

# Restoring and expanding open habitats from woods and forest in England: summary of consultation.

## What is this about?

This is a summary of a public consultation by we in the Forestry Commission on Government policy on restoring and expanding open habitats from woods and forests in England. The full consultation can be found at [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats-consultation](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats-consultation) or contact Dominic Driver, Forestry Commission (contact details below).

## The policy challenge

The key challenge is to work out what “the right tree in the right place” means in practice for a landscape that provides environmental, social, and economic benefits for everyone now and in the future.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century large areas of open habitat such as heathland, moorland, wetland, bog and unimproved grassland were planted with conifers for timber production. On other areas, trees such as pine and birch became established due to natural regeneration. These types of open habitat are now recognised as valuable for their wildlife, landscape and cultural heritage. Restoring and expanding priority open habitats has become part of delivering biodiversity objectives. The woods and forests that were planted or grew up on open habitat during the last century provide a potential resource for this. However, woods and forests also provide many other benefits and many people do not like to see woods and forests being removed. In addition, open habitats are usually more costly to manage than woods and forests.

There are about 130,000ha of woodland on potential open habitat but it is unlikely that all of this would be removed under any reasonable timescale. Over the policy timescale

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of 10 to 15 years<sup>1</sup> possible intervention rates range from 370ha per year to 3,000ha per year of woodland removal, 5,600ha to 30,000ha in total.

We need a policy to enable effective decision making about when it is right to remove woods and forests on potential open habitat and when it is right to retain them. This will help make sure that we have a landscape that delivers more public benefits overall now and in the future and a process of change that is supported by most people.

## Our approach to the challenge

A Strategy for England's Trees, Woods and Forests (ETWF) and the England Biodiversity Strategy include commitments to develop this policy with us as the lead body. Ministers will make the final decision on the policy. We are neutral but committed to developing workable policy options that take into account all of the Government's aims within ETWF: a sustainable resource, climate change, natural environment, quality of life, and business and markets.

We are following a cycle for effective policymaking working closely with Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs, Department for Energy and Climate Change and Natural England. We are taking an open approach involving stakeholders and publishing intermediate steps at [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats). In delivering this approach we are following a nine-step process which includes this consultation, step 5.

## Consultation.

The consultation consists of a web-based document published at [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats-consultation](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats-consultation). We launched it on 12 March 2009 and it will close on 5 June 2009.

In the consultation document we propose six elements present in any policy:

- Treat woodland and open habitats as mutually beneficial.
- A presumption against removal of 'mature native woodland'.
- Practitioners<sup>2</sup> to help local users take part in developing the initial proposals.
- Setting priorities for woodland removal or retention at a regional level.
- A framework for evaluating individual projects.
- Avoid net deforestation in England.

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<sup>1</sup> The timescale of the Government's Strategy for England's Trees Woods and Forests.

<sup>2</sup> People or organisations (including us) restoring or expanding open habitats from woods or forests.

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We discuss the following three key variables:

- The balance between achieving biodiversity objectives and reducing carbon emissions.
- Managing open habitats to keep them in 'favourable condition' or adopting a more dynamic approach of shifting mosaics of trees and open areas.
- The level of woodland removal for restoration or expansion of open habitats that would avoid a significant negative impact on the timber industry.

We also include sections on the evidence, the correct rate of restoration, desired outcomes, indicators for evaluation, approaches to decision making, and criteria for helping decide which option is best. We also discuss the role of compensatory planting. Finally, we set out the implications for delivery mechanisms as follows:

- Public funding – English Woodland Grant Scheme and Higher Level Stewardship.
- Adapting the way legislation is implemented –felling licences, Environmental Impact Assessment, SSSI condition, and Countryside and Rights of Way Act.
- Publicly owned land – Forestry Commission Public Forest estate, Defence Estates.
- Codes of practice and standards.
- Research and evidence.

We set out specific questions in the full document but welcome comments on any aspect. We are keen to hear from people who use woodland, forest and open habitat in their daily lives as well as from people and organisations with a professional interest. We are notifying stakeholders by e-mail and publishing the consultation in the press. We are also supporting consultation events for areas with specific issues or interests. This includes some events focussed on young people.

Please look at the full consultation at [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats-consultation](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats-consultation) and let us know your views by 17.00 Friday 5 June 2009. When you respond please complete the Information On You form, also on the web site.

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