

**Agenda Item 10**

**COMMISSIONERS' MEETING**

**Memo No 24/14**

**17 December 2014**

## **DIRECTOR ENGLAND REPORT**

### **Oak Processionary Moth (OPM)**

With conducive weather conditions, 2014 proved to be an exceptional year in terms of nest numbers and sizes. The known extent of the main West London population increased by 50%, although part of this was due to identification of spread from earlier years which was assisted by improved survey and detection, most notably this year by a significant pheromone trapping exercise. As a result of both, the increased extent and the establishment of a protected zone in October is being reviewed. In principle FC survey and control effort will need to focus on the perimeter with a concomitant need, given limited resources, to cease Defra funding for the control effort in the core area where it serves no value in limiting spread. Attempts are being made to ensure local authorities and other significant players in the affected areas are fully aware of the need for collaborative action. Disappointingly the majority of authority elected leaders invited by Lord de Mauley to a breakfast meeting declined the invitation, so alternative routes via London Councils, the Mayor's office and though one to one contact with officials are being pursued.

### **Chalara**

#### *Ash Resistance Trials*

At the end of the second growing season, Chalara has been confirmed as present at all 14 trial sites. Over-all survival is 91% (96% last year) ranging from 72% to 99%. All sites remain in good condition in terms of site maintenance (weeding etc.) and relationship with owners. Chalara infestation rates across seed zone sources and trial sites have not yet been assessed; this is planned for end of 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> growing seasons.

#### *Outbreaks in North West England*

The first wider environment case of ash dieback in Lancashire was spotted by one of our tree health officers in July. Subsequent surveys have resulted in subtle symptoms generally being observed across most of the county including the northern edges of Greater Manchester. Also locations across much of the Yorkshire Dales and a few sites over the border in Cumbria were identified. This has caused surprise amongst local stakeholders, who with the lack of activity in the region in 2013, were not expecting its arrival so soon. A minority of stakeholders were aware of the Cambridge University modelling. All engaged stakeholders understood that eradication was not an option, but some still expected local action to be required. The FC Area team has reacted to wider interest and extended the Cumbria Tree Health Group to become the North West Tree Health Group, with a new NW Ash sub group, as well as existing groups on *Phytophthora ramorum* and *P. austrocedrae*. It should be emphasised that while this cluster appears as a large area on the distribution map, most symptoms are recent and affect a low level of ash trees in the area, with small scattered pockets where dieback is more pronounced in younger trees (similar to the emerging picture in NE England). This is in contrast to parts of East Anglia and Kent where large numbers of trees are now affected, some with very significant decline.

## Phytophthora Ramorum surveys

Following the spring surveillance, further activity was undertaken in September. The purpose of these flights was to establish what visible disease activity had occurred over the summer and to obtain as clear a picture as possible of disease dynamics prior to the most significant period of potential sporulation in the autumn. Additional flights were undertaken across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as a result of which the summary for the year to date (19/9/2014) is as follows:

28 flights have been undertaken - 18 in England, 6 in Wales and 4 in Northern Ireland - which have surveyed 57,208 hectares of both privately and publically managed larch. In the process of surveying larch, 948,436ha of forest and woodland have been flown over as at 19/09/14 (59% of forest and woodland in England & Wales from the National Forest Inventory (NFI)).

An update on our 2014 programme for symptoms of ramorum disease of larch trees in England has now been published. The pattern of observation over the survey season has consistently comprised limited, low-level symptoms which have generally been close to previously confirmed infection or in association with infected rhododendron. Follow-up investigations of the small number of new areas of infection found have generally confirmed infected rhododendron as the likely source of infection.

## National Tree Safety Group

The NTSG met in October, this was in response to concerns that its established guidance may need updating in the face of very rapid decline of ash trees in the East and South East of England, and the fact that owners/managers are therefore having to deal with dead/dying trees sooner than may have been anticipated. It was concluded that while there are tree safety implications, particularly where trees are next to roads, this of itself does not raise new or different tree safety issues, and so does not affect the existing guidance. It was agreed it would be helpful if the guidance could be supplemented by additional case studies focusing on generic tree disease issues, with Chalara used as an example (and this will be done). It was also agreed there was a need to avoid alarmist messages as this could trigger pre-emptive premature felling of trees unnecessarily, and tree owners should adopt a measured response as already detailed within the guidance.

It should also be noted that 5 years after initial *Phytophthora ramorum* infections in the South West of England, decline is now significant in some 'terminal' hosts (e.g. beech) that were not required to be felled for disease control purposes. These will also have to be dealt with as a safety issue albeit they are usually in woodland situations and less frequently adjacent to public highways.

## Deer Control

A review of Forestry Commission England's approach to reducing the impacts of deer on forestry and woodlands started in May 2014 and included an informal consultation with key stakeholders in August-September via Citizen Space. We have carefully reviewed the evidence along with the 89 consultation responses, and remain committed to working to reduce the negative impacts of deer on forests and woods. We have decided that the grant given to the Deer Initiative Limited has been a good way of achieving our objectives, and therefore, the FC will continue to fund the Deer Initiative Limited in this way for 2015/16. In order to test whether there is a better way, we have decided to market test our approach with a competitive tender process during 2015/16 for 2016/17 funding. The Forestry Commission will work closely with Natural England and other government agencies, to align and share our approach to supporting collaborative deer management.

## Squirrel Control

In November 2013 the then Secretary of State asked FC England to review the current approach to grey squirrel control, and to recommend any necessary improvements. To do so, consultation took place with various organisations, which showed that there was strong support for grey squirrel control along with red squirrel conservation, and the need for more efficient and varied control methods.

As a result, an agreed action plan has been developed and was published on 4 December. The action plan forms an update to existing policy and no proactive communications are being undertaken. Lord de Mauley and I will speak to the action plan at an event hosted by HRH the Prince of Wales at Clarence House on 9 December. The main points of the action plan are:

- Funding for grey squirrel control within the Countryside Stewardship Woodland Management scheme options
- FC to publish a good practice guide
- FC to work with stakeholders so to develop a squirrel partnership for England
- FC Area Teams to give advisory support to local landowners
- The PFE to increase squirrel control where there is co-ordinated control action among other local landowners
- Participation in red squirrel groups to continue, such as Red Squirrels Northern England
- To work with other signatories such as DEFRA and NE, to co-ordinate red squirrel conservation
- To continue investigation and research into control methods including immune-contraception, pine marten reintroduction, and trapping, and into a pox vaccine

## Reforming how the Defra network provides payments under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in England.

Work continues on reforming Defra network's approach to CAP to save money, improve customer services, reduce disallowance, and achieve desired outcomes. There is a three pronged approach:

1. **IT:** A single new IT system and greater digitisation (Claiming Rural Payments). Initial functionality to enable farmers to prepare for basic payment scheme applications has been released and is being tested with customers, later releases will provide the functionality for the Rural Development Programme for England. July 2015 is a crucial date for this. In the meantime, we are developing our in-house system, GLOS, to support interim grant offers from January 2015 and maintaining a "plan B" for GLOS to provide functionality for longer if CRP is further delayed or de-scoped.
2. **People:** Focussing transactional (desk-based, administrative) functions in Rural Payments Agency (RPA) and technical functions (e.g. advice from field officers to landowners) in Natural England (NE) and the Forestry Commission (FC) (EU Payments). Defra Executive Committee on 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2014 confirmed that the transactional function will be in RPA at York, administration of legacy grants will remain with NE / FC and that FC will provide the expert forestry advice for the technical function with no-one from FC transferring to NE. It also confirmed provision for the costs of change required for re-organisation of our legacy grants administration functions. Communication on this to Forest Services (FS) staff is planned for 9<sup>th</sup> Dec 2014, transfer of our people from the York Administrative Hub to RPA is planned for 1<sup>st</sup> June 2015.

- 3. New schemes:** the £900M Countryside Stewardship scheme integrates NE's Environmental Stewardship grants and FC's England Woodland Grant Scheme. It focusses on biodiversity, water quality, and flood risk management. The forestry elements are favourable. Features include approximately the same level of funding as in the previous scheme, a greater requirement for woodland management plans, more on deer and grey squirrel control, and a grant structure for woodland creation that gives equal treatment to broadleaves and conifers. A joint training programme for field and woodland officers in NE and FC, called Licence to Operate, adds significantly to the resources for forestry advice to customers by increasing NE's forestry capability. Another £140M Countryside Productivity scheme focusses on business development and is also important for forestry. We are supporting forestry businesses to prepare for applications. Interim Countryside Stewardship grants, including woodland creation, should be available from January 2015 with the scheme fully live from July 2015, subject to CAP-IS and European Commission approval. Defra external communication is ramping up, see [www.gov.uk/cap-reform](http://www.gov.uk/cap-reform) .

### **Infrastructure Bill**

Parliamentarians and lobby groups raised concerns that the Infrastructure Bill could be used to sell off public forest land, despite government reassurances to the contrary. In November 2014, the Government moved amendments to the Bill ensuring that the provisions in the Bill could not be used to transfer to the HCA or sell any part of the public forest estate.

### **Public Forest Estate – Gruffalo Campaign – Update**

Forestry Commission England has a three year contract to work in partnership with Magic Light Pictures (The Gruffalo rights holders) to inspire a new generation of children to learn about and respect the natural environment and woodland through the Gruffalo stories.

Over the summer we created twenty eight self-led trails teaching children about the forests around them. The trails were undertaken more than 1,239,000 times over the six month period. We also created fifteen life-sized Gruffalo sculptures which have been seen by over 900,000 in their first four months of being in the forest. The Gruffalo himself travelled around twenty one of England's forests in July and August, meeting and greeting his fans. 12,500 children had their photo taken with the Gruffalo and more than 27,000 people saw the 'real' Gruffalo. It has been estimated that visitor numbers increased by almost 12% as a result of the Gruffalo partnership.

In October we launched the winter themed Gruffalo's child trails, and these are continuing to prove popular, with record numbers of activity packs being sold in the opening weekend.

### **Disputed Case – Wallshield**

In August 2013 the Forestry Commission received an EWGS application to support planting of a 77 hectare conifer woodland, at Wallshield near Haltwhistle, in the Northumberland National Park. Due to the sustained objection by the Park Authority, a 'disputed case' process was begun. Having received a recommendation from the FWAC, and consulted the Forestry Minister (who gave no view), the ENC determined the application in favour of the applicant. This will be the first new coniferous woodland in England for some time, and the case has attracted some attention in the sector.

### **Cinderford Northern Quarter – Forest of Dean**

CNQ is a major mixed use development which has been the subject of long-running controversy in the Dean. Planning Consent was granted (subject to S106 agreement) on the 14th November by Forest of Dean District Council with a 14 to 1 vote in favour.

Following autumn storms some of the species mitigation works undertaken have been lost due to breaches of fences. The extent of environmental mitigation works still required, especially in the areas to be felled, may well delay a commencement of the development until September 2015.

The Land Exchange is still being drafted. This will see the Secretary of State disposing of 10 Ha of land within the Development site in return for 25 Ha of the adjacent Cinderford Linear Park currently in the ownership of the District Council. A submission has been made to the Secretary of State to approve this exchange.

### **Heritage Lottery Fund**

Heritage Lottery Fund is to fund a major HLF Landscape Partnership Scheme proposed for the Forest of Dean. The total HLF grant earmarked is in the order of £3 million for the 7-year project. The 18-month development phase starts in the New Year.

### **Apprenticeships**

The first batch of Forest Enterprise England apprentices, are approaching the end of their two year training contracts. From the original twenty apprentices taken on, two have left the Forestry Commission. To date, fourteen have been taken on as permanent employees in a variety of roles, along with the fact that at least two apprentices from the Forest Enterprise Scotland apprenticeship scheme, have been also taken on as permanent staff.

We have just offered places to twelve new apprentices, who will start in January 2015, but this number may be increased to fourteen new apprentices, as there is an obvious demand for these places and the standard of applicants continues to be high. Any future programme will depend on the rate of staff turnover, but if possible, the aim is to take on further batches of people. This is considered a good method of bringing in new staff at the beginning of their careers, into Forest Enterprise England.

The FC and sector partners have been successful in our submission to BIS to be an Apprenticeship Trailblazer under phase 3 of the programme. The work now starts to design a new apprenticeship scheme for forestry which helps employers bring new entrants into the workforce to meet the growing demand for home-grown timber.

We will work with businesses ranging from SME's to multi-nationals as a forestry sub-group, reviewing existing provision, consulting on potential revisions, and developing a new standard for delivery in 2015/16. Forestry sits alongside Arboriculture, Horticulture and Landscaping, which will all be developing their own standards and liaising as an overall land-based group to share good practice.