

# **THREESTONE BURN FOREST**

## **AMMENDMENTS TO ANNEX OF ENVIRONMENTAL STATEMENT**



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## INTRODUCTION

At the original scoping meeting for the Threestoneburn (TSB) Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) held in April 2007 the following issues were raised either by those attending or invitees who had sent a written response to the invitation (See Appendix 16 of the TSB Environmental Statement).

- Access routes to site for timber haulage
- Traffic impact and disturbance
- Red squirrel conservation
- Breeding birds
- Botanical interest of site
- Landscaping effect of proposals
- Future public access provision
- Restoration methodology
- Deer management
- Archaeology

The scoping meeting was minuted and copies of the minutes were circulated to all attendees and invitees who could not attend.

After the scoping meeting minutes were circulated to all attendees, the Forestry Commission then wrote to all of the people who had originally been asked to consult to give them a further opportunity to raise issues of concern that could be addressed in the ES.

This solicited additional responses from the RSPB, Natural England, Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission themselves.

The following additional issues which had not been raised at the scoping meeting were identified to be addressed in the ES :

- Carbon sequestration
- Hydrological Impact of Proposals
- Timber marketing implications
- Schedule I bird conservation measures
- Emergency planning provision

At this stage it was agreed that the items raised at the scoping meeting as well as those listed above would be the main points of concern to be addressed by the ES.

Subsequently after the ES was submitted and had been on the public register for 8 weeks consultation, additional information was requested on the following four major item :

- Biodiversity
- Red squirrel conservation
- Access to forest
- Landscape

This annex document should be read in conjunction with the original ES document and the accompanying appendices as there are many cross references. However as a stand alone document it does contain significant new information, clarifying points of enquiry and hopefully addressing the concerns of the consultees. The additional appendices and maps at the end of this document contain expert reports and information that should be read in conjunction with the text.

The main difference to the new proposals, compared to those previously is the time scale involved. Within the original proposal the plan was to deforest the area over a period of 36 months. This was a very ambitious target and although theoretically possible it would have presented marketing problems and possibly cause disruption on the access routes. It is now proposed to undertake the work over 12 years. This will significantly reduce the effect of the proposals on everything from red squirrels to local residents.

During the public consultation phase several statutory consultees requested additional information on biodiversity, such as Natural England (NE) and the Northumberland Wildlife Trust (NWT). The NWT also had concerns about the loss of habitat for Red squirrels (**Ref Appendices 7 in ES**). Ingram Parish council and local residents expressed concerns regarding the stated preferred access route (**Ref section 12 of ES Traffic & Transport**).

NE also expressed concerns regarding the thoroughness of the landscape appraisal (**Ref Appendix 9 in ES**).

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION REQUESTS**

The items where additional information was requested are identified in sections 5 - Geology, Hydrology, Soils & Drainage, 6 – Ecology & Nature Conservation, 8 – Red squirrels, 9 – Social & Economic Issues, 10- Landscape and 12 Traffic & Transport. The reference numbers for these sections are cross referenced to the relevant sections of the original ES document.

Subsequently to the further 28 days consultation on the Annex to the Environmental Statement Northumberland County Council (NCC) Highways raised concerns regarding the suitability of the proposed access route onto the county road network and the safety of the junction onto the A697 at Brandon Whitehouse. The NCC Highways Authority will not approve the necessary road improvements to allow the timber traffic to egress from the forest via the southern route

This amendment to the Annex principally concerns the proposal to construct a link road from the existing forest road infrastructure to the farm track leading to South Middleton farm. This will allow the timber traffic to travel North and egress onto the A697 at the Middleton road end.

The amended information is presented below in a similar format as before cross referenced to the relevant sections of the original ES document, where relevant to the proposed changes regarding haulage route.

### **5. Geology, Hydrology, Soils & Drainage - Hydrology (Ref Appendix 21 in original ES document)**

#### **5.2.5 Hydrology & 5.2.6 Water Quality (Additional Information)**

The proposal to create a link road to facilitate the Northern haulage route does not materially alter any of the previous issues raised regarding flood risk and security of the water supply, however the road construction will pass slightly closer to the property, 300 metres and 200m from the water supply. The link road will cross 3 minor tributaries of the Threestone burn, all of which are less than 1 metre wide. It is proposed to use culverts to create these crossing points. Consent under the Land Drainage Act 1991 will be sought from the EA

### 5.3.1 Indicative Timetable – (New Information)

**Month 1** (Autumn) – scraping of existing internal forest road network & drains maintenance. Commencement of first stage of riparian woodland planting to provide red squirrel habitat

**Month 2** – tree felling to facilitate quarry extension & tree felling of road-line route.

**Month 3** – quarrying & crushing of stone to produce stockpile

**Months 4-6** – Winter break

**Months 7-10** (Spring/Summer) Road construction and upgrading of link road through NE corner of forest and upgrading of farm access track to South Middleton

**Month 11** – commencement of harvesting operations

It is expected that the first stage of the harvesting programme will commence within 12 months of approval..

Wherever possible the work will be scheduled to minimize ground damage and to take place when the flood risk is reduced.

Appendix 18 A details are given of the specification of the forest road construction and the lengths of road to be upgraded and created.

Appendix 18 B – Landscape there is additional appraisal and assessment relating to the appearance of the new proposed route in the landscape. Generally the topography of the area shields the new road from the majority of view points.

All forestry practices undertaken within the forest would follow Arboricultural and Forestry Advisory Group guidance and best practice. The longer timescale and more gradual restoration process will reduce the impact on the hydrology and negate any adverse effects on the property (**See report in Appendix VIII Flood Risk Assessment**).

Although the private water supply is not within the forest boundary a 100m buffer zone will be established where machinery usage will be restricted and no subsequent mulching or drainage will be carried out.

## **6. Ecology & Nature Conservation – (Additional Information)**

The proposed link road involves the construction of 994 meter of new forest road to be constructed on an existing forest ride and an additional 600 meter of road, cutting through the conifer stands in the North-east corner of the forest. The construction of this section will necessitate the felling of a 20 meter wide band of trees (1.2 ha). There will then need to be 500 meter constructed on the open hill to enable this new road to link up with the existing hill track which leads down to South Middleton farm. This track extends to 3359 meter and requires widening, strengthening and drainage improvements along certain sections. **(See map in Appendix 18 A - for details).**

As part of Lilburn Estates and Ilderton Dodd Farms Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) application a comprehensive habitat survey of the hill track route was undertaken in 2008/09. These surveys which are included in Appendix V also identified areas of botanical and ornithological interest.

The surveys revealed that the proposed route primarily consists of classification MO1 – Grass moorland and rough grazing. This includes both wet and dry acid grassland, used for grazing and generally species poor acid grassland, dominated by bent and fine leaved fescues, mat grass, heath rush and purple moor grass.

The final 500 metres of link road through to the forest crosses an area of more typical M02 – Fragmented heath habitat, with dwarf shrubs covering 25% of the area, the balance consisting of acid grassland mosaic.

## **7.0 Birds – (New Information)**

During the habitat survey the following breeding birds were noted on the surrounding land on both Lilburn Estates and Ilderton Dod:

Curlew, Snipe, Lapwing & Skylark

## **7.7 Mitigation**

During the construction phase of the new proposed road disturbance to breeding birds will be reduced by restricting the works to the linear feature of the road. The width of the work area will only be 6 metres maximum, encompassing the running surface and ditch, where required. No vehicular traffic will need to deviate from this line. It is likely that construction and usage of the road will take place during bird nesting seasons but again disturbance will be localized.

Once the forest has been felled and replanted with riparian broadleaves the road will be encouraged, by hydro-seeding to “green over” and only used by estate agricultural vehicles. It will not be open to public access, other than by pedestrians, so in the long term disturbance to nesting birds will be minimal.

## **7.8 Impacts & Effects**

Only 13% of the road construction/improvement actually involves creating the new road on “virgin ground” as the remainder already exists either as a farm track or road formation. To minimize disturbance to breeding birds the tree felling of the road-line will take place before the nesting season and although the bulk of road construction will take place during the nesting season, machinery and disturbance will be restricted to the linear route of the road-line. Out with the forest boundary there are no proposed new burn crossing points, as they already exist, but within the forest 4 small tributaries have to be crossed. To help mitigate against ground damage it is intended to carry out the majority of the construction in spring/summer, when water levels should be low.

Appendix II details the road specification but it is intended to only widen the existing formation where absolutely necessary and to carry out the appropriate amount of drainage to help minimize the impact of the road upgrading.

## **8. Red Squirrel Conservation – (Additional Information)**

### **8.7 Update of Impact & Effects**

The Red squirrel surveys carried out previously revealed that red squirrels are present in the forest in modest numbers (**Ref ES Section 8 & Appendix 7**).

The proposal to utilize the Northern haulage route will have no material effect on Red squirrel conservation in the forest other than that the road construction in the North-east corner will commence earlier than originally intended and that the road will require a 20 meter wide strip to be felled through this section as part of the first phase of the felling proposal. It is intended to carry out this felling in the Autumn to reduce disturbance to breeding red squirrels. There will be no change to the previously stated felling schedule and the proposed replanting of the riparian zones will remain as programmed in the ES, with the first phase commencing prior to any tree felling.

The road to be constructed through the NE section of the forest will, where feasible follow existing rides, and the route chosen has been identified to minimize the threat of wind-blow. The route is aligned east-west, avoids wet areas and follows a ridge of harder ground where more wind-firm edges can be established.

## **9. Social & Economic Issues**

### **9.4 Public Access Provision & Recreation**

#### **9.4.2 Amended Proposals – (New Information)**

The new link road and upgrading of the hill track will affect some existing public rights of way (PROW) – **See accompanying map in Appendix 18 D.**

Within the current forest boundary the new link road crosses a public bridleway. Ramps will be constructed at the crossing points to ensure that the users can easily cross the new road. The existing hill track that is proposed for improvement, crosses 2 further public footpaths. A section of the existing hill-track follows the same route as a public footpath and care will be taken during the upgrading of the track to ensure that the surface is suitable for pedestrians.

Cattle grids will replace the current field gates on the hill track, but all of these will have a gate positioned next to them to be used by the public.

Directional and appropriate warning signs will be erected, wherever required to advise users of the various PROW of the road upgrading and subsequent harvesting operations.

This revised routing of the haulage route will reduce the possible conflict with equestrian & pedestrian users who prefer to utilize the previous proposed southern haulage route.

## **9.5 Neighbours – (Additional Information)**

The principal neighbours affected by the revised haulage route are;

Mr & Mrs B. Brown – Ilderton Dod Farm

Mr & Mrs J Wright – Threestoneburn House

Both have been consulted as part of the prior notifications process. Whilst to date neither has submitted any formal reply, both have indicated informally that they are happy with the proposals as presented.

Lilburn Estates have negotiated an access agreement with Mr & Mrs Brown to cross part of their land as part of the link between the forest and the existing track.

Although Ilderton Parish council is no longer in existence the local parochial church council has been asked for its views.

## **10. Landscape Appraisal – (Additional Information)**

### **10.7 Amended Proposals**

Within the attached **Appendix – 18 B** there are 3-D images and photographic montages showing panoramic views from the location of the proposed road looking east towards the A697 and in reverse from the road looking west towards the forest. The information contained in Appendix 18 B clearly demonstrates the effects of the proposed road construction on the surrounding landscape.

Due to the general topography, woodland planting and the location of roadside trees the photographs show that the new route is not particularly visible from the main road. Because the formation already exists and predominantly crosses level ground there will not be a significant additional impact on the landscape posed by this amended route, even when the track is widened and improved to handle HGV's.

**(See attached specification & map in Appendix 18 B).**

A GPDO notice has been applied for to NNPA for permission to undertake the works.

## **11. Cultural Heritage – (Additional Information)**

### **11.2 Proposals**

In the original ES the issues surrounding archaeology on the site are identified in **Section 11 – Cultural Heritage and in Appendix 8**.

The maps prepared for the HLS bids on the respective farms identified the archaeological sites in the vicinity of the new proposed routes. This information has been collated and **Map 1** within the map section of this report shows the known archaeological sites and it can be clearly demonstrated that no sites are affected by these proposals as the new link road through the forest and hill-track improvements avoid the sites.

If any previously unknown sites are uncovered by the operations, then the NNPA archaeologist will be informed immediately.

## **12. Traffic & Transport – (Additional Information)**

### **12.3 Alternative Proposals**

Within the ES (**Ref section 12**) the 3 alternative access routes for removing timber from the forest were identified and the relative merits of each were discussed. The ES stated that the preferred route was Alternative 1 via Reaveley, Brandon and onto the A697. During the consultation period and at the NNPA Committee meeting held in Wooler on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2008 there was concern expressed by the NNPA members and Ingram parish council regarding the choice of this preferred option and the disruption that would be caused to local residents and visitors. The FC therefore asked us to look again at the 3 alternative routes.

At the end of this process and based on meetings with Ingram parish councilors and an informal meeting with Northumberland County Council (NCC) it was still felt that on balance the Alternative 1 route was still the preferred option.

After the end of the formal consultation process NCC Highways formally objected to Alternative 1 being the preferred route (**Letter in Appendix 12 A**).

Their objection was based on certain sections of the road being unsuitable for HGVs and the junction onto the A697 being inherently unsafe in light of the additional HGV traffic that would be utilizing it.

### **12.3.3 Alternative 3 – The Northern Route (Additional Information)**

This possible route was highlighted at the scoping meeting. There is an access track leading from South Middleton on land owned by Lilburn estates running in a south-western direction towards the forest. The first mile of this track could, with a moderate amount of upgrading be negotiable by lorry, but the next 3/4 mile is consists of a 3 meter wide farm track, suitable for light vehicles. This track goes to within 400m of the forest boundary before turning away to the north in the direction of Langlee in the Harthope valley.

Re-assessment surveys have revealed that this track could be upgraded by widening to 4 metres and strengthening with stone quarried within the forest. The existing track follows an appropriate route, all burn crossings are already bridged and the upgrading will not be obvious in the landscape. This option does involve carrying out additional roading work compared to that previously proposed. But the table in Appendix II demonstrates that the amount of stone required is not significantly more than originally proposed and well within the capacity of the existing quarry sites.

### **12.4 Predicted Impacts & Effects – (New Information)**

In light of the NCC objections regarding Alternative 1 and the known unsuitability of Alternative 2 it has been left to pursue the preferred option of Alternative 3, the Northern route. Further analysis of this route has revealed that although significant improvement work is required to facilitate its use by HGV traffic, with the exception of the new roading required to link the existing forest road to the farm track (2094 m ) the remaining 3359 m of hill-track already exists as a road formation and it is possible to carry out the construction and upgrading without causing significant environmental disruption.

The proposal is to use the track for HGV traffic over the next 12 years whilst the forest is felled, but that it would then revert to a private road only used by estate vehicles for ongoing farming and sporting activities. The track upgrading and construction specifications are included in **Appendix 18 A** as are photographic illustrations of similarly constructed tracks, at Wooler Common. These tracks were constructed in 2000 and with 9 years usage by light traffic have quickly grassed over. To speed up this process further it is intended to hydro-seed the upgraded tracks within the forest and the new hill track. This process will commence as soon as sections of track are no longer in

usage by HGV's. There will be a rolling program of hydro-seeding commencing in year 4 of the deforestation and being completed at the cessation of the haulage operations.

## **12.7 Summary and Conclusions – (Replaces previous version)**

Based on the revised assessment we now believe that the Northern route is the most viable option and that although it involves extra new road building any adverse effects can be mitigated against.

## **14 CONCLUSIONS (Replaces previous version)**

### **14.1 Hydrology & Water Quality**

Road specification and mitigation contained in Appendix 18 A

### **14.2 Ecology & Nature Conservation**

Key features, habitats and species identified in surveys. Additional information and mitigation identified measures in Appendix 18 C.

### **14.3 Birds**

Surveys completed and mitigation identified to reduce impacts.

### **14.4 Red squirrels**

Mitigation measures to reduce impacts identified and specified. No material changes to previously agreed proposals.

### **14.5 Social & Economic Issues**

### **14.6 Landscape**

The concerns regarding the impact on the landscape of the new road proposals are addressed by the additional information contained in the landscape appraisal, which considers both the impacts of the felling and replanting.

### **14.7 Cultural Heritage**

Existing public rights of way not adversely affected.

### **14.8 Traffic & Transport**

The objection by NCC Highways on the use of the southern haulage route has led to this amendment to consider utilizing the Northern route (See 12.3.3). Although more new road construction work is required than previously specified, it can be seen from the table contained in **Appendix 18 A** – road construction & specification, that the requirement for stone and therefore resultant quarry expansion is not significantly increased. It is not

proposed to enlarge the existing quarry any more than originally intended and no quarries are proposed out with the forest area.

**Appendices –**

- 12 A** Scopees letters
- 18 A** Road construction description & specification
- 18 B** Landscape appraisal/assessment
- 18 C** HLS habitat survey – Middleton crags
- 18 D** Public Rights of Way

**Maps –**

**Map 1 - Archaeology**