee Chairmen.
11. The three Chairmen are members of the England Forestry Forum.



