

When to convert woods and forests to open habitat in England: Government policy: summary.

This is a summary of Government policy on how to decide when to convert woodland to open habitat in England. We, the Forestry Commission, developed this policy working with Defra, Natural England and others. Our ambition is to generate landscapes that provide benefits for people and wildlife for the 21st Century. We will achieve this through land-use change using conversion of woodland to open habitat in tandem with woodland creation.

The aims of this policy are to:

- generate biodiverse landscapes of open habitat and woodland that provide long-term benefits to people and wildlife;
- make sure that conversion of woodland results in more open habitat which makes a significant contribution to biodiversity objectives; and
- minimise any negative impacts on the ability of woodland and forestry to increasingly contribute towards a low-carbon economy.

The outcomes we want from the policy are:

- resilient ecological communities, where wildlife, including open habitat species, is able to cope with changes so that biodiversity is maintained and enhanced;
- woodland and forestry that make an increased contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, through higher rates of woodland expansion and by maintaining the area of commercially productive woodland;
- land management which is financially viable in the long-term so that resilient biodiverse landscapes can be maintained and the call on public funding is within manageable limits; and
- people's engagement with the landscape they use, particularly their local landscape, is maintained or enhanced.

To make progress on all these aspects we will apply the following principles:

- **the right tree in the right place;**
- **the right habitat in the right place; and**
- **the right change at the right pace.**

We will deliver this policy using the following elements.

- **A framework** for site-by-site decision-making based on converting woodland to open habitat where it will consolidate current high quality habitat, or where it will significantly enhance key species and habitats.
- **A mechanism** for balancing woodland removal and woodland creation based on making reasonable progress on both enhancing open habitats to benefit wildlife and creating woodland to help reduce greenhouse gases.

- We estimate that the level of ambition for land-use change that represents reasonable progress on both, is a rate of conversion of woodland to open habitat of about 1,000 ha per year, if the rate of woodland expansion also accelerates. An increase in the rate of conversion of woodland to open habitat will therefore start slowly and progress towards 1,000 ha per year with an accelerating rate of woodland expansion.
- The mechanism will include compensatory planting in certain circumstances, and maintaining the total area of commercially productive woodland, such as conifers.
- **A process** for ensuring local involvement in decision-making from the early stages of any proposals for conversion of woodland to open habitat.
- **Standards** for conversion and for managing habitats created or woodland retained to:
 - minimise negative impacts on aspects such as landscape, access, and soils;
 - minimise greenhouse gas emissions during conversion;
 - make sure woodland is managed so it can still be converted at a later date if needed; and
 - provide information on where to create permanent open habitat, and where more dynamic mosaics of woodland and open habitat are desirable.
- **Evaluation** of progress towards the outcomes we want. We will do this with our stakeholders. We will assess progress using indicators of outcomes such as the amount of open habitat restored, or expanded, and changes in the area of productive woodland.

In collaboration with Natural England and working with others, we will evolve the delivery mechanisms available to Government to implement the policy. Key delivery mechanisms are regulation, grants, and publicly owned land.

We will publish a strategy for open habitats on the Forestry Commission public forest estate.

We will review this policy in 2015.

To find out more about this policy, including the full policy document, go to www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats or contact:

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