

Making private woodlands valuable in England.

Gabriel Hemery, of Forestry Horizons, comments on the England Forestry Strategy consultation.

England's trees, woods and forests face three key challenges:

1. The needs to increase the asset value of the growing resource;
2. The ratio of conservation outputs to inputs needs to be enhanced;
3. England's environmental footprint needs to be reduced.

The depression in the forest industry seems to extend beyond timber prices. The recent England Forestry Strategy (Defra 2006) consultation has done little to lift the spirits of the forest industry. Improvements required for: production to play a role, a better evidence-base, and greater vision. By continuing to focus on non-market benefits and being led by short-term policy, the industry is in danger of failing to meet any of these challenges.

The need for a productive culture

It is well understood that government intervention in support of timber production is no longer appropriate. It seems less understood by policy-makers that the reality for woodland owners is that production is often an important and necessary objective. A clear message from the consultation meeting in June was that Defra/FC faces difficulty in referring to economic production with their policy masters. Therefore the industry must present its vision to fit the policy interests of government.

“Our goal should be to build a profitable, innovative and competitive industry, which helps build sustainable rural communities while making a positive net contribution to the environment....” said David Miliband, secretary of state for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, July 2006.

Unfortunately, the statement was directed at the agriculture industry. Would this not be an admirable vision for the government in connection to forestry? Why are Defra/FC civil servants shy of using the term ‘production’ or ‘profitable’? Unlike agriculture, the forestry industry is small and lacks the co-ordination and profile to influence policy development sufficiently. However, the economic pillar is important in any sustainable system and should fit alongside environmental and social agendas. At present the latter two have gained higher recognition.

The background paper to the consultation provides a balanced view of the issues facing the timber industry and arguments for and against government intervention. There is ample and growing evidence that lack of management is adversely affecting conservation (p.4). These and other non-market benefits can be delivered by an economically viable timber industry. A key barrier is the false dichotomy placed on timber production delivering a separate function from non-market outputs. Forestry, certainly in the broadleaved private sector, has an excellent track record in multiple benefit delivery.

A 'productive culture' could support economic sustainability, which must permeate forestry policy, strategies and action on the ground. It should also reflect the needs of England's trees, woods and forests. The industry wants a policy framework that supports productive forestry, more than short-term, unsustainable grants. There is a need to educate the public (including ‘hobby’ woodland owners) and indeed policy-makers, in addition to gaining support for marketing and innovation initiatives.

Poor evidence-base for policy formulation

The principle evidence-base used in the development of the strategy (Crabtree, Willis et al. 2005) was flawed. In turn, this led to a strategy document which was poorly focussed and unbalanced.

i.) ‘The study does not cover in any detail the timber processing sector nor the prospects for timber prices or markets’ (p.1, Section 1.2).

These are critical issues affecting the sustainability of England's woodlands. More evidence is required.

ii.) ‘Imported timber that is harvested non-sustainably’ .. is... ‘a complex issue beyond the scope of this study’ (p.2, Section 1.4).

Yet the continued sourcing of timber from unsustainable sources, even within Europe, is a key argument in support of the development of our home-grown timber resource. Added to this,

opportunities from increasing regionalisation in terms of sourcing home-grown materials and the rising energy crisis, should mean that timber and wood products, or 'production', should be key to any vision. As a signatory of the 1992 UNCED Rio Declaration, the UK government acknowledged its responsibility to ensure that activities within its jurisdiction did not cause environmental damage beyond its borders.

iii.) Conifer bias

The evidence-base has extreme bias towards conifers/softwoods as there is clearly a lack of evidence relating to broadleaves/hardwoods. This is a critical issue because the structure of conifer/broadleaved ownership is almost exactly reversed between the FC and the private sector in England (FC 74 % conifers / 26 % broadleaves: private 24 % conifers / 76 % broadleaves). Of the 754 000ha broadleaved woodland in England, 93 % is in private hands. Yet the evidence-base relies on economic forecasts relating to softwoods and, by default, represents the interests more of FC than the private sector.

It is unacceptable that the interests of government largely rest on broadleaves, but the evidence-base does not, or that the forestry industry is expected to follow government lead. How can Defra reconcile the industry's desire for productivity with the government's policy aims? Defra and FC need to enhance links with the forestry industry so that agendas beyond those pushed by powerful lobbying conservation and countryside organisations are also recognised. The statement below succinctly summarises the challenge for government:

'We will only fulfil our objective of achieving sustainable woodland management in England by working in partnership with the people who own and manage the woodlands.' Jim Knight MP (former forestry minister).

FC should commission further research in support of English forestry:

1. More emphasis on broadleaves/hardwoods, including economic forecasts for hardwood outputs;
2. Forest/woodland owners' requirements and views (rather than just NGOs);
3. Markets for hardwoods in the light of regionalisation, unsustainable hardwood imports, woodheat/fuel opportunities.

Lack of vision for England's trees, woods and forests

The lack of vision in the strategy was of great concern. A new vision is essential, which addresses a fast-changing environment, in both a physical (climate change) and economic (moving away from an oil-based economy) sense, and this should fit with forest rotation timescales (40-100 years). Governments could change between 15 and 30 times while a single broadleaved woodland matures. Boldness and innovation will go down well in the industry.

What next?

Let us hope that the industry has responded with sufficient weight to the public consultation. Even more so, let us hope that government listens.

References

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Forestry Horizons is an independent project established in 2006 aiming to make private forests valuable in England. It is supported by leading forestry and environmental scientists, and business leaders. Gabriel Hemery is project director.
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