

# THE CASE FOR RETAINING AN INTEGRATED FORESTRY COMMISSION



The purpose of this paper is to clarify why the current union mandate to retain a fully integrated sustainably resourced and evolving Forestry Commission (FC) should be supported and thereby prevent the FC from being torn apart to satisfy a Westminster political whim.

## **Foreword**

In 1918 the 14<sup>th</sup> Lord Lovat (Chairman of the Forestry Commission from 1919 to 1927) said *"it is not, however with the past but with the future that the nation is concerned, how to make a forestry policy, how to carry it out and if the occasion arises, use the resources that the State has built up for the State's best advantage"*. The Acland report of 1919 paved the way for the legislation required to set up the Forestry Commission (FC) and to resonate with the thoughts of Lord Lovat.

This is still true today after nearly 100 years. We contend that the FC is the ideal organisation for achieving the desires of the public and is best placed to achieve the UK Government's and the devolved administrations' future policies on protecting, improving and expanding woodlands.

The continued positive evolution of the FC has provided the secure foundation of public forests that are to the advantage of the public and from which many benefits to the public are derived.

## **Summary**

The need to keep a fully integrated FC is discussed extensively throughout this paper. It indicates the advantages of retaining the (so far unevaluated) staff resource and the interaction between the different parts of the FC to meet common outcomes and a variety of policies as designed by governments and applied by ministers. Many of these staff are public facing and as such they portray the friendly and professional face of the organisation by which the organisation is often judged. Other staff in the FC provide the support systems to achieve the objectives of the organisation; and all of these staff are working from numerous locations in England and Scotland. Communication is therefore a vital component to keep a focus on the common goals that need to be achieved. This communication connection across the FC allows the ease of passing up-to-the-minute information very quickly and reliably; and provides the opportunity to muster resources speedily and in a coherent fashion. The breaking of these connections will jeopardise the fast response to emerging issues and threats to trees from pests and diseases. The FC is much greater than the sum of its component parts and, as such, is currently delivering complex objectives whilst planning for the future and taking lessons from the past. It can and should continue to do this if it remains fully integrated, sustainably resourced and is allowed to evolve to meet new challenges.

## **Introduction**

There are less than 2500 people employed by the FC in England and Scotland responsible for managing 707,500 Hectares of forests and woodland—that's bigger than the Isle of Man—on behalf of the British public. The cost of employing these staff is approximately £90Million; however, the Independent Panel on Forestry concluded in their report that for every £20Million invested in the Public Forest Estate in England, £400Million worth of benefits can be realised.

It's not only about the money, however, it's also that intangible connection we all have with woods and trees which means that many of us can spend time relaxing or taking exercise in those special places to which no monetary value can be applied.

No matter how the public enjoy their forest visit—whether it's by simply taking a walk or through a more organised event—those forests are there as a direct result of the investment by decades of taxpayers in their support of the Forestry Commission. The staff within the FC have adapted to changing policies and the needs of the public, which has led to developing modern forests that meet all of today's challenges. These publicly sponsored forests and woodlands now provide for climate change mitigation, flood alleviation, soils stability, economic activity, alongside providing health and wellbeing.

## **The Case for Integration**

For clarity it is useful to state at the outset what the FCTU are calling for; the rationale and case for which is set out in detail below.

- a) A fully integrated and adequately resourced Forestry Commission.
- b) The Forestry Commission to retain existing functions and include those emerging from the Independent Panel Review;
- c) The Forestry Commission to be answerable to Parliament via sponsoring department such as DEFRA; to the Secretary of State; and/or appropriate Ministers in the devolved Administrations;
- d) In Scotland we would wish to see a permanent focus on forestry and the National Forest Estate through a fully integrated FC and a retention of Civil Service status;

- e) All employees of the Forestry Commission especially those currently involved in the delivery and management of the Public Forest Estate must retain their civil service status;
- f) No privatisation of any FC functions.

Our rationale as to why the Forestry Commission and its members of staff should continue to deliver multi-benefits from the Public Forest Estate (England) and the National Forest Estate (Scotland) is as follows:

The FCTU believe that the current structure of the FC comprising the component parts of Central Services with Forest Research; Forestry Commission England with Forest Services and Forest Enterprise England<sup>+</sup>; and Forestry Commission Scotland with Forest Enterprise Scotland remains the best way forward to coordinate expertise, management, research and the testing and development of government policy initiatives.

The strength of the FC is in its integrated nature given the scale and scope of the work it undertakes and the need to work across Whitehall departments and other administrations. We do not believe that disbanding the current elements of the FC to a disparate number of bodies would strengthen the ability to deliver forestry and woodland policy. Moreover this requires an integrated whole with an overarching body to undertake the governance role required to manage the various sub-departments such as Forest Services, Research, Forest Enterprise and cross-border functions.

Whilst Britain's trees, woodlands and forests do not deliver environmental, social or business benefits alone, the FC's role is to balance these objectives in a sustainable way with the resources available. Multi-purpose forest management is better achieved through a fully integrated FC, which is an ideal springboard for delivery of ecosystems services and many other benefits.

Integration is a key factor with the depth of skills from a loyal and dedicated workforce who hold a common vision of the FC and are not constrained by location or borders. This common purpose has been in place for nearly a century. It remains the FC's greatest strength and is founded on the integration of the staff body, which to the casual observer remains unseen and unevaluated. The public forests as utilised by today's society are there not only in response to government policy, but because of

the FC and its staff who see themselves as the people who understand the needs of trees, the needs of the environment and the needs of people.

We wish to see the right tree in the right place from which economic benefits are derived; from growth to thinning and, where appropriate, final felling with subsequent renewal taking place. We need these trees to be resilient and protected from pests and diseases. To aid this we require our colleagues in Forest Research to have the resources in place now to look towards the needs of trees in the future so that we always have the right tree in the right place. We therefore call for our present day integration to continue to allow FC scientists to have an accessible working forest in which to undertake experiments that provide confidence in which trees we should be growing; and where, for another hundred years or more.

Environmental needs borne from a fully integrated FC provide for a clear understanding of how our public forests can aid in the mitigation of soil erosion, flood threat and the effects of climate change. The members of staff in the FC work towards another common goal when faced with these sorts of issue and as such, a pool of professional expertise can be readily mobilised to face any one of these threats to the forest and adjacent environments. These same staff members are also dedicated to the protection of some of our most endangered species and habitats, and work together to ensure the continued existence of flora and fauna that may be put under further threat from outside influences. The FC was the very first state forest management organisation to obtain independent certification against the standards for sustainable forest management as set by the Forest Stewardship Council. This was due to the FC transforming 20<sup>th</sup> century even aged plantations into the diverse forests of today; by which a wide range of economic, social and environmental outcomes are derived and which current and future generations will benefit from.

The staff members in Forest Services England/Forestry Commission Scotland constitute the regulatory bodies that oversee the industry—public and private—to ensure that government standards are met, and are responsible for promoting forest expansion and applying stringent forest standards. This ensures that we integrate new afforestation into the landscape, and this should be seen as very complementary to the established public forests. We have mentioned flood alleviation and water, and we could argue that the public forest does its bit; however, it generally has a static role in this (as we manage already to a high standard) but through grants to the private

sector we can enlarge woodland cover and add to established woodlands to achieve these goals. The integration of staff within the various parts of the FC is crucial to making sure standards are met; that members of staff are fresh and current, and the needs of the forest industry are properly championed.

To meet an evolutionary objective this will mean forests getting closer to people—local people—to have a connection to forests. FC staff are easily recognised and have demonstrated that they are easily approachable by the public and will do their very best to deal with enquiries and offer assistance. This is seen as important to those visiting a forest or woodland for the first time in being welcomed and made to feel safe in this type of setting. Many of those who are termed as disadvantaged within society can feel at ease and on an equal footing when they meet members of FC staff and enjoy the benefits of being in an FC forest.

The FC currently through its dedicated workforce will proactively engage with communities to ensure that the needs of people can be accommodated into the forest and that any potentially negative impacts are understood and minimised. Trees within these community areas are there to provide timber and many other benefits which local communities—through consultation—can very much be involved in what those benefits deliver and how they enhance their community. It is important that these sometimes competing benefits are fully and professionally explained by FC staff. This can be crucial in explaining the difference between commercial woodlands and urban parks to the public—being able to demonstrate the life cycle of a forest tree. This is not just confined to the rural areas of England and Scotland but to many of our urban neighbourhoods equally, in which the forests and woods come to the people and our staff broker the connection between people and trees.

It is the competence of FC staff who can readily grasp these fundamental values, that the integrated nature of the current organisation is able to provide the depth of expertise, which allows the public and communities to have confidence in the FC. This confidence was very evident when previous attempts to reduce the forest estate led to public outrage and they sought to defend not only the estate but the FC as well. Since the Independent Panel on Forestry Report in July 2012, there has been a perpetuated disconnect by the Westminster government to separate the staff of the FC from the estates that they manage on behalf of the public. The disconnect serves these politicians well as it blinds the public to what the future management of the estate will

look like in the future. Present day members of FC staff believe that if the estate is managed and owned by the proposed Public Forest Estate Management Organisation (PFEMO) outside the FC, it will lead towards a more profit based outcome and eventual privatisation. Should this occur, then the public will feel cheated but will not be in a position to alter this course of action once it commences. It is therefore imperative that retaining a fully integrated FC is the only way to safeguard the public forests and to ensure that any perceived disconnect between estate and FC staff is prevented.

### **Why Integration is Important**

The argument we need to make to politicians to maintain an integrated FC is essentially an ideological one: do you support the transfer of public assets to the private sector (as this is what will be the eventual outcome of a public corporation and we have seen many instances of the government shedding services from the Civil Service to outside organisations and private contractors) or do you support the right of the British people to hold their public forests in perpetuity for the good of the nation and future generations? If it's the latter answer, then they must be vested in the state as this is the only guarantee of long term stability; and the costs are insignificant. Both of these options may require legislative changes; however, to disband the FC and the Commissioners comes with massive risks. Whichever option is pursued, the arguments mean that we will be clear about what is being changed, and people will be able to express a view about it. At the moment, the option for a PFEMO is a wolf in sheep's clothing, which may appear to be sensible to many, but which is premised on an underlying desire to tear apart the FC. We also need to be mindful of lessons learned from the creation of Natural Resources Wales to ensure that the timber industry has the confidence in such an organisation and that the focus on forestry is permanently maintained.

FC forests remain the only stake that the majority of Britons have in the fabric of their country, excluding their houses, and still represent the largest area of common land in this country. They provide a huge range of benefits at a minimal cost for all to enjoy regardless of income, ability, race, or creed. Virtually every other developed nation on earth manages forestry as a partnership between the state and the private sector. Where these ties are loosened or cut, we see poor forest management standards, illegal logging and clearance for agriculture etc. In England the PFE is a social good, managed by the FC for this purpose. We get this from the PFE currently, where the

imperative to manage selectively for greater profitability is curbed. This is unlikely to remain the case—as our argument asserts—under a PFEMO, where over time the priorities will change; and of course, time is the key here. Forestry needs a long time and continuity of management to deliver the greatest range of benefits to society. The arguments made on the grounds of cost are spurious, as most of upland agriculture would stop tomorrow if the same metric was applied.

The value of a well coordinated and dynamic forestry sector to the rural economy is in providing over £7bn to GDP and 29,000 jobs, which is genuine economic activity with a minimum of public support supporting rural communities.

Through the FC, our public forests give us the timber for house building; wood fuel to heat those homes and our furniture is made either directly from sawn timber or wood by-products. This much heralded sustainable resource is seen by many as being an important facet for the long-term future of the British economy.

### **Finally**

Since the Acland report of 1919, the FC has used the integrated model to deliver ever-changing policies, environmental objectives and social improvements. For this to persist we need to support the continued work of the FC and its professional and dedicated staff to ensure that the fully integrated, sustainably resourced and evolving FC can go on with providing a sustained service to the British public for another 100 years or more.

FCTU Secretary

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FORESTRY COMMISSION TRADE UNIONS