

Grants Update

EWGS Grant Suite update

Woodland Regeneration Grant (WRG)

Thank you (in advance) for your feedback on the WRG briefing paper (paper 03/11). They will be/have been fed into the applicant guidance and instructions for staff. The timetable for implementation is:

- 13th May 2011:
 - National email alert based on the briefing paper
 - WRG webpage updated
 - EWGS 4 revised guidance published on the WRG webpage
 - Phytophthora guidance published as a new Operations Note
- 16th May 2011:
 - New rates and rules come into force for new applications
 - FC staff will start contacting applicants with applications in progress that have not reached draft contract stage
- Independent Panel report (currently planned for Spring 2012):
 - During 2011/12 we will be monitoring WRG applications to see whether the new rates/rules have influenced restocking practices
 - Subject to the report, WRG will be reviewed and adjusted if required

At the meeting I will provide some additional context and information about the changes, and AFG members will have the opportunity to discuss the changes too.

Woodland Creation Grant (WCG)

AFG members will recollect a lively discussion about WCG changes at the last meeting. In light of the WRG changes and other priorities, WCG changes have been less than originally planned. Original thoughts for more revolutionary change have been deferred, but we have ensured as many of the simpler changes have been incorporated for 2011, based on the ideas and feedback from AFG members. Key changes for 2011 have been:

- The fast track score and application deadline approach of previous years is gone. There is a single threshold score which you need to achieve and we will accept applications until funding is fully committed. Therefore applicants should know if they're in or out straight away and can advise clients with more certainty. The minimum score your application will need to achieve in 2011 is East of England region 3 points, all other regions 10 points
- Increased species flexibility to reflect good forestry practice and the new ancient & native woodland practice guide. Native woodland can include a proportion of emerging or honorary species, and a small proportion of appropriate non-natives
- The rule that some planting must be done in the next planting season has been relaxed for schemes that require a lead in time e.g. land restoration projects
- Planting and claims can be spread over 3 seasons where it is justified e.g. a large phased planting project

- We will accept applications from prospective landowners and agree the proposals and grant offer in principal, so the prospective landowner has more assurance they will receive Woodland Creation Grant

Further changes to Woodland Creation Grant for the future continue to be considered, which will include thoughts collected so far e.g. removal of scoring system. Other factors under consideration are the introduction of the Woodland Carbon Code and potential for private financing of woodland creation.

Woodland Planning Grant (WPG)

Updated WPG guidance will be published in the summer. The changes are not major but will reflect changes since the last version, notably the introduction of Category B protocol, 10 year felling approval and the imminent introduction of Woodfuel WIG.

The FC management plan template is also undergoing changes, notably:

- Improved table at the end of the plan for the owner/manager to record their compartment details e.g. species, P year
- Adjusted tables to meet woodfuel WIG requirements (volume of BL/CON to be harvested in the next 5-10 years)
- Greater emphasis on the use of maps including concept plans

We see the changes as minor and for the owner/managers benefit. We recommend owners/managers don't wait for the new template but continue to use the existing template in the meantime, adding the minor changes after as required. There may be further changes to the template in the medium term to ensure it meets the impending revised UK Forestry Standard and UKWA Standard, but the scope/scale of changes are at present unknown.

Woodfuel WIG

We are busy drawing up this new grant so it can be launched and the £10M available can be committed as soon as possible. This includes applicant guidance & forms, excel spreadsheet calculators, forest road/track guidance, webpages, FC staff instructions, and training for both FC staff and applicants. Key differences from other EWGS grants are:

- It is funded through RDPE axis 1 so is focussed on economic improvement. Whilst the contribution to cost is 60%, applications will not account for timber income like other WIGs so we envisage owners will often find funding of the operation easier
- Roading support is based on 3 quotes rather than standard costs, and claim payment will be based on receipted invoices
- Work related to inventory and contract management is based on standard costs
- The grant will be delivered by a third party in priority areas (NW, SW & SE regions). Elsewhere Woodland Officers will deal with applications and claims

The outline timetable for implementation is:

- Employment of third parties: May-Jun
- Training of FC staff: Jun-Jul
- Training of third parties: Jun-Jul

- Grant launch and guidance / forms published: end of July
- Regional promotion and events: Jul-Aug
- Training on forest road / track for FC staff, third parties & applicants: Aug-Sep

At the meeting I can provide further insight into how we envisage the grant operating and will welcome feedback from AFG members on the proposals.

General Grant Items

EWGS Terms & Conditions (T&Cs)

Further to the last AFG, we are still in the process of updating the EWGS T&Cs. When we have a final draft we will send them to AFG members for comment before they are published. To remind you, the main changes proposed are relatively minor:

- Changing “FC National Office Cambridge” references to Bristol
- Making clear that felling approval linked to a woodland management plan provides 10 year felling approval
- The penalty clause matches the EU regulations on penalties. At present it doesn't meet the regulations in relation to Title 1 payments (WMG & FWP), but for Title 2 is stronger than the regulations; this is in light of our aim to provide simple and consistent penalty rules

Woodland Creation Grant (WCG) 2nd Instalment

We have now reached the point where woodland creation that was claimed early on in the life of EWGS is due for 2nd instalment of WCG, and for many they also have related Farm Woodland Payment instalments. In order to receive WCG 2nd instalment and FWP instalments 6-10, claimants will have to submit a claim form (which we intend to send out) declaring the conditions of the scheme continue to be met.

Due to other priorities, the IT development to support the invited claim process is delayed until September, so there will be a slight delay. If this causes problems for the claimant e.g. hardship cases, we can approve manual claims but we will not actively promote this approach.

In conjunction with this exercise, we also want to adjust the area where necessary so it is aligned to the Rural Land Register – this will help ensure in future it does not fall foul of cross checks and affect other payments like SPS or Stewardship.

Visitwoods

The FC is a partner in the Visitwoods project, which is led by the Woodland Trust. The project aims to promote the availability of accessible woodland in GB, and enables anyone to add extra information on the website e.g. what facilities there are, visit experiences. The site is up and running, with a promotion campaign planned in Spring 2011 www.visitwoods.org.uk

Information on what woodlands are accessible is based on a range of information including woodlands that the FC is supporting via access grants. In accordance with the scheme conditions, all such woodlands are published on the site and through previous email alerts we have encouraged owners to provide extra information e.g. facilities, closure periods. No decision has been reached at this stage but we have been considering whether active involvement in the website should be expected if

receiving grant support for access; we hope public bodies such as Local Authorities, and NGOs such as the National Trust would be actively involved as a matter of course.

For woodland owners it is an opportunity to promote the facilities on the site (which may include commercial or income related activities) and receive feedback from users. From an FC G&R perspective, it enables us to monitor access provision by reviewing website contributions, and liaise with woodland owners where an access issue or other significant issues arises e.g. health and safety.

RDPE transition

Work has already begun regarding the transition from the current RDPE which ends in December 2013. In terms of grants, our intention is to continue to commit grant budgets using the same profile as normal, to minimise the smoothness of transition and retain sector confidence.

The only grant that requires minor change is Woodland Management Grant. We have to introduce a clause into new WMG contracts saying that the terms of the grant offer may be adjusted subject to what the new rural development regulations for 2014 onwards. At this stage we envisage little change and hence no impact on WMG contract holders, but will keep the AFG and contract holders informed as we know more.

Funding for Farm Woodlands

The revised leaflet was published in January 2011. Thank you to AFG members for their comments which were included in the published document.

Customer Service Standards

The latest Corporate Spending Review targets from April 2011 include customer service targets similar to before i.e. the time taken to process applications and claims. This reflects the comments from AFG members at the last meeting that these remain key service standards to retain. We will now be working on publication of revised service standards, to reflect the corporate targets but also the challenges faced with reduced staff numbers.

Craig Harrison
National G&R Manager