

REVIEW OF FORESTRY COMMISSION ENGLAND'S APPROACH TO REDUCING THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF DEER ON FORESTRY AND WOODLANDS**Purpose**

To inform the National Committee about the review, the decisions taken and the timetable for 2015-16 onwards.

Background

Forest Services, through grant aid, the RDPE programme and staff time, works with landowners, deer managers and partner organisations to achieve a healthy population of wild deer that are sustainable. Current investment is generating many inputs and activities but the desired outcome of reducing the negative impacts of wild deer on woods and forests continues to elude us; these impacts are increasing.

A significant cash investment (£226,000 in 2014-15) is made through the Deer Initiative Ltd and the current grant aid agreement with the DI Ltd expires in March 2015. RDPE delivery is being re-designed and FS staff roles are potentially changing. This review is a timely opportunity to look at how best FS can apply its resources with greater effect. The review will assist in FS business planning and in identifying possible ways in which its role might change.

A number of areas were not in the scope of the review:

- Deer policy

- The PFE's management of deer

- Research priorities

- RDP in relation to deer

- Other agencies (Natural England, Highways Agency, Defence Estates) work on deer. These agencies have been involved in the review process.

An informal consultation with key stakeholders was carried out to help inform FS thinking. The consultation focused on an options paper which was hosted on Citizen Space for six weeks, ending on 15th September 2014.

Eighty nine responses were received from a range of organisations and individuals including RSPB, the Woodland Trust, government agencies, forestry agents, deer stalkers, and estates. A draft report of consultation is included at Annex 1).

Decision

Following discussions at Forest Services Senior Managers and the Forest Services Board on 20th October, FS Board noted and agreed:

- Forestry Commission England remains committed to reducing the negative impacts of deer on woodlands through increased co-ordination and landowner collaboration.
- It considers that a grant to Deer Initiative Limited is a good way of achieving this and it will continue to fund Deer Initiative Limited in this way for 2015/16 (subject to business plan approval).
- Due to evidence of increasing damage to woodland by some deer populations, continued pressure on budgets, and increasing need to demonstrate value for money, the Forestry Commission judges it is the right moment to test whether there is a better way of achieving the desired outcomes in a more cost effective way.

The Forestry Commission will be market testing to explore whether or not there is a better way of doing things that will improve outcomes during 2015/16, with any new arrangements put in place for 2016/17.

A majority of respondents to the informal consultation expressed the view that the option to invite competitive bids was their least preferred approach but in light of the need to improve outcomes and achieve better value for money the Forestry Commission has decided to market test its support for collaborative deer management.

Next steps

The Deer Initiative Ltd Board have been advised of these plans at their meeting on 21 October, but members of the Deer Initiative Partnership will not be informed of the plans until they meet on 25 November.

- The partners will be advised that:
- The Forestry Commission will continue to support DI Ltd in 2015/16 through a revised grant offer with greater clarity on expected outcomes.
- This offer will be reduced by 5% on the 2014/15 grant (subject to business plan).
- Whether and how it supports DI Ltd after 2015/16 depends on the outcome of the testing work referred to above.

In support of this approach:

- The Forestry Commission will look into whether its future budgets allow setting up an innovation fund, to fund investigation into new approaches.
- The Forestry Commission will refocus some Forest Services staff resource to lead the coordination of relationships with service suppliers and with external partners.
- Defra wildlife policy officials have been informed and the Forestry Commission will explore a 'One Business' approach with the Defra

network, aiming to agree a shared way of funding work on collaborative deer management.

Communications

We hope that the revised approach shared with the Deer Initiative Ltd Board will remain confidential until the partners are informed on 25 November.

A ministerial submission regarding the decision was made on 28th October 2014.

Tendering will require very careful handling. We therefore plan to:

- o Be as clear as we can be about how we have sustained our deer funding in recent years despite major reductions in our wider partnership funding.
- o Seek to ensure that the tendering process is accessible to all likely bidders, including the DI Ltd and other SMEs. If we find that this is impossible and results in us being able to test only a small portion of the market, we may need to revisit our approach.

Forest Services
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