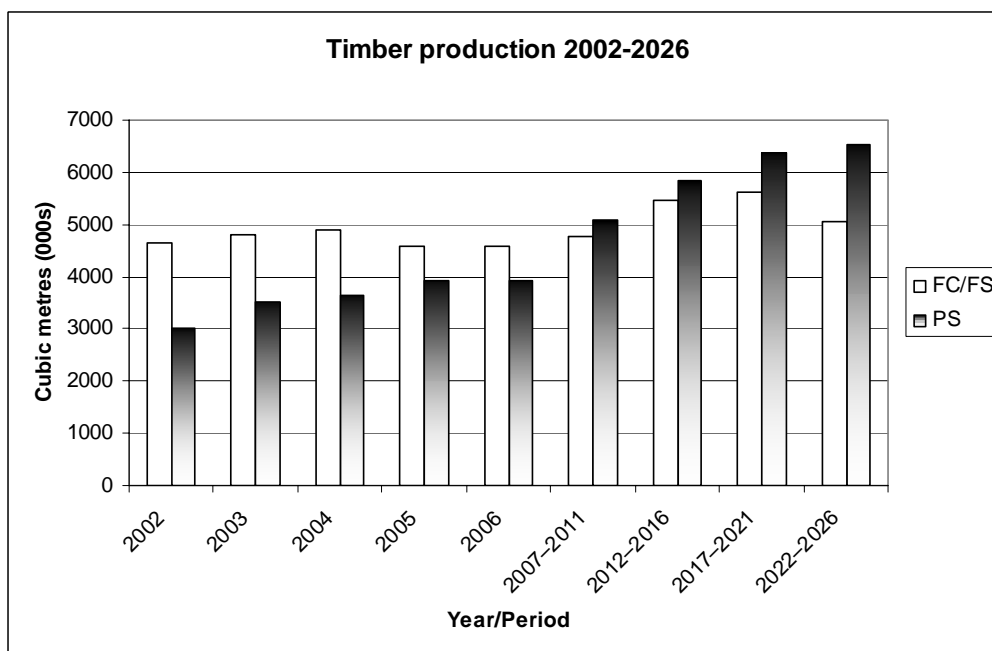


PRIVATE SECTOR DATA AND THE 2011 PRODUCTION FORECAST

The visibly increasing supply of timber from the published national forecasts since the 1970s has provided a degree of assurance that future timber supplies will be adequate to support significant investment in timber processing.

In 2002 timber production from the private sector (PS) in Scotland exceeded that from the Forestry Commission (FC) for the first time. The rising production curve from previous published forecasts has indicated the increasing prominence of the PS. Figure 1 shows the development of this trend for the GB forecast.

Figure 1.



There are concerns about the accuracy of yield class and other data used in the PS forecast. Following a meeting with the Confor processor group last year, a new Private Sector Production Forecast working group (PSWG) has been set up, and met for the first time in March 2008. The PSWG is made up of private sector representatives with expertise in data management, and FC members, who are either involved in delivering the new forecast system or have a forecasting policy role in their countries. Its main terms of reference are straightforward.

- **To improve the accuracy and quality of the private sector production forecast**
- **To encourage and achieve a greater level of engagement in the production forecast process by the private sector, by using its data, where available and appropriate, as input to the forecast system.**

The aim is to make the best use of existing data, where it is readily available, and agree ways to resolve any barriers to accessing it to allow straightforward data migration. As part of the process, we are asking for support from those who have and hold data about the woodlands in their ownership or management. The first task for the PSWG will be to quantify the volume of data that is potentially available, and the variety of formats which it is held in. We are also interested in assessments of data quality. For example has it been collected according to the mensurational standards in the 'Blue book', or by some other methodology. Finally we would like to know how it might be accessed, if made available.

By carrying out this exercise over the next few months, we can determine where the significant gaps in data availability are, and target resources through the National Inventory to plug them. If the crop information is available, the 2011 forecast can then be an amalgam of FC, private sector, and national inventory data. This will provide a more accurate forecast, for less cost, and which can be updated more frequently.

At the same time, the FC is undertaking a complete rewrite of the software used to produce both its own forecast, and that for the private sector. The intention is to have one forecast programme for both purposes, reducing the costs of future maintenance, and allowing greater harmonisation of inputs. Due to the complexity of the process, which involves the forecast program rewrite, combining FC, national inventory, and other sources of data, the next published forecast will be produced in 2011.

Currently, the FC is working on a new spatial map of all woodland in GB to be complete in 2009. Once the map is finished, data on the nature of the woodland estate will be required to allow predictions of future volumes to be made from it. In the past this data has been collected solely through the National Inventory of Woodland and Trees (NIWT) using a national sampling framework of plots. Some of the data for the 2011 forecast will be provided from these samples, but if we are to improve accuracy and confidence limits, then access to better data will be necessary. Options which are being explored include carrying out another national survey, but allowing for the concept of data top ups from existing or new data sets. The survey plots will be permanent and will be revisited at regular intervals to monitor change. They will also be 'tiered' to save costs, allowing for greater precision at GB, than at country and regional levels respectively. For the Private Sector softwood forecast, around 2300 one hectare samples with ten 0.01ha mensurational plots per sample will be required to enable a forecast of standing timber to +/- 2% at GB, +/- 4% at Country and +/- 8% at Region. At this stage it is proposed that there will be 14 regions in GB.

We believe that the private sector holds a lot of useful data, which will aid this process, particularly data on management intentions for bringing timber to market. The FC project team is exploring ways of making use of this where it can be made available, while safeguarding the interests of the data owners. To ensure confidence in the information arising from this new data, the FC will use statistical methodology to derive the results and will provide quantifiable

confidence intervals with all the resultant information. This is seen as crucial to restoring confidence in the outputs of the national forecast. To achieve this will require the support and commitment of the private sector growers and management companies. The benefits will be improved forecasts, both nationally at a strategic level, and locally at an investment or managerial level. The new forecast system will also include predictions of log quality and woodfuel product volumes, which will be of enormous benefit to owners, buyers, and sellers alike.

The PSWG will be exploring ways of developing an efficient process for making the data available to the forecast at regular intervals, and will work to create continuity between data input by the private sector to the forecast and that used for the Forestry Commission Estate. This will include improved mensurational practice, and will also be considering and making recommendations on steps to be taken towards developing plans and methodologies to allow future forecasts of hardwood production to be underpinned by better quality data. However, the initial work of the group will be towards improving the prediction of conifer volume for the 2011 forecast.

A key desire will be to foster a sense of shared ownership of the Production Forecast and to provide appropriate Private Sector representatives to the review process of the Production Forecast outputs. The work of the PSWG will initially be aimed at delivering the 2011 forecast, but this is very much seen as the start of a process which will continue long after that.

Further information about the work of the PSWG and how to get involved in supporting it can be found on the FC website at www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/hcou-4u4jgx. This will provide details of the membership, the programme of work, the full terms of reference, who to contact, and how to provide the data we are looking for. The Forestry Commission commits to ensuring that data provided will be kept confidential, and will not make public any reports or forecasts, which would enable an individual owner's woodlands to be identified.

The Forestry Commission and Confor are fully committed to making this new initiative work for the benefit of the whole forestry sector. We believe that it represents the best opportunity that there has been to improve the quality and currency of the national production forecast, and to deliver real and long lasting benefits for those who manage, grow, and make use of the timber resource in GB woodlands. We look forward to your support to make it happen.



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