

Agenda Item 6**Commissioners' Meeting****Memo No 13/15****1 October 2015****ENGLAND COUNTRY REPORT, DIRECTOR ENGLAND****Countryside Stewardship**

The new woodland improvement options which became available from 1 July 2015 completed the scheme's woodland offer and will help us to protect and improve the nation's woodlands. Support for woodland creation, tree health and management plans opened in February.

Given the high number of unsolicited Expressions of Interest for agri-environment applications received, Natural England will need longer to work through these to full application and has therefore extended the Higher Tier deadline to 31 October 2015. The Forestry Commission has worked hard to make sure that land managers understood that the application deadline for initial woodland applications was 31 July 2015. No new woodland applications will be accepted as a result of this extension, and Forestry Commission advisers will be working with applicants to improve their initial woodland application before the final deadline. The Mid-Tier application deadline will remain 30 September 2015.

A total of 257 applications for woodland improvement have been received. Of these, 199 were for woodland options only, and 58 formed part of mixed applications including agri-environment options. There was strong interest from all the FC areas with the number of applications received as follows: SW - 39; South East & London - 65; East & East Midlands - 62; Yorkshire & Northeast - 33; and Northwest & West Midlands - 56. 177 eligible woodland creation applications have been received to create 1,235 ha of woodland. In addition the Forestry Commission is working with Natural England on a number of high environmental value cases of direct conversion of existing HLS agreements to Countryside Stewardship. This is to ensure continuity of support, particularly on the components of vulnerable non woodland habitat.

Rural Development Programme for England – Woodland Management Plans

In addition to the 3,000 approved management plans already in place, we are currently working on around 200 more to support woodland improvement applications this year. Changes as a result of this new RDPE have resulted in a build-up of plans for approval.

We are working with the Institute of Chartered Foresters to improve the quality of management plans we receive to help speed up the process in future. A series of workshops is being held later this year called *Better Management Plans, Faster Approvals*.

Legacy Schemes – Delayed Payments

Following the EU Commission's decision to give all Member States extra time for land managers to submit their claims in the first year of the new CAP we are advising Pillar 2 applicants that they may not receive their payments as early as in previous years while their claims are checked. We understand the importance of these payments to the rural community and the RPA and Forestry Commission will do their best to get payments out as early as they can. We want to be in a position to make the majority of payments in December.

Although previously delayed, claims for 2015/16 second instalments of EWGS woodland creation grant will be issued shortly. We will be writing to customers this month with their claim form to let them know what they have to do and by when.

Reshaping Forest Services

Implementation of the reshaping Forest Services consultation decisions continues as planned. Delays to the availability of the CAP IT system meant that Rural Payments Agency (RPA) were unable to take on the transactional processing of Countryside Stewardship applications on 1 July as expected and this work has been temporarily passed to Natural England. The Forest Services administrative hub in York closed on 31 May as planned. Two of the three admin hub staff based in the hub opted to join NE on secondment and the other moved to a temporary post within the Strategic Development team. A review of the secondments will take place in mid-October and will include an assessment of the revised timing of COSOP transfer to the RPA.

Quarterly Headline Performance Indicators

Forestry Commission England's most recent [quarterly headline performance indicators report](#) revealed 99.7% of known tree felling was carried out with Forestry Commission approval last year, 58% of English woodland was in active management similar to the previous quarter and Forestry Commission incentives have delivered 325 additional hectares of woodland in the first quarter of 2015/16, in addition to the 1,782 ha in 2014/15. This quarterly figure is lower than in previous years, but this is an anticipated consequence of the transition between RDPE schemes and should not be a cause for concern.

Oriental Chestnut Gall Wasp

Outbreaks of OCGW were found in Farningham Woods in the Sevenoaks district of Kent in June 2015, and in St Albans. Work has been taking place to limit the potential impacts of these outbreaks and Ministers approved the action to fell areas of high infestation to reduce pest pressure and the likelihood of its spread. An analytical programme of work has been carried out to assess the risk and to create a longer term intervention strategy to manage OGCW.

Whilst no further outbreak sites have been identified through surveillance activities, the latest available evidence (including modelling on the rate of spread by Cambridge University) points to a high likelihood that the pest is present in other sites in the UK.

The felling that has taken place in Farningham Wood will have had beneficial effects on reducing pest pressure; however it will have a limited effect on reducing the probability of spread beyond the wood. As such, it is likely that some wasps will leave the wood this season and infect other trees. The environmental and climatic conditions combined with the availability of host species in the UK, will provide favourable conditions for the wasp to survive and establish itself within the UK.

Twelve countries across Europe have reported the presence of OCGW, but EU measures introduced in 2006, failed to prevent spread. However, experience from some of these EU countries highlight that the suppression of the pest through the use of a biological control agent such as *Torymus sinensis Kamijo*, represents a successful method to contain the spread and limit impacts in the long term. Eight countries are already using, or are planning to use, this natural predator. The biological control agent takes between 5 to 10 years to become effective, and in Italy for example, the agent is now widely established after it was released in 2005. Research on biological control will be commissioned in late September, but results from Italy show that OCGW infestation is being significantly reduced. Wider Protected Zone surveys for Chestnut blight and OCGW will take place in the South and East during September, and extended surveys including 32 PFE sites, 15 nursery/orchard owners and one Forest Research plot, will continue until 9 October.

Oak Processionary Moth

The OPM surveillance and control work carried out this year, has been done in line with the OPM control plan agreed with the Minister. We chemically sprayed 250 sites this spring, that were known to be infested and during the summer, surveyed over 30,000 trees. The vast majority of nests found have been removed, and there is now an exhaustive pheromone trapping programme in progress, involving 900 trips around London and between London and Pangbourne.

There continues to be some spread of OPM, notably out to North East London, and the Woking/Guildford part of Surrey, including RHS Wisley. While these findings are significant and a cause for serious concern, we remain confident that the control programme employed is limiting the rate of spread. Surveys in Pangbourne have for the third year in succession, not found any nests. This is encouraging, but we remain vigilant, as there remains evidence from pheromone traps of the presence of male moths.

The full results of this year's work, along with future implications, will not be fully known until the autumn when the field survey and pheromone trap results from all stakeholders, have been collated. In addition to the operational review, there will be a wider evaluation of the OPM control programme pilot, this autumn. Current policy in London is to contain the spread of OPM and seek to eradicate outbreaks where they occur, outside the outlying boundary of infestation. We have now also begun the extended OPM protected zone survey of 63 local authority parks in Andover, Basildon, Brentwood, Harlow, Hemel Hempstead, Oxford, Reading and Slough. Defra are leading an evaluation exercise on current policy, and a report on this is expected in January 2016.

Wild Boar

During the autumn and winter of 2014/15, the number of Boar culled from the Public Forest Estate totalled 361. These were either shot by Forestry Commission rangers or were victims of road traffic accidents. The cull closed on 31 March 2015. The thermal imaging survey which took place from February to April 2015, gave an estimated population figure of 1018, despite the cull of 361 animals.

The plan for the 2015/16 cull is to further increase the number of rangers from 4 to 6 and to increase the cull to 575 animals. This is the number that Forest Research has forecast as being necessary to halt the population increase. Following the cull, a thermal imaging survey will be repeated to see if the population level has changed.

Further to this, the Deer Initiative has started the process to establish a Boar Management Group for the Forest of Dean. Whilst local land owners have been very receptive to this, progress has been slow, partly due to lack of funding to employ a full-time co-ordinator. The fledgling group recently gave a briefing to a local MP, Mark Harper who is very supportive of boar management and the position FEE have taken, at the end of July.

Forest Enterprise Update

A Forest Enterprise Estate (FEE) focus in 2015 has been to understand what changes are required in how we work to equip staff teams and individuals to 'Release Their Potential' to meet the challenge of delivering more autonomously, commercially and sustainably in the future (either within Forestry Commission or outside the current structure). The Executive Team has undertaken work to identify what actions their national teams can initiate to start to change how we work in this way, and have identified three areas that they wish all teams to focus on in developing their work. These are: Clarity of Purpose; Value for Money and Customers. The wider Leadership Team were involved at an early stage of developing these concepts, and the emerging content of 'Releasing Our Potential' document was tested with approximately 60 staff at 3 workshops across England. A document 'Releasing Our Potential' is being launched to all FEE staff on 14th September, and is included in Commissioner's papers. It outlines the focus areas and the national team actions proposed for the next 6 - 9 months, as well as identifying how we will all be able to see if those actions/proposed outcomes have been delivered. District and Business unit teams are tasked with engaging their teams with Releasing Our Potential, and developing their own actions and activities to ensure that clarity of purpose, value for money and customer focus all become consistent mainstays of how we all work in our business as usual. These focus areas for change in how we work, are complimentary to and do not replace, the Public Forest Estate Strategic Goals which seek to deliver benefits for people, nature, and the economy.

Forest Live

Concerts began in 2001 at four Forestry Commission venues, and this year was our sixteenth season, taking place at seven forest locations.

Forest Live concerts take place annually in June and July in England. An open area in the forest is temporarily transformed into a concert arena for between two and four nights of top quality live music with capacities varying from 5000 to nearly 10,000 people each night. This year's artists included Paloma Faith, The Script, Sam Smith and Robert Plant and over 129,000 people attended the programme in total.

The Forest Live programme is managed directly by the Forestry Commission, with Recreation Managers acting as concert site managers for the duration of set up, break down and during the shows. The commitment by the whole team to give customers an excellent experience is demonstrated by the fact that many first time visitors to the Forestry Commission Estate, plan to visit again in the future after attending a concert. Ticket sales for the programme are managed through the Forestry Commission's own box office, maximising customer data capture and therefore enabling us to continue to inform concert goers about our wider work in England's woods and forests.

Hewitt versus Forestry Commission

Over the period of 24 to 25 June, the Forestry Commission successfully defended a civil claim at the Liverpool Crown Court. The claim was brought by a mountain biker, who claimed losses and injury under the Occupiers Liability Acts. The claim was the result of an accident sustained by the mountain biker whilst at the 'No Brains' wild trail bike area at Delamere. Two members of Forestry Commission staff, Liam Kelly (Recreation Ranger at Delamere) and John Ireland (Safety, Health and Environment officer) gave evidence. Both were commended by the Judge for their clear, knowledgeable, and pragmatic management of cycling in general, along with the site, and accident and Forestry Commission policies. Past case law clearly conveys considerable responsibility upon people who undertake high risk activities, and the Judge found that the Forestry Commission management of 'No Brains', including the signage, grading system, inspection regimes and leaflet information, were all sufficient to discharge a landowners duty of care. Costs were awarded to the Forestry Commission and the outcome continues the Forest Enterprise Estate's successful record in Court for such cases.

Landslips in the North West of England

Forest Enterprise has recently secured a cost sharing agreement with Salford and Bury Councils over a two serious landslips threatening a number of houses on the edge of important greenspaces in the NW of England. Both sites are former brownfield land sites and both almost certainly contaminated. The cost sharing agreement is a welcome recognition that the industrial legacy of contaminated land is a shared responsibility and while FE does carry the cost of managing the greenspace for public benefit, we have not accepted that role at any price. The cost of the remedial works is £1m+.

£1.2 million National Lottery Grant to Protect UK's Red Squirrels

A new project to secure the future of the native red squirrel is set to receive £1.2 million in funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The endangered red squirrel and its habitat will be protected through 'Red Squirrels United', a new four year programme bringing together eight partners from across the UK.

Red Squirrels United will operate directly in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and work with the Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels partnership on cross-border conservation action and skills-sharing, to achieve the development of a UK-scale red squirrel conservation initiative for the first time. The project will deliver key national conservation objectives with the aim of protecting red squirrels through communication, education and conservation activities. It is supported by Government nature conservation agencies and the 32 organisations within the UK squirrel accord group.

Community-based rapid response teams will be created involving 1,250 volunteers who will be trained to conserve key red squirrel populations threatened by their interaction with non-native grey squirrels. These volunteers will be supported by partner organisation staff, building the large networks of red squirrel champions essential for conservation success. Partners will maintain grey squirrel-free habitats where they already exist, for example on the island of Anglesey and in Kielder Forest in northern England; extend current red squirrel protection zones in mid-Wales and Merseyside and implement a new whole country approach in Northern Ireland.

Forest of Dean – Reintroduction of Pine Marten

We are investigating the possibility of carrying out re-introductions of Pine Marten on the public forest estate in England, and specifically sites in the Forest of Dean and Chilterns. We would be working with the Vincent Wildlife Trust who are undertaking work on reintroductions elsewhere in Great Britain. Forest Research involvement would record and disseminate the potential positive benefits from control of grey squirrel populations and consequent reductions in tree damage and any negative impacts in lowland forestry arising from the reintroductions. It is important that this is done in collaboration with suitable partners and in discussion with neighbouring landowners once suitable areas are confirmed and we have recently raised the idea during the Confor SW Woodland Show.