



Coppicer and green wood worker Sam Ansell (*pictured*) sees the green shoots of rural regeneration every day.

Together with other forestry workers in north Lancs, the 30 year old is looking to establish a co-operative business venture to exploit the untapped potential of the area's woods to deliver greater economic benefits and create jobs.

Coppicing is the age-old art of managing woodlands where tree stems are cut back at regular intervals to promote vigorous growth and supply timber on a sustainable basis. Such woods are also renowned as being vibrant wildlife habitats – a way of squeezing a pint from a quart pot in biodiversity terms – and a feature of many ancient woodlands.

Sam took over his coppice business five years ago and employs two people, including an apprentice, at his Silverdale-woodyard. This type of micro enterprise is typical of the size of primary woodland businesses – an estimated 7,000 people are employed in England's woods and 20,000 in the wider forestry sector, which includes primary processing. There is

considerable scope for additional growth. Much of Sam's coppicing is carried out in the Arnside and Silverdale AONB with clients including private woodland owners, Butterfly Conservation and the National Trust. Some of this work is funded through the Forestry Commission's English Woodland Grant Scheme. Harvested wood is made into firewood to supply the expanding woodfuel market (between 80 - 120 tonnes per annum), converted into charcoal and also used to make high quality country products like furniture, hurdles, benches and brooms. The business also runs training courses in skills and crafts, from hurdle to charcoal making.

Sam said: "We are currently working up to two hectares of traditional coppice woods every year and a further hectare of more general woodland. Such places once supplied thousands of people with a livelihood. Although times have changed, they still represent a massive opportunity. We need to make more of them today - they are an important resource for the rural economy."

According to the Forestry Commission, 22,000 tonnes of timber could be sustainably harvested annually from under-managed woodland in north Lancs and south Cumbria.

Such woods are an economic asset, capable of supplying timber, supporting green businesses and enhancing habitats. Meanwhile, the wood fuel sector in particular continues to grow as energy costs soar. Demand for timber has ratcheted up. The bottleneck is freeing up local supplies and getting more woods back to work, so the raw material is not imported from other areas or even from abroad.

Sam adds: "We are a small scale business, but by linking up with other coppicers to create a co-operative we can pool our efforts, maximising the value of our investment in equipment such as firewood processor, tractor and trailers, and also take on larger orders and projects. That will allow us to compete with bigger companies and make more of our woods.

"For instance we could start long term coppice rotation for firewood over a 15 to 20 year period. But we still preserve our unique selling proposition - we are local forest and craft workers using local wood to meet local demand. That fits

in very much with the whole sustainability agenda."

Pilot project

Sam is currently running a pilot project on low impact firewood supply funded by the AONB. Ten of his customers are being helped to plan ahead and estimate their firewood needs over a longer period while increasing their wood storage capacity. This will reduce the number of deliveries required and avoid short-term shortages of firewood. Where clients have woodlands, timber may be harvested and processed on site, reducing costs.

"Some larger woodfuel suppliers import timber from abroad, which increases woodfuel's carbon footprint. The key to our business is supplying high quality products – whether charcoal, firewood or furniture – which uses local wood and contributes towards sustainable woodland management."

- Lancs woods untapped economic asset.
- High value added quality products made from local wood.
- 120 tonnes of firewood supplied from coppiced woodland.
- Co-operative business plan to increase production.



Sam Ansell with other local charcoal makers