

MINUTES OF THE 914TH MEETING OF
THE FORESTRY COMMISSIONERS
THE COW BARN, KNEPP ESTATE, WEST GRINSTEAD
16TH JUNE 2016

Present

Sir Harry Studholme (Chair), Mary Barkham, Amanda Bryan, Ian Gambles, George McRobbie, Jo O'Hara, Jean Lindsay

Also Attending

Roger Coppock (Agenda Items 8 and 9)

PK Khaira-Creswell (Agenda Item 10)

Ben Ditchburn (Agenda Item 11)

Fiona Alexander (Minutes)

1. Introduction and Apologies

The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. There were no apologies.

2. Minutes of 17 March 2016

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

3. Matters Arising

i) Appointment of Forestry Commissioner

The meeting heard that the process to appoint a new Forestry Commissioner for England was progressing. The Minister met the appointable candidates on 14 June and has made a recommendation on the appointee to the Secretary of State.

4. HMRC Tax/VAT Compliance

The meeting discussed the continuing work undertaken by the Forestry Commission on the HMRC audit. The meeting heard that all parts of the FC are engaged with the tax and VAT issues and the engagement of external professional services ensures that expert advice and reassurance is provided to the whole organisation.

Action Point Jean Lindsay to provide an update paper for the next meeting

5. Forestry Governance Project Board

The meeting heard that the Forestry Governance Project Board (FGPB) met recently and agreed to seek views from Ministers on high-level principles around Forest Research in order to enable the Forest Research Oversight Group (FROG) to produce a short-list of business cases.

The FGPB has a challenging timetable with a considerable amount of work to be completed however, there is commitment for the project and it is anticipated that work will begin on the options in the autumn.

6. Forest Research Oversight Group

The meeting was given an update on the work of the Forest Research Oversight Group, noting that two papers on resources and capital had been submitted to Ministers.

7. Forest Holidays and Camping in the Forest

Paragraph withheld under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Part II Exempt Information s43 (prejudice to commercial interests)

8. Plant Health Threats/Pests

The Commissioners welcomed the paper on Plant Health and in particular noted the work undertaken by Kew and other botanic gardens to investigate new pests and diseases and the tree species they attack. As new pests and diseases emerge and become a known risk, they are added to the Plant Health Risk Register. 50 draft contingency plans for managing pests/diseases are now in place, primarily as a result of the additional funding from Defra. The review of the EU Plant Health Regime is nearing completion and the three-year implementation will start in the Autumn. There will be implications for the forestry sector with strengthened controls required for Phytosanitary Certificates and timber movements. The Forestry Commission will feed back to the industry once more information is known. The meeting agreed that Plant Health remained a significant issue and it was important to keep it appropriately resourced and at the top of the agenda. The appointment of a Chief Plant Health Officer for Scotland will also make a positive difference.

The meeting heard that TreeAlert is running successfully with over 200 Observatree volunteers. Funding for Observatree is available for approx. 18 months and the meeting agreed it would be beneficial to keep this going in the longer term.

Action Point Observatree funding to be added to Agenda for September meeting

9. Plant Health Governance

The meeting heard that significant strides had been made in the governance of plant health with strong collaborative working between the countries and agencies. Going forward, it was hoped that this close working would continue along with Forest Research continuity and outputs, and an integrated capacity to manage controls.

10. Forestry Commission Centenary

The meeting discussed how the centenary of the Forestry Commission in 2019 might be celebrated. It was acknowledged that the centenary was an important milestone in the history of the Forestry Commission and of UK Forestry. However the meeting recognised that with the ongoing decentralisation of services and devolution of

forestry to the countries, there are sensitivities around this issue that must be taken into account.

The meeting discussed the current operating landscape of the organisation noting that the different country administrations could have different views on the subject. In particular, it was suggested that focus might vary between 1919 as an important year for forestry in GB and the celebration of the Commission as an organisation. The year could be marked with a range of activities and events which included the centenary of the Forestry Commission, and these events and activities could be organised in conjunction with partners, stakeholders, the industry etc.

The meeting agreed that further discussions were required and views would be reported back at the next meeting in September.

Action Point Jo O'Hara and Amanda Bryan to advise on Scotland's viewpoint at the next meeting

11. UK Timber Resource & Future Supply

The meeting viewed a presentation on the UK Timber Resource and noted the background to the establishment of the National Forest Inventory (NFI) and how an understanding of available resource has supported investment in the timber processing industry. The NFI is a scientific assessment of how much timber there is and it also predicts how much timber there will be in the future. A variety of assessment tools are used including technology such as satellite imagery and remote sensing. NFI statistics include woodland gain, loss, and canopy change, timber volume and carbon stocks. The NFI information is based on approx. 25,000 sample stands and measurements from over 520,000 trees throughout the UK.

12. Scotland Country Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- I) Forestry now sits with the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity. The Minister is keen to increase new planting figures;
- ii) FC Scotland is effectively delivering the Forestry Grant Scheme despite IT issues. The next focus is on improving approval times;
- iii) FC Scotland is exploring health and safety liabilities associated with self-built trails, following recent accidents. Self-built trails may be an area of liability for FC Scotland who will need to ensure that all interested parties have appropriate levels of insurance cover in place.

13. Central Services Report

The meeting discussed the report and noted the following:

- i) Good work on the Woodland Carbon Code continues;
- ii) the process to decentralise IT and finance functions to the countries has begun with the formation of working groups to assess the requirements;
- iii) negotiations with Natural Resources Wales are progressing;

- iv) forestry is a high-risk activity. There are still too many chainsaw accidents each year. Responsibility for health and safety will transfer to the countries later in the year however, it will remain an essential priority and the focus will need to be on leadership and behaviours.

Action Point Jean Lindsay to check on the status of FC Practice Guide 'Managing forest operations for soil and water protection'

14. England Country Report

- i) The meeting discussed the report and noted that there has been a considerable amount of work on the '25 Year Environment Plan'. The Framework for the plan was due to be published in July and the full plan published before the end of the year.

15. Any Other Business

Restocking Figures

The meeting heard that the report on canopy cover change was due to be published in July. 'Forestry Facts & Figures 2016' is due for publication in September and will include statistics on new planting, restocking and land use change. The meeting noted the importance of improving our understanding of how forests across the country are changing and how this work would help with this.

16. Date of Next Meeting

27 – 29 September 2016 to include a Tour in Scotland.