

Agenda Item 7

COMMISSIONERS MEETING

Memo No 4/14

20 March 2014

DIRECTOR ENGLAND REPORT

Forestry and Flooding

Following the wettest January in over 100 years, the flooding in many parts of England and the press coverage about the potential for land management and forestry in particular to reduce flood risk, Defra, Environment Agency, and Forestry Commission have produced a joint briefing note on the role of forestry in flood risk management. The scientific evidence supports the premise that forestry has the potential to significantly reduce flood risk in certain circumstances – mainly in small to medium sized catchments (<100km²) and generally for flood events of less than a 1:100 return period. Even then forestry measures have to be carefully targeted, both to maximise the flood risk benefits and avoid increasing flood risk by inadvertently synchronising flood flows. The current debate is useful for raising the profile of forestry and the benefits it can offer but there is a risk that some might see forestry as a panacea for flood risk more generally when it is not.

Storm Damage

Severe winter storms have caused damage to woodlands and tragic loss of life. While initial indications from forest districts is that aggregate losses have not been catastrophic, Forestry Commission England has undertaken a windblow consultation with key forest and woodland stakeholders, to define the impact and location of the storm damage over the past 4 months. This consultation will close on the 14th March and after analysis, we will decide if a full, statistically robust National Forest Inventory survey is required. Contingency management procedures have been tested by the storm events and have proved effective.

Defra One Business

The latest decision to be made under the 'one business' banner relates to the future of Defra corporate services – in particular how the Defra network manages its information communication technology (ICT), procurement, estates and communications support services including design, event management, filming and editing.

Defra's Executive Committee (the Permanent Secretary, Chief Operating Officer and Directors General), with the support of the Defra Network Leadership Team has decided to consolidate corporate services where it makes sense to do so, because it's the best response to a challenging economic climate.

This has no immediate impact on the Forestry Commission, and no decisions have yet been taken about how we will work with the new corporate services directorate which will be set up in Defra to implement this decision. Forestry Commission England has been identified as a 'tranche 2' organisation which means our own corporate services will be considered in a second phase after 'tranche 1' corporate services have consolidated.

Forestry policy one year on

A Forestry Forum took place at the end of January to update stakeholders on progress with the commitments contained in the Government Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement published one year previously. As a part of this a very positive report was issued showing progress towards the policy ambitions in general and the specific commitments, including case studies of the forestry sector's activities to show how the forestry sector is delivering as a whole. Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Dan Rogerson MP, attended and confirmed the future arrangements for the government's forestry functions in England.

Grey Squirrel Policy

In late November 2013 the Secretary of State commissioned the Forestry Commission to review the approach to grey squirrels in England's woodlands. In December, the Forestry Commission published a consultation asking for people's views on the evidence underpinning policy. The consultation closed on 24 January 2014 and was supported by a stakeholder workshop which explored some of the emerging issues in more depth.

The review of our current strategy shows that the approach to red squirrel conservation is working but needs to be sustained, and more could be done to improve collaboration of grey squirrel control in support of tree protection aims, including greater activity on the public forest estate. A revised strategy should provide a stronger framework for taking more effective action to control grey squirrels in woodland and around red squirrel populations.

Key messages from the consultation include: strong support for the imperative of more grey squirrel control; strong support for the existing approach to red squirrel conservation – it is working and needs to be sustained; mixed views on conditionality and regulation; lack of consensus on the best and most cost effective control method; a strong view that neighbour inaction made control ineffective; and some criticism of the level of grey squirrel control activity happening on the public forest estate.

A submission including analysis of the results of the consultation and associated recommendations is currently with the Secretary of State for his consideration.

Jerwood Open Forest

Two major partner-funded commissions have been awarded to artists to produce works on the public forest estate in England. Jerwood Open Forest is a new initiative in the Jerwood Visual Arts programme, launched by Jerwood Charitable Foundation and Forestry Commission England, with additional support of public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England's Grants for the arts programme.

Semiconductor (Ruth Jarman and Joe Gerhardt) will produce their first ever public sculpture based on a year's worth of data collected from the top of a flux tower at Alice Holt Forest in Surrey. The work considers scientific data as a means of understanding the environment, and explores the relationship between how science represents the physical

world and how we experience it. Through a process of re-contextualising the data, it will become abstract in form and meaning, taking on sculptural properties.

Chris Watson and Iain Pate will produce a multi-channel sound installation featuring the remarkable, and seldom witnessed, conversations of ravens returning to roost. Hrafn; Conversations with Odin will take place in Kielder Forest in Northumberland in September 2014. Speakers high in the forest canopy will immerse the audience in sound starting with calls of distant ravens and concluding with several thousand birds arriving overhead. The work anticipates and celebrates the return of these powerful voices to the forest, making a connection back through history and folklore to the present day.

Forestry Skills Event

Leading figures in forestry met at the Highgrove Estate on 14 February to discuss how to work better together to ensure forestry skills remain a priority for the future. The Duchy of Cornwall and the Forestry Commission organised the event to bring together private and public sector forestry representatives to address learning and development in the workforce.

Speakers included Oliver Rackham OBE, Peter Bonfield OBE and Graham Taylor (representing Pryor and Rickett Silviculture). His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, a great supporter of developing and promoting forestry and woodland management skills, also attended.

Workshops, facilitated by the Forestry Commission, explored how cross-organisational partnerships within the forestry industry could be created or further developed. The partnership between the Duchy of Cornwall, Forestry Commission and others is an exemplar project of how to bring new skilled people into forestry.

English Woodland Grant Scheme

As we enter the end of the current Rural Development Programme and in line with unprecedented peak in business activity in 2013 we continue to adjust the availability and scope of our grants to new applicants.

Ministers agreed transitional arrangements for woodland creation grants in December - we would continue to process received applications and would look to inviting further application in 2014 to maintain planting in 2014/15 in line with the overall annual RDP rate. An intention to offer woodland creation grants in 2015 in advance of much of NELMS to support continuity of planting for the 2015/16 planting season was also announced.

New Environmental Land Management Scheme (NELMS)

The new scheme will bring together, as a single scheme, Environmental Stewardship and the English Woodland Grant Scheme. We are developing a range of forestry 'options' for the new scheme that build on the existing structure of grants, reflect the priorities of the Forestry and Woodland Policy Statement and the new EU Rural Development Regulation.

These have been shared as they have been developing with a series of forestry stakeholder meetings.

The budget for new environmental scheme amounts to about £3.1bn over the six years of the next programme. However, £2.2bn of that (71%) is already accounted for by current agreements. The main priorities will be biodiversity and then water (quality and flood management). Given the limited uncommitted budget Defra and its delivery bodies are working on how best to capture 'synergies' - options and locations that can address more than one priority. Forestry options can play a key role in contributing to these.

Elm Yellows and Oak Processionary Moth

Forest research has confirmed the discovery of the elm yellows virus in Dutch Elm Disease resistant elm trees imported from Italy and held in English nurseries. FERA colleagues are leading the response, although FC is also involved. South and East Forest Districts are investigating whether they have taken some stock from the nursery for planting in the New Forest and Chilterns in relation to butterfly restoration projects. It is positive that the monitoring and control systems across the Defra network are working effectively and we are vigilant against new threats to the health of our trees.

Defra and the devolved authorities are currently consulting with stakeholders to develop a UK position on the virus, also known as elm phloem necrosis, which is spread by insects and by vegetative propagation.

The disease is widespread in North America and there have been a number of outbreaks in Italy, France and Germany. The UK native field elm (*Ulmus minor*) is thought to be susceptible to EY, while the wych elm (*U. grabra*) appears resistant.

A report on the survey and control of Oak Processionary Moth has recently been published following the increased control programme during 2013/14. The report identifies that this work has resulted in a 53% reduction in total nest numbers reversing the previous exponential increase. Significant reduction in nest numbers was found on some sites but there is evidence that sustained control will be needed to avoid risk of re-infestation. There has also been a clear reduction in the rate of spread.

In addition, the programme has helped create capacity in contractors and surveyors, including new machinery and use of continental capacity and experience. Various research programmes will provide further evidence to adapt future control programmes to ensure delivery of the current eradication strategy (with containment in West London) with the possibility of eradication of OPM everywhere. The control programme will need to continue to ensure that the efforts during 2013/14 are not wasted. Improvements to systems and processes will help deliver an even more effective and efficient programme in future.

Defra has confirmed an allocation to Forestry Commission of £3.29m to support work across FCE, GB and FR with particular programmes of action continuing on Phytophthora and OPM.

The Gruffalo

The Gruffalo is one of the nations favourite children's books. Forestry Commission England is working in partnership with Magic Light Pictures who own the rights to the Gruffalo to inspire a new generation of children to learn about and respect the natural environment and woodland through the Gruffalo stories.

The activities will start on 11 April and run until February 2015. Twenty eight forests throughout England will host Gruffalo activity trails and 15 life size Gruffalo sculptures will be unveiled at birthday picnic events in June. Gruffalo's are approx 7 ft tall and 4 ft wide and the timber to make them has been sourced from the New Forest, Bedgebury and Westonbirt.

Countryfile will be filming the tree felling, timber transportation and the carving of a Gruffalo at the secret 'Gruffalo creation centre', in the south of England. In addition, the feasibility of doing one of the carvings in an iconic location in London to help raise awareness of our work to a much wider audience is being investigated.

We anticipate increased income as a result of this partnership derived from visitor car parking and admission charges, sale of Gruffalo guides and merchandise and secondary spend in cafes and other third party businesses.

So far, this partnership has proved very popular with the public and the Gruffalo webpage now the second most popular page on forestry.gov.uk with 64,133 page views during February. In the two weeks since the social media launch we have had 16,040 people subscribe to our database. This is already 10,000 more subscribers than any other campaign we have run. The increased database will allow us to cross sell other products, such as Christmas Trees and Forest Live concerts to a bigger audience in the future.

Long Term Contracts

The threat of legal challenge has delayed the awarding of long term timber contracts in Southern England. We have conducted a thorough internal review, which supported the decisions made and are now proceeding with the advice of FC England solicitors, Eversheds.