

Restoration of Open Habitats from Woods and Forests Policy Development Workshop

26 September 2008

Points made during plenary sessions.

General

- There are capacity issues that must be taken in to account.
- There is a lot of anecdotal evidence but not much factual evidence. Is there evidence available elsewhere which has not yet been captured? Several contributors suggested other sources of evidence. There was also discussion over how much further evidence was required for policy principles to be established.
- Processes will be required to sustain open habitats, e.g. grazing. Follow up points were made that management processes would require a workforce and would bring in other rural economic activity, especially linked to agricultural practices and tourism.
- The relative importance of the issues depends on the scale. It is difficult to determine how significant particular issues are until the scale of magnitude is known. It would have been helpful to have various scenarios to consider. There are questions about pace and rate of change that must be taken into account.
- Political perception may be disproportionate to the actual change.
- It is necessary to consider how the evidence base will be perceived more widely.
- The importance of communications was stressed. In particular, carbon balance and forestry and timber sector confidence were noted as being communications issues.
- A top-down approach is quantitatively based, but we need to bear in mind the quality of the areas created.
- There was a need to clarify which outcomes need to be delivered at a national level (e.g. UK obligations) and require Ministerial decision-making, and which are lower level decisions which need to be guided by good practice standards and processes.

Carbon

- Carbon could have a large impact if sustainable timber is taken into account. More evidence is needed.
- The evidence about carbon is varied, but the public perception is that there is a lot of evidence and it is a big issue.
- A clear national analysis is needed on how important woodland is for carbon.

Biodiversity

- There is a lot of evidence about birds but there are also wider biodiversity considerations.

- At a landscape level there needs to be consideration of how woodland biodiversity and open habitat biodiversity can co-exist. Mention was made of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan as giving a priority framework for this.

Impacts on business

- There would be a potential loss of production and impacts on machinery use.
- Many businesses are dependent on woodlands/ open habitats, e.g. tourism, grazing etc. Evidence is needed on the full range of economic and social activities.
- Engagement with sawmill owners is required.
- The perceived effects on business may be disproportionate to the actual change.

Regional/local impacts

- It is necessary to consider the regional or local impact, and not just the national perspective.
- The consideration of local factors must include soil and topography.
- It is necessary to consider how aggressively the policy will be followed both nationally and regionally.
- Delivery will be complex because of regional and local issues.
- Will there be national and regional planting targets?
- It is necessary to consider the extent to which local/public concerns can be expressed through processes such as environmental impact assessments.
- It is necessary to stress in the national policy that there is a geographic element to delivery.

Compensatory planting

- There are issues around compensatory planting e.g. if open habitats are created in England, does it count if trees are planted in Scotland.

Public perceptions

- It is necessary to consider what the public think. There is evidence on short-term views but there needs to be consideration of what the public think of changes in the long-term (e.g. 10 years after the open habitats are created).

International commitments

- The UK has signed up to international agreements which impose obligations relating to forestry. Therefore the Government has commitments to ensure the right number of trees in the appropriate places. However these commitments often focus on ensuring trees remain in particular areas of the world, e.g. rainforests. Therefore the deforestation argument needs to be used carefully.

Management

- There needs to be consideration about how open habitats will be managed.

- There was discussion over the quality of evidence on the condition of open ground and woodland. Some felt that there was not enough evidence on condition others that there was a good evidence on the condition of SSSIs and that much open habitat is SSSI..

Landscape

- Landscape designations have levels within them. We have commitments to designate areas and need to keep landscape in mind as a high priority.
- Regard must be had to the Landscape Convention which the UK has signed.