

## **Expert Committee on Forest Science (ECFS)**

Minutes of the 3rd Meeting held on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2014

Hilton Hotel, Cardiff

### Present

Professor Julian Evans (Chair)

Roger Coppock

Professor Peter Freer-Smith

Professor Jaboury Ghazoul

Professor Monique Simmonds

Professor Eunice Simmons (via teleconference)

Professor Andrew Watkinson

Peter Whitfield

### In attendance

Veronica Cain (secretary)

Chris Lea

Chris Jones (NRW)

Chris James

Ceri Davies (NRW)

### 1. Welcome and preliminaries

Julian welcomed the committee and representatives from Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales (NRW).

### 2. Minutes of the meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2014

No amendments to the minutes were required.

### 3. Matters arising

- **Action 3/13: Roger Coppock to investigate commissioning an analysis of forest science funding.** Action to complete and report in September 14.
- **Action 4/13: Roger Coppock to present a paper to the next meeting on horizon scanning and priority setting.** This action is included on the agenda.
- **Action 6/13: Peter Freer Smith to provide a paper on FR staff evaluation procedures for the next meeting.** This is included as an agenda item.
- **Action 7/13: On-going membership and succession will be discussed at the September 2014 meeting.**

The committee expressed a wish to follow up from the presentations delivered by programme leaders in FR as part of mentoring. Roger and Peter to make suggestions. Roger gave an update on the WPEP. Work on this is on-going and the possible options for change are being considered.

**Action: Peter Freer-Smith to suggest appropriate mentoring role.**

# Expert Committee on Forest Science

---

## 4. Research Commissioning by Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales

Julian explained the background and purpose of the Expert committee to the Welsh Government and NRW representatives. He thanked Chris Lea and Ceri Jones, along with their staff, for coming to address the committee.

Chris Lea explained that they report to the Minister for Natural Resources and Food and that the main focus is on natural resource management. The Welsh Government work collaboratively with NRW and the minister has set the following priorities: Green Growth, Resilience for the future and Poverty.

NRW manage the public forest estate and work closely with the private sector. The research budget is shared with England and collaboration takes place with DEFRA to deliver against the budget in a multi-disciplinary way. The main challenge is perceived as how to work more closely with research councils.

Chris outlined several of the key projects that they are undertaking, stressing the collaborative approach across the UK as important to maintain relationships along with access to EU and private sector funding.

The Committee raised concerns over the potential loss of corporate knowledge arising from a long history of R&D in Wales, e.g. hydrological research at Plinlimon, in view of emphasis placed on ecosystem services and related management strategy. The Committee was assured that while this is seen as a challenge care is taken not to neglect past work.

This led to discussion of the link in with Natural Capital. NRW are currently recruiting an economist and will work collectively with the Welsh government and the water board on green growth and natural capital. Roger mentioned that the CFS Analyst responsible for economics is contributing to the Natural Capital Accounting project. Chris Lea confirmed that the Welsh Government were keen to collaborate on this. The economists in NRW are looking at new opportunities for more incentivised funding. It is hoped that a community of practice can be set up to share knowledge and prevent duplication and linked across professional institutions. A barrier to fully joined up working is access to research council programmes. Indeed, it was suggested that research councils may not be fully aware of how devolution has changed the research landscape. It was noted that the current review, being carried out by Sir Mark Walport, Government Chief Scientist, may address this.

Concern was expressed over budget cuts. Also there is imbalance between England rating payments for ecosystem services as a low priority and Wales striving to embed the ecosystem approach into all land management. As a result Wales feels under supported. Indeed, although colleagues in NRW are well connected there are serious concerns that their often lone voice on behalf of Wales is not sufficiently heard.

# Expert Committee on Forest Science

---

The involvement of Welsh Government in the new Science and Innovation Strategy has been very highly valued. Welsh Government colleagues feel it is important for FR to be involved in the SNEG group.

The Committee expressed concern about private sector involvement in Welsh forestry policy and research. Although representatives are included in many stakeholder groups which consult with policy colleagues, it is important that many more opportunities for private sector input are provided.

Ceri Davies reported that NRW's first business plan has been completed and would be pleased to circulate copies to the Committee. The plan has a broad remit, with evidence-based knowledge being at the forefront of priorities. There is a strong focus on the ecosystem approach. The key aims are to gain a good understanding of environmental economics and to understand the role and impact of this at a landscape/national scale. It's important that there is both a sound evidence base and that this evidence is easily accessible.

## **Action: NRW to circulate business plan**

Forestry is a significant element of NRW's business. The Committee welcomed this assurance in view of the major contribution that forests and the forest industry play in Wales.

NRW have flexibility over how they spend their funding and are able to match funding from other organisations. They can also use external funding for leverage. NRW have strong links with other land management organisations. The challenge is to achieve a multi-disciplinary approach across land management as a whole and be truly innovative leading to more efficient use of resources.

The Welsh representatives asked the Committee if they felt the research programme was balanced and fit for purpose. This had not been discussed in detail yet but The Committee expressed concerns over duplication and the need for strong cross border links in the research community

The Minister is keen to promote knowledge transfer to the private sector. This is partly achieved through the rural development plan. More work is needed to create productive partnerships. It is hoped that an information hub can be set up. This would be an information data base for areas of science, latest research, and practical advice open to all.

FR are strengthening their presence in Wales, which was welcomed by the Welsh government who place a high value on the input from FR and feel they are working well together.

Discussion returned to Wales' ground-breaking ecosystem services approach. There is a real opportunity to build a broader research base with active collaboration with

# Expert Committee on Forest Science

---

universities. The Ecosystem Services Approach is so innovative and challenging that Wales could lead on its application/implementation provided best advice is sought e.g. drawing on some of the modelling work in the US. It is reiterated that collaboration with universities is crucial and to have in place strong cross border linkages. This subject is a priority for NRW and FR.

## 5. Science and Innovation Strategy (SIS) update

Roger explained that the SIS for forestry research in Britain was given full approval by all three ministers Ministers and was launched on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2014. The next step is implementation. Roger referred the Committee to his short paper (Paper 3) which shows the timetable for implementation. The Committee will be asked to review the new programmes individually. The Committee agreed to this. The Committee's presence at the workshops would be useful and members would be notified of details and their participation sought. It is important that people are familiar with the current documentation, and Roger explained that this will be included in the brief. The document effectively outlines the research areas: it is in tune with Welsh strategy.

**Action: Roger to circulate Committee members with details of workshops**

## 6. Horizon Scanning for Forestry Research

Roger spoke to his paper (Paper 1) which sets out the process of horizon scanning. He would welcome all ideas on how the process can be improved.

The Committee remarked that Annex 1 mentions social trust but how are opinions garnered for horizon scanning? Roger explained that there is a new website set up to act as a forum for people to air their views and discuss issues. It is hoped that this will reach a wide range of stakeholders, as it is impossible to engage with all of them in person. Public Opinion surveys are already carried out by the individual countries.

CFS analysts act as a bridge between policy and scientific colleagues. They hold quarterly meetings to facilitate input and feedback recognising that it is often the scientists themselves who are best placed to judge what lies in the future i.e. horizon scan.

The need for collaboration and good communication with the devolved nations is important. Citizen science and public perception are key elements, though there's always uncertainty over how the media will cover things.

The devolved administrations are advised directly by the CFS International Policy team, who can forewarn of potential issues, but there does remain the problem of things being overlooked. The Committee enquired of FR's involvement with EU research and funding since horizon scanning cannot, plainly, just be a UK-based exercise. They are involved in 17 EU projects, are members of the European Forestry Institute (EFI) and collaborate actively in European Plant Health Research. The EU forestry strategy, is well-established and involves wide consultation with the sector, but getting urgent action can sometimes

# Expert Committee on Forest Science

---

be hampered by the lack of a designated EU director general for forestry as can a consensus view on issues about, say, threats in the future when having to work with several directorates. An example of the difficulty of cross-sectoral working is the recent flooding in Somerset. Better land management including forest cover on the hills from which water drained could have significantly alleviated some of the flooding, but accessing funds from non-forestry sectors is a big challenge.

The Committee asked, 'How are priorities set in light of new threats?' The immediate response is to reallocate resources to tackle more immediate priorities. The external research budget can also be utilised in the face of emerging challenges.

Two recommendations were made to the Committee: (1) to act as a sounding board for themes and issues thrown up by horizon scanning; and (2) to suggest that DEFRA revisit horizon scanning in particular the link between forestry, biodiversity and land management. The Committee welcomed their involvement in (1) and offered to contact Professor Chris Gilligan concerning (2).

**Action: Andrew to write to Chris Gilligan to request links.**

## 7. FR Evaluation Of Staff Performance

Peter Freer-Smith presented his paper (paper 2) on how staff performance is assessed in Forest Research. This is an important issue for those who manage staff and also for the Committee. The diagram on page 15 of the new SIS shows the relationship between the reviewing systems. Peter has also provided an example of the new competency framework, and the new job plan template (annex 1) which will be used to assess staff performance. The new framework will make quality easier to assess, as it focusses on what and how it needs to be delivered.

Annex 2 shows the expectations, in terms of publications, of each pay band. Peter explained that some projects require grey literature (i.e. pest alert or guidance documents) as opposed to published peer-reviewed scientific papers and that an individual can only be assessed against the competencies in their job plan.

The Committee pointed out that level of published papers in quality journals affects the reputation of FR. Poor achievement has a negative effect on the morale of all. But balance has to be attained since it is the job that is evaluated, not the scientist, and delivery of applied practical advice is often core to a job. This is different from academic and HE institutions. It led to concerns that FR staff can be over stretched and their opportunities for promotion compromised. Substantial discussion ensued of how to reconcile these conflicting pressures. The key performance indicators are set in the corporate plan and FR's overall target for peer reviewed papers is 60 per year.

Since there is a need for a variety of outputs it would be sensible to ask the scientist about their aspiration and career progression, as applied science and academia have different requirements. There is still the need for a balance and this can only be achieved

# Expert Committee on Forest Science

---

through active management. The Committee discussed this further in their meeting without officials – below.

**Action: Peter Freer-Smith to provide a breakdown of the staff in each role.**

It was noted that there is some confusion over the output expectations of DEFRA and relevance to FR since FR are an agency of the FC, and the FC are an agency of DEFRA. The FC has regular meetings with FERA and are planning on meeting with CEFAS.

## 8. Other Issues with Officials Present

Peter Freer-Smith asked what research programmes the Committee wished to see at their next meeting (Alice Holt 16-17 Sep. 2014)? The following were agreed: Hydrology, Tree Health, and Mensuration, with a tour of the flux tower (Straits Enclosure) in the afternoon.

## 9. ECFS meeting without officials

1. The Committee requested that a 2 hour pre-dinner evening session should be added to increase time for discussion and in-depth debate. The next day would normally follow the  $\frac{3}{4}$  day structure with a finish around 4 pm.

**Action: increase committee time.**

2. Following the next meeting the Committee would issue a press release highlighting important issues and milestones to coincide with its first anniversary.

**Action: to issue press release summarising critical issues from first year's work.**

3. The Committee discussed the best way to provide support on the matter of staff expectations and output. In addition to points raised earlier (above) it would be useful to hear researcher's views and feedback on peer review in the light of most academics' assumptions since FR's imperatives will sometimes differ concerning publication type and priority. A balance needs to be established and researcher's own motivation incorporated.

**Action: Jaboury and Andrew 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.**

**Action: Andrew also to contact Bill Sutherland on this topic.**

4. The Committee reviewed ways it could most usefully meet its TOR and provide input. The following were identified: expectations of scientists, encouragement and support, measuring impact, plant/animal spend, meeting with stakeholders and spend in relation to the sector value. The main focus will be on spend, horizon scanning and academic excellence.

## 5. Response to Wales

It was felt that the best way to support Welsh colleagues would be through looking at governance, not research. A framework is needed for operations and to ensure that

# Expert Committee on Forest Science

---

research is being translated into operations. With universities focussed on ecosystem services, what role is best espoused by FR? What are the comparative advantages of various institutions? For example it would be useful for FR to contribute their huge forest database to modelling and support provision of experimental sites. There is a need to ensure that Welsh government research priorities are clearly laid out.

**Action: Evaluation ecosystem services work within the framework.**

6. The final discussion addressed research engagement and the forest industry. FR need to establish their unique selling point. Much of their research supports business needs but is more needed on engagement with the private sector? This will be further explored at the meeting at Alice Holt in September. Technical reports won't be picked up unless there is clarity over stakeholders and how these are communicated with. It is hoped that the Committee will meet stakeholders at the SIS workshops and plant health seminars.

10.DOB

**Date of next meeting: 16<sup>th</sup>- 17<sup>th</sup> September 2014, Alice Holt, Farnham, Surrey.**