

Expert Committee on Forest Science (ECFS)

Minutes of the 4th meeting held on Tuesday 16th and

Wednesday 17th September 2014

Alice Holt Lodge, Farnham

Present

Professor Julian Evans (JE) – Chair
Roger Coppock (RC)
Professor Peter Freer-Smith (PFS)
Professor Jaboury Ghazoul (JG)
Professor Monique Simmonds (MS)
Professor Eunice Simmons (ES)
Professor Andrew Watkinson (AW)
Peter Whitfield (PW)

In attendance

Wilma Harper (WH)
Claire Holmes (CH) Minute secretary

Tuesday 16 September

Agenda Item 1 - Welcome and preliminaries

Julian welcomed everyone to the Committee's business meeting and expressed the Committee's thanks to James Morison, Sue Benham, Eric Casella and Matt Wilkinson for hosting the afternoon's visit to the Straits Enclosure to look at several long-term experiments.

The Committee recognised the importance of having dedicated research forests. Policy implications of the GHG balance work are clear and the group uses cutting edge technology. The long term commitment to this area of science has proved very valuable. The Committee discussed the tension between pure and applied science – FR needs to be involved in both, with a focus on the applied side. Access to forests for research and linkages to the forestry sector are important parts of FR's remit.

Agenda Item 2 – Management of outputs; peer review/technical and practical advice – Paper 1

JE thanked JG and AW for their work on Paper 1 – '*Guidance to reconcile the conflicting pressures of peer-review versus provision of technical and practical advice in research performance assessment*'. In presenting the paper, JG

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stressed that assessment needed to be an ongoing and constructive process; it needs to be used positively with staff. As an institution, FR will have to follow the accepted criteria for organisational review – institute and higher level metrics – although the criteria do not fit well with FR. There needs to be a dialogue between individuals and their managers and part of this is to align the institute and the individual's objectives. FR needs to revisit how it will assess performance; outcome mapping was proposed as an approach which FR should consider.

It was considered important that the next external review of FR in 2017/18 should not damage the morale of FR staff by basing evaluation on arbitrary targets and neglecting objectives put in place in April 2015. In addition new IT-based KE (digital communication) e.g. Apps and twitter communication should also be considered.

Action: PFS was asked to draft a short paper based on these discussions for the April 2015 ECFS meeting. This paper should consider the REF criteria and FR's remit in order to suggest suitable evaluation criteria for the next external review.

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Agenda item 3 - Minutes of the meeting held on 19th March 2014

With clarification of action point 6/14, the minutes were agreed to be a true record of the meeting.

3. Matters arising

- Action 3/14: **PFS to suggest appropriate mentoring role** – *Main agenda item*
- Action 4/14: **NRW to circulate business plan** - *PFS agreed to chase NRW for this document - **action ongoing***
- Action 5/14: **RC to circulate Committee members with details of workshops** - *JE thanked Committee for their involvement in the various workshops.*
- Action 6/14: **AW to write to Chris Gilligan to request links** – *AW confirmed that discussion had taken place. Forestry Commission has representation on Horizon Scanning Group and dialogue between FC and Defra continues.*

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- Action 7/14: **PFS to provide a breakdown of the staff in each role** – *Main agenda item*
- Action 9/14 (1): **Increase committee time** – *JE thanked members for their continuing commitment to the Committee.*
- Action 9/14 (2): **To issue press release summarising critical issues from first year's work** – *Covered later in the agenda*
- Action 9/14 (3): **JG and AW to draft guidance on how management of outputs can be addressed that reconcile the conflicting pressures of peer-review versus provision of technical and practical advice. AW to contact Bill Sutherland on this topic** – *Covered in Agenda Item 2 above.*
- Action 9/14 (5): **Evaluation ecosystem services work within the framework** – *PFS to establish progress on NRW's framework - **action ongoing***

Agenda item 4 – Analysis of forest science funding – Paper 2

RC highlighted Paper 2 which, from the limited data available, provides an overview of the extent of research funded over the last 5 years (2008-2013). The analysis has been split by 8 themes and highlights that the main funders since 2008 have been the FC (£52M), NERC (£36M) and Defra (£28M). RC confirmed that the data included funding on tropical forestry. The report highlighted the reduction in funding on forestry-related issues by NERC and that the only comprehensive research across the board was being undertaken by the FC and Defra with very little funding from the private sector.

The Committee felt it was important that with the threat of cuts in the future, Defra should be made aware of their substantial responsibility in this area and further reduction in funding could have serious implications for the forestry sector.

In discussion with LWEC, the data provided had been broken down graphically into disc diagrams each prepared by theme showing the size and number of projects funded in each area. Again, when looking at the data by theme, it revealed how relatively few organisations are contributing to forestry-related research.

Data on EU funded projects were not collated centrally and therefore were inaccessible to analysis. The Committee also wanted to know how funding

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levels on agricultural related research issues within the UK compared with that for forestry.

Committee enquired of the scope within BBSRC and SRC in the university sector for extra funding on forestry related projects and queried the potential for commercialisation activity within FR.

JE thanked RC for his report – noting that this is work in progress.

Action: RC to inform Committee how much in relative terms is spent on research in the UK on agriculture in comparison to trees and forests.

Agenda item 5 – ECFS mentoring role – short proposal, email of 17/6/14

PFS noted that since writing the proposal, FR, in response to the FC's Research Plan Brief, would be preparing a new set of programme proposals (moving from 14 to 6 or 7) with the view to achieving interdisciplinary working across the organisation. It was proposed that once the new structure was in place, Committee members would be better placed to establish individual relationships with staff and reviewing the programmes relevant to their expertise.

WH noted that clarity on the role and commitment of 'mentoring' should be defined.

The Committee agreed that each member would take special interest in a programme relevant to their expertise. Communication would be via e-mail or in person, reading outputs, understanding the work being undertaken, so that they could offer support and provide advice when required.

Agenda item 6 – Review of CFS research brief and SIS commissioning – brief update

RC thanked the Committee for the helpful comments which had been accommodated within the final document. The Brief had been significantly reduced in size whilst combining research challenges together to make them more coherent. It was acknowledged that the report is ambitious and it was not expected that FR will be able to deliver everything within the Brief with current resources available. The significant challenge ahead for FR to prepare new programmes, undertaking existing deliverables and committed long-term work, whilst working within the current budget was also acknowledged.

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Adequate provision for knowledge exchange within each programme and a strong focus on social science across all the programmes would be encouraged with teams working closer together.

JE drew attention to FR's principal asset, namely, the highly valued community of scientists. It was noted that by giving FR autonomy in designing the programmes for 2015-2020 this would create a demand to invest in FR's staff continuing to improve skills and have better informed stakeholders. It was important to set bespoke targets and objectives for staff against their performance could be evaluated.

In addition, research (to the value of c. £500,000) would be commissioned externally to complement work being provided by FR and buy-in capacity which is not at present within the department.

Agenda item 7 – Update on RSMB meeting 16/9/14

The Research Plan Brief had been presented to RSMB and after lengthy discussion the Brief, as submitted, would be considered as part of the process but would not be worked on further or resubmitted for RSMB sign off. Rather than redrafting and resubmitting the Brief, the RSMB had asked CFS and FR to proceed with preparing a series of research proposals to deliver against the Brief and the FC SIS, taking into account the issues discussed. It had been agreed that FR would prepare a document setting out the proposed programme structure and how these relate to the original SIS research areas. It would be at a fairly high level indicating the rationale, research challenges and high level deliverables addressed by each programme. These would be progressed and discussed with country policy leads and CFS analysts with a view to submitting to the RSMB for their sign off.

It was agreed that between the end of October and the spring RSMB, the detail of the programmes would be progressed between CFS, country policy leads and FR. The Expert Committee would be asked to undertake peer reviews of the research programmes and provide feedback during March 2015. The committee would be sent copies of all research themes but individual members to focus on only one for thorough peer review. Committee agreed that it would be useful to be kept updated as the process evolves.

Action: RC and PFS to keep Committee updated on progress prior to their meeting in the Spring.

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Agenda item 8 – Introduction to ECFS of the GB Cross Border Services Corporate Plan to see how science is linked in

RC introduced the Plan to the Committee which is the formal document given to Ministers which highlights how much is spent by the FC on research and what work is carried out on a cross border basis.

Agenda item 9 – Discussion of ECFS membership and succession planning

Whilst members of the Committee were initially appointed for 3 years, good practice dictated that there should be a rolling programme of appointments. JE enquired if any member would wish to serve a shorter term. ES would consider her workload and contact JE of her decision whether to continue with the three year term.

Action: ES to inform JE of her workload in due course.

Agenda item 10 – Date and location of next meeting

13th and 14th April, venue – Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, Aberfoyle

Agenda item 11 – Any Other Business

No further business was discussed

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ECFS meeting without officials

Committee agreed it would be helpful to identify two or three key issues from the past year for wider public dissemination (see below) and to consider issues ECFS should review in the future year.

The committee wanted to thank FR for impressive presentations concerning hydrology and soils, mensuration and modelling, and tree health.

Committee expressed concern that evidence of linkages across research groups at present were still weak. It is essential that this does take place in the future, with the new programmes emphasising critical analysis with cross cutting themes.

Evidence of impacts needs clearer definition. How research impact is measured should be put on the next agenda.

Acton: PFS/RC to draft short note on evaluating research impact.

Committee discussed knowledge exchange issues and noted that KE is to be embedded in all programmes but with separate funding allocation. It was unclear why this would improve KE.

Much concern expressed over low level of funding. Given the constraints of funding, but reviewing their first year's work the Committee have seen: (1) a lot of evidence that FR are making substantial progress in reviewing what their priorities are moving forward and implementing these in a tighter financial world; (2) that FR are leading cutting edge science – for example the way pathologists are tackling one pest and pathogen after another etc. (3) that the breadth of research has increased at a time when funding is reducing; (4) that internationally significant research is being carried out and whilst expensive technology is improving, the ability to respond to threats is severely curtailed at a time when FR are called on to respond to pest/pathogen problems, environmental change, ecosystem services, etc.

In terms of public interest in forestry, as highlighted in the Independent Panel's recommendations, purposeful research to support woodlands must be supported.

The Committee considered the next statutory visiting group review in 2017/18 and hoped to influence the review's modus operandi in particular to ensure that evaluation matched agreed targets with less emphasis on externally imposed metrics.

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AW highlighted that the research should be communicated more within the community – need to show that a good job is being done – more media interest engaging with the public. Committee queried if FR has social media expertise?

Acton: PFS to brief committee on use of social media to communicate research.

ES queried if forestry research was still being supported in Wales. It was noted that Tom Jenkins has taken over from Hugh Evans as head of FR in Wales. The importance of tailoring research to the needs of the devolved nations was emphasised.

Committee additionally raised the following.

The crucial importance of long-term experiments and projects

Priorities for discussion at the next meeting

1. Impacts of forest research work – how is it affecting industry and its customers?
2. Communications within FR – how can significant issues within FR be delivered.
3. Presentations from PFS – the overall picture of how FR's work will be taken forward over the next 5 years.

AW suggested at the next ECFS meeting in Wales Catherine Monks, NRW could be invited to meet the Committee. Catherine has been involved with issues of flooding, environmental sciences and is committed to ecosystem services approach in Wales.

Committee welcomed the mix of field visits and research presentations as essential are to the committee's work.

Draft press release

ECFS has completed its first year's work and highlights the following key points.

- Funding for forest and tree research totalling about £25 million pa, a figure that includes spend on tropical forestry research, is tiny bearing in mind forests cover 13 per cent of UK's land surface.
- The rapid increase in pests and diseases threatening trees and forests is a huge challenge to which Forest Research are responding well in a very tight resource environment.

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- The value of long-term experiments have been demonstrated again and again. Economies must not compromise past and future investment in this area of forest research. The designation of dedicated research forests is welcomed.