

# APPLICANTS' FOCUS GROUP MEETING

## FC England National Office, Bristol

### 12 November 2009

#### 1 Welcome, Introduction & Apologies

Present: Neville Elstone, Tim Shardlow, John Morris, John Lockhart, John Jackson, Paul Nolan, John Blessington, Andrea Graham, Judith Webb, Tony House, Simon Mageean, Caroline Harrison, Julian Ohlsen, Alison Mable, Laura Jones, Andrew Smith, Craig Harrison, Steve Hunt, Angela Duignan, Penny Phillips.

Apologies: Mike Wood, Mike Seville, Richard Sochacki.

Andrew Smith opened the meeting as new chair of the AFG. Richard Britton sent his apologies as he's attending a Natural England meeting in Yorkshire

Andrew welcomed the group to the new England national office in Bristol. The Cambridge office remains open until May, with some staff relocating but majority of 30 staff effectively leaving. He asked the group to kindly be aware of morale at the office, and consider any communication accordingly. Birmingham still considered a better venue for most AFG meetings given distribution of members, but felt seeing the new office was appropriate

AFG members introduced themselves

Andrew noted particular FC presence for the meeting - Laura Jones, new Head of Policy and Programme Group; Penny Phillips Graduate Development Programme team G&R team member, shortly to assist Mark Broadmeadow. Angela Duignan attended for the Woodfuel presentation. Mariska Van der Linden joined the group for lunch.

#### 2 Minutes and matters arising from previous meeting

EPS – NE made it clear that their inability to attend was due to diary clashes. Steve explained that training was subject to NE changes to the guidelines. There has been only 1 licence application so far. AFG members mentioned ongoing inconsistency between FC regions re EPS checklist requirements and ongoing unease from woodland owners about EPS in general. FC have provided robust support to owners when unnecessary surveys have been suggested as required

**Action 1: Steve to remind FC staff not to demand an EPS checklist**

T&C's – no changes planned but will consider when appropriate

Additional Contributions - are paid in 80% / 20% instalments

Climate change – Laura will pick up any questions during her session

HLS and EWGS interaction - Craig has ongoing discussions with national NE team and advises regions on individual cases, key being to ensure there are no gaps between the scheme but guidance suggests which scheme is more appropriate. RDPE mid-term evaluation likely to pick up some of these issues. John Lockhart explained the stalling of applications because of confusion between the 2 schemes, and possible effect EWGS applications can have on HLS targeting scores

**Action 2: Craig to call John Lockhart to discuss and investigate further**

The group agreed the minutes can be published as approved.

### 3 Briefing ([Paper 07](#))

BACS payments - Caroline referred to regional member problems with BACS payment references and notable audit risk to payees. Julian queried consistency of paper/email remittance advice. Andrew confirmed the bank statement details cannot be referenced but the remittance should have case references to help cross reference. John Morris noted payments for the same amount at the same time are difficult to reference

**Action 3: Craig to review BACS remittance and explain it's content on a webpage**

National office staffing update Up to 11 members in Andrew's team, with another post to be appointed before xmas.

Mid-term evaluation (MTE) – large volume of work means we will appoint a short-term member to make the case for forestry and delivery to date. Neville asked how representative bodies become involved at an early stage to help construct consultation exercises; can be difficult for e.g. ICF to manage simultaneous consultation exercises

**Action 4: Industry representation/involvement to be put on 1<sup>st</sup> MTE project board agenda. ICF to send ideas on how to engage on this to Andrew**

Energy Crop Scheme - FC approached by Defra re utilising anticipated under spend. Principle has been accepted including administration of axis 1 funding via EWGS. Key issues are funding for grant administration and compatibility with current RDA plans. FC can tailor current WIG mechanisms to manage axis 1 funding; key difference will be invoicing rather than standard costs

#### *AFG feedback*

Suggested changing term 'admin' to marketing, so it may be supported under measure 111

The danger of parallel schemes doubling up administration costs and strong support for keeping the process simple

Planning issues with wood fuel boilers

**Action 5: Need to show examples of best practice. Angela to pick this up in implementation plan**

Laura explained short-rotation forestry field trial progress and keen to find more trial sites. Without good evidence base from trials this work will struggle to progress

**Action 6: Andrew to circulate Chris Ryder's contact details.**

FC Staff training - All staff are going through EWGS updates and refresher training to ensure compliance and consistency

EWGS help line – promoting the view that regional offices are the best place to go for specific advice. AFG raised regional office manning and availability

**Action 7: Andrew to consider regional office availability and use of answer phones, voicemails and number diverting.**

Penalties – Steve re-emphasised the warning to the organisations that if you have ticked the box to say you're claiming all of the grant, the work must have been done. AFG broadly felt the tick box was OK, but suggested adding clear warning on the claim form

## 4 Policy & Programme Group Briefing – Laura ([Paper 08](#))

Laura summarised the key work areas for the group and thanked AFG members for their input to various projects.

- Study of PFE - Ongoing and looking at its possible evolution into the future. Now looking at evidence from consultation process and economic value of the estate. Hope to see recommendations in the new year
- Operational efficiency – part of the government initiative to look at efficiency of assets (land and estate) and the best use of it. This work is part of the Government pre-budget report last year and anticipate ongoing pressure for increased efficiency
- Low carbon transition plan – FC has been set the challenge to lead on this. Government have accepted that trees have part to play in carbon issue. Figure we put in the plan was 50 million tonnes of carbon saved. Government announcement regarding renewable energy strategy – recognised importance of biomass, referred to woodfuel strategy and implementation plan.
- Open habitats policy – in progress. Ministers have asked us to work up options. Key issues include carbon, economic cost, local community impact and outcomes. Aim to have options for FC National Committee in December, then approach ministers
- Want to survey landowners about woodland management and barriers to this; Caroline mentioned EU has asked ConFor to look at something similar.

**Action 8: Caroline to give Laura information about landowner survey. John Lockhart to drop Laura a note about other examples of this**

- NE have launched 'uplands vision' today – very positive about woodland management, woodfuel, and aim for 25% woodland cover.
- UK Forest Standard – is being updated and covered in FCE Executive Board next week

### *Points from the group*

The woodfuel strategy - PFE England needs to have a clear stated external policy re timber sales. There are clear policies in the 2 other countries and could be critical to the success of the woodfuel strategy due to woodfuel security, guarantor's etc. FC could look at the continent to emulate their system of local woodlands supplying local firewood/ co-operatives, which reconnects people to the products of their local woods. Laura agreed spatial planning needs to be considered carefully. It did start as a 'framework' which would link us to other agendas such as water management/quality, which could give us better leverage in the future; it also acts as a 'security blanket' for those not used to it. Seems to have got 'lost in translation'

Woodlands for the future – repeated concern about how spatial planning is used and communicated. Increasing concern about loss of flexibility of land use long term; you need a very substantial incentive to achieve large woodland creation programme. Concern about woodland income after farm woodland payments cease and maintaining landowner enthusiasm to continue creating more woodlands. Pests and diseases need to be considered and highlights the risk of large scale monoculture and single objective creation

Water guidelines– in progress with Tom Nesbit. AFG asked when it would be published, as it will help organisations in discussion with water companies.

**Action 9: Laura to clarify Water Guideline release date**

**Action 10: People can also give feedback to Laura, esp around UKFS, via email**

## 5 Wood Fuel Implementation Plan ([Paper 09](#))

Angela summarised her paper and key points:

- The implementation plan due out spring 2010
- Strategy was published in 2007, with lots of activity since then. Keen to get feedback from the group about volume etc.
- Draft Implementation Plan has 5 key work areas:
  - Woodfuel boilers: Renewable Heat Incentive due out soon, so more boilers needed. Currently 2,000 boilers out there now.
  - Woodfuel supply: 2 million tonne target. How do we engage with woodland owners so that they can get involved.
  - Supply chain strengthening: e.g. Housing Association say they will not get boilers if it can't be secured
  - Skills and training: increased size and skill level of workforce required. Want to assess how many jobs there would need to be by 2020.

- Communications – selling ourselves and ensuring people understand that burning wood can be a good thing. We have just done a piece for Country File about sustainable management. Particularly engaging with the trade association to raise the profile of the forestry sector and developing responses to negative views.

### *AFG Feedback*

Minimum aspiration has to be that private woodland owners will make a profit; people won't do it for the good of the biofuel movement. Need entrepreneurs and new business to drive it for growers and contractors, esp. over the long-term contracts that will be needed, otherwise you won't get the investment you need. Need to differentiate between standing/roadside cost/value. The grant still expects owners to put 20% of their money into it, which is why so many are under managed.

Educating planners with examples of best practice and case studies; there are lots of good examples, but these aren't being distributed.

Mid Term Evaluation should be an action, which Angela noted as a mistake.

Providing advisors from the energy sector with better information about woodfuel and the renewable energy industry, following feedback about the poor advice being distributed at present. E.g. people did not get the recent BEC updates as a matter of course, and there are many other examples of info that many of us won't come into contact with. FC needs to build a relationship with people working in the energy sector, perhaps via something similar to the suppliers' forum or something like an FC e-newsletter would be very helpful.

Economics – People concerned about the proposed drop in price of woodfuel and the wide range of chip prices quoted. It is critical that we have robust economic modelling, to provide information on supply chains and show where investors will get their fee. Private businesses want to see the economic driver, and feel secure about developing a supply chain. It is proposed the modelling should be part of the work done by the FC, DEC and Defra.

Worries surrounding the log market, re; the quality of log being supplied and how poor quality would reflect badly on burning wood. Need to ensure the quality of the supply chain – which links to the issue of local supply chains.

PAWS restoration – a potential benefit for water quality, biodiversity etc.

### '2 million-tonne' question.

Has the volume stayed roughly the same? The 'wood mobilisation study' is looking at just this, due out in January.

In 2007, the increase was due to the standing price of small diameter firewood and the 80% funding. Therefore now the increase is zero, if not going down -the markets have collapsed for lowland species.

**Action 11: Members of the AFG to email Angela back comments if they haven't been aired or come up today, but are thought about at a later date.**

**Action 12: Mark Broadmeadow to distribute presentation from the meeting 'Woodlands for the Future'.**

## 6 Customer and Land Registration ([Paper 10](#))

FC are updating our systems to keep in line with RPA's moves on data refreshing. Alec has produced an update to share thoughts on the woodfuel implementation plan.

The chief operating officer of RPA (new to post) is having a meeting with PHT and Andrew Smith where the stakeholders feelings will be presented. The RPA states that the culture of the organisation is open-minded and willing to respond to feedback.

The customer register and RLR team report that they will achieve their 90% service level by the end of the year (90% responded within 20 days).

### *AFG Feedback*

The process of land registration is not clear for applicants, re; what stages have been completed and what they have yet to do. If applicants don't understand the process it is a deterrent.

Land registration takes over 2 months introducing frustration and cost, even before the grant application has been approved.

Frustration that there isn't a single point of contact at RLR. The FC should provide a link for this and the information needs to be managed properly. Agents are being sent the maps of applicants' farms and requests for updates. No provision for being able to simply change the information.

Re-mapping/canopy mapping where the canopy of a tree overhangs the adjacent agricultural land. Neighbours have been sent a revision of the mapping, almost causing boundary disputes - an issue that potentially becomes a legal issue.

Confirmation that land registration is registering the business while the RLR is capturing the land by parcel. Doesn't state the type of land, i.e. 'woodland parcel', just a 'parcel'. Potentially a landlord and a tenant may both have separate SBI's. There is lots of work being done on a land-linking system. To coincide with this, the FC needs to look at the process of maps and mapping in EWGS, with regards to compartment numbers. This will be initiated via a whole consultation process with the AFG to discuss how this can be streamlined.

FC staff (Woodland officers and admin officers) have been advised to start processing applications even if the land hasn't yet got an RLR or SBI. It would be helpful for the funding to be ring-fenced at this stage.

RPA - The person who runs this function would find this extremely useful. Perhaps some of you would like to come into the office to discuss this with the relevant people.

**Action 13: Peter (RPA) will take this issue forward with the group externally. He will make contact with Julian and John specifically about this.**

## 7 EWGS Update ([Paper 11](#))

Key areas for discussion are the AFG's views on the FC not issuing FWP with current WCG applications, due to EU approval. This is potentially causing a lot of problems in the interim, but has the best long-term intentions in mind.

EU approval decision is expected back just before xmas. The FC is hopeful that it will go through.

Defra has disclosed that it has up to £2 million in RDPE money that must be spent. This will be lost unless applications are approved almost immediately. The FC are offering to sign conditional contracts to people who are willing to go ahead regardless of the possible rates.

WCG without links to FWP will not be delayed in the application processing stage.

Craig has drafted a letter to send out to applicants. A number of existing schemes are also linked to FWP – affecting 400 schemes across the country. They will be informed of their specific options, but told that payment will not go through until EU approval.

### *AFG feedback on draft letter*

Gives a clear statement on the current position, offers an opportunity for discussions to take place, and the chance for people to decide on workload etc. Allows people to make their own decisions with a reasonable understanding of the risk but would benefit from an indication on the anticipated date of decision from Defra. If not, explain why you can't give an indication of this, ensuring it is consistent.

It must be made clear that it will be an 'all or nothing' decision. However if approved it gives a huge opportunity to market it as a highly rewarding scheme in certain situations.

Communication – Gemma Davies, our information, manager is reviewing our internal and external documents. Specific focus on regional grants and EWGS pack's, with the view of possibly updating the documents in the near future.

### *AFG feedback*

Produce specific regional grant flyers that will attract new clients. The need to revise the main EWGS guidance wording can be put onto the back-burner.

The Ops notes are extremely good, and in some instances links to further information. It is important that people have the ability to get information at the ability level /requirements they need.

**Action 14      Produce documents for agents to allow them to market FC grants.**

## 8 Phytophthora

A confidential update to get AFG feedback for our external communications for next week.

Background - Since 2002 the disease has spread from several main hosts, most notably Rhododendron. In August 2009 *Phytophthora ramorum* was confirmed on *Rhododendron ponticum*, on mature larch and foliage of thicket larch west of Plymouth. At a site east of Plymouth it has been confirmed in oak, beech, chestnut, birch and larch.

Over the summer the rate of deterioration was very rapid and is ongoing.

Recent symptoms – not related to proximity of infected rhododendron. Cankers are high up. Larch has folia and stem infection – strong indications that larch is acting as a folia host. Excessive amounts of resin being produced. A definitive confirmation of the role of Larch is unknown now due to the changing season. We have to look at the 2 phases – Rhododendron and Japanese Larch- at their growing time. Larch has shut down now which gives us a bit of space to look at options/current knowledge.

Implications – not entirely understood. Parallels have been drawn to west coast of North America. Infection spreading through woodlands is greater than in shrubs and the protocol has dictated removal of the host. For the future, a climatic model based on that used in California is being used. This has shown a high degree of risk on west coast and south-west edge of the country. We are therefore gearing up our SW team to answer questions from the public.

Future - There are gaps in our knowledge as this is so recent. We are working with Fera to better understand this. Ongoing research taking place to understand the issue further, i.e. the potential for larch buds to carry it through the winter.

Laura is forming an internal group within FE to do a survey over the estate. It will inform us and guide us better. FC is also forming a bio security board (external) to look at everything going on, on all fronts. GB-wide board headed by Roger Coppard (?). Will include appropriate representatives from the sector. First meeting is this month.

Communication - Ensure people aren't getting misinformation by knowledge sharing and keeping an open process in getting across key messages. The main focus will be in the SW. Need to be disciplined in responding to questions. A 'key messages and briefing sheet' should be produced for all organisations to clarify the facts we should all be following.

### *AFG feedback*

Stakeholders must be engaged on this matter. Messages must be managed in a co-ordinated manner and ensure our info base increases. We need to know where the channels of intelligence are.

UPM have carried out samples across Larch holdings in the SW, purely for internal use. Julian has seen this in under-thinned stands, not well thinned stands.

The FC are only looking at Japanese larch as a host. Attention should be paid to Douglas fir in the SW.

Concern about the struggle for resources in trying to research this. A general belief that FR funding is all going into conifer and not into broadleaf pests and diseases. Need to divert funds to these key areas, to ensure control before it gets out of hand. Confirmation that the spend on plant health research has increased in FR, and the government has put £25 million into phytophthora research. Fera is conducting much of this in Yorkshire.

**Action 15: AFG members to pass information/observations/knowledge from their regional teams to the FC.**

## 9 AOB

Alternative funding - Agents need further information to have a better understanding about alternative funding streams.

Forum - Could something equivalent to the model shown in the SE be rolled-out nationally? Sign posting, hands-on advice and having relationships with parties in the RDPE to help steer woodland owners in the right direction.

**Action 16: Andrew to send out briefing about regional funding (6 points from Richard)**

Felling licences – increasingly a high proportion have to be re-issued. Some regions only allow for 2 years. It is a consistency issue between regions/WO's.

Felling licence database - The new database will send out a letter to warn of an upcoming expiration, 3 months beforehand.

**Action 17: Steve to send an email out to regions to reiterate this.**