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Growing broadleaves for quality timber

A tale of two

Policies and institutional attitudes towards the growing of broadleaves for quality timber have diverged between England and Scotland. **Rick Worrell and Gabriel Hemery** highlight the oddly different approaches in the two countries and issue a challenge to owners to take better control in the destiny of the forestry sector.

Scotland

The concept of broadleaved timber being an important part of the forestry profession got swept away by the focus on conifers during the 1970s and 1980s. However, a few private estates carried on with good management and Forest Enterprise maintained a handful of sites. When broadleaves emerged as a valid aspect of forestry in the 1990s, they did so as 'native woodlands', in which timber production rarely afforded any meaningful priority by policy-makers, owners or agents. Strangely, many of the key voices and organisations in the 'native woodland movement' were keen on timber production (for example, *Worrell and Callander 1996*). However, this part of the message got dissipated in the policy process (where it was undermined by some strictly environmental NGOs) and timber was abandoned by many owners and agents trying to maximise grants and minimise costs. Meaningful support for the growing of broadleaves for timber only emerged recently after a short campaign by growers and Scottish members of British and Irish Hardwoods Improvement Programme (BIHIP) sparked a national debate, which spawned an FC working group and injected the issue into the key policy documents (Scottish Forestry Strategy and new Scottish Woodland Grant Scheme - under development). So after flirting briefly with the notion that broadleaves were only capable of delivering public benefits, foresters in Scotland made it plain that this was not sensible, and put timber production back on the agenda.

It would be good to report that this has led to a surge of activity on the ground, but that is really not the case. There are moves to set up demonstration areas in both private and public forest and FES is increasing its commitments to the growing of broadleaves. However, progress is limited by the disarray in Scottish grant schemes, but also because owners appear reluctant to commit the kind of money needed to establish and manage timber crops. There is a hint that some owners have become over-reliant on grants, with the

result that short-term grant income weighs too heavily in management decisions, at the expense of sound silvicultural investments. Grants introduced to combat market failure are maybe generating failures of their own!

England

Growing hardwoods for timber was an accepted part of forest policy until recent years, although conifers dominated FC policy and research. Since then the support of hardwood forestry has been pressurised by:

- public benefits argument – public money should only be used to deliver public benefits and timber income was not considered admissible. This has been strengthened by the perception that the large population of England means that public outputs are more important than in Scotland;
- free trade issues – government should not be allowed to support commodity production as this distorts free trade;
- environmental interests arguing that environmental benefits have historically been overlooked and require a period of high priority to make up for historic under-representation.

The result of this is that forestry policy-making in England has become overwhelmed by social and environmental policies and this has acted to alienate owners. One of the principle outcomes has been to exacerbate under-management of broadleaved woods (currently extending to 600 000ha in England). Ironically, this under-management has now been linked with negative impacts on biodiversity (*Amar et al., 2006; Braithwaite et al., 2006; Fox et al., 2006*). As well as the lack of support for economic outcomes, owners are frustrated by a lack of recognition for their concerns about their abilities to provide public benefits (for example, public access problems). Another real and long-lasting frustration for private English growers has been that some of Forest Research's efforts, particularly in tree improvement, are not meeting their needs. In practice, the forestry sector in England is a significant contributor to the English economy and to peoples' lives; the sector employs 420 000 full-time (*England Forest Industries Partnership, 2006*), supporting 2.5% of the UK economy in 2005 (*CEBR, 2006*). Well over half of the forest estate in England is broadleaved, most of which (82%) is in private hands. That these woodlands must be a major focus for the delivery of public benefit is not in dispute. However, if sustainability means anything at all, it is clear that policies must enable broadleaves (as well as conifers) to be managed in a way which is economically sustainable. Forestry in England now has limited strategic vision, as the sector still looks to FC for leadership, whilst FC and FE must do

timber in England and Scotland to countries

more to meet the needs of private woodland owners.

Some relief from the feeling of gloom has arisen. ConFor, is pressing the case for economics to be accepted as a major driver for the private sector in its pursuit of sustainable solutions. There is now real interest in an increase in woodland management from country conservation agencies, and an emerging focus on wood for energy and concern about future wood security. Perhaps we should be asking: is timber production a public good?

Public support for timber production?

Politicians have, understandably, come under pressure to be seen to be producing public benefits in return for public money. We do not have a problem with that principle, but you have to think hard about what constitutes public benefits and how they are produced. Forestry is an odd occupation. It is almost unique in that government money can be provided for apparently solely productive purposes, yet the outcome inevitably includes an impressive array of public benefits – the finest example of this being quality broadleaved stands. This mechanism does not work half as well in farming, and, as a result, ‘production subsidies’ have gained a bad reputation, a poison which has spilled over into forestry policy.

The other key issue is that most broadleaved woodlands in both England and Scotland are in private hands, so whatever policies and support are applied, they need to appeal to private owners. Private owners respond well to support for productive management; they also respond well to a balanced portfolio of support for productive and public benefits. But an unbalanced suite of support mechanisms that effectively fail to recognise the role of timber and income generation will only breed cynicism and disengagement.

What should policy-makers do?

A new framework needs to be developed to ensure appropriate woodland activity. We do not believe that swallowing the ‘public benefits’ and ‘free trade’ arguments uncritically and diverting public resources solely into environmental and social outcomes is an option. We suspect that would continue to fail to engage most owners and would badly skew the forestry profession. A far better approach is to develop a balanced suite of public support underpinning environmental, social and economic outcomes of forestry. Tactics here appear twofold. Firstly, we must continue to hammer home the message that support for productive operations in broadleaved forestry will actually provide very good public benefits, and in the long-term that unassailable logic

might make in-roads. Secondly, policy-makers can be more creative about how they design and label public support for productive outcomes. Planting at high densities, use of selected stock and careful tending do not have to carry the label ‘timber production’ if that currently sets off alarm bells in Brussels or Whitehall. As a short term expediency, more acceptable labels could be sought which deliver the same thing¹. These latter approaches appear broadly to be one which FC Scotland has been pursuing in the context of supporting quality hardwoods and maybe there is a lesson here for England.

There is also a case for moving the focus of government support away from grants as the primary motivator, to a wider suite of support to the sector including: local scale extension and business innovation work, support for seed supply; support for the hardwood wood chain and more relevant silvicultural and genetics research. This could help develop more sustainable outcomes in the long term.

What should private owners do?

This is a crucial stage in the evolution of forestry and it is vital to make government aware of the true value of well managed broadleaved woods. Furthermore, as doing is the best way to demonstrate the value of anything, we must renew our efforts to get out in the woods and create quality hardwood crops. We must stop being led by the nose by inappropriate grant schemes. We need to take firmer control of our collective destinies on this topic and half measures will not suffice.

England and Scotland

Whilst there are clearly valid differences between the two countries, which merit different policies in some contexts, the evidence points to the fact the divergence of policies has gone too far in the case of our broadleaved woodlands. The key issue is to have a policy that works for private owners, that recognises the importance of good management and timber incomes, and those fundamental outcomes do not change on either side of Hadrian’s Wall.

Reference

¹ A good example of this concerns the masterly re-labelling exercise instigated by FC Scotland. When restocking came under threat from Brussels it promptly disappeared from the draft grant scheme and ‘restructuring’ has popped up in a similar place.

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