

Forest Policy Group

The Forest Policy Group is an independent thinktank dedicated to diversifying and strengthening forestry in Scotland by the development of well founded, clearly presented policy proposals for government and its agencies, and by stimulating a wider debate about forestry in Scotland.

Participants include forestry and land use professionals, policy advisors, timber processors, architects and builders, woodland owners, community woodland organisations and NGOs.

FPG is grateful for funding from the Borders Forest Trust, Community Woodlands Association, Dynamic Woods, Native Woodlands Discussion Group, Reforesting Scotland, Network for Social Change, the Patsy Wood Trust and the Schiehallion Group, as well as in-kind contributions from participants.

1 FPG meetings, external liaison and representation

This has been a busy year in which the group has had its usual complement of three full-day meetings. We have also been active in external liaison, with Forestry Commission & Forest Enterprise, Scottish and UK parliamentary committees & the Minister for Environment and Climate Change, and colleague organisations.

In February, FPG had a very productive joint meeting and field trip with staff of Forest Enterprise (FE) which revealed much common ground and scope for advancing FPG's aims for rural development forestry in line with FE's thinking about developments on the National Forest Estate (NFE). The meeting covered a range of topics including woodlots, disposals (sales of portions of public forest), FE's admirable deer management record, and its new policy for productive broadleaves. Dialogue has continued since then and another meeting is planned for this autumn.

We are currently represented on 2 Forestry Commission panels - the Tree Health Advisory Group (represented by Rick Worrell) and the Native Woodlands Survey Response Group (by Gordon Gray Stephens).

Our convenor this year was Simon Pepper, with Ninian Stuart taking over in the autumn as convenor for 2015.

2 FPG Website and Social Media

Much work has been devoted this year to development of our new website and social media capacity. Through this, FPG aims to communicate with those in the current policy arena who may wish to follow our thinking; we also aim to stimulate interest from other like-minded organisations and individuals, and from the wider public. The new site features a blogspot and FPG is on Twitter @forest_policy or via #forestry4people. All papers mentioned below are published on the website.

3 Forest Ownership and Land Reform

FPG welcomed the publication of the Land Reform Review Group's Final Report in May this year and maintains a watching brief on how its recommendations will be developed. Following our submissions to the LRRG last year, we submitted evidence in October to the UK Parliament's Scottish Affairs Committee parallel inquiry into forestry and the tax aspects of land reform; and in June to an inquiry held by the Rural Affairs Committee of the Scottish Parliament (RACCE). Land reform and the creation of opportunities for many more types and scales of ownership, tenure and enterprise remain a vital concern for FPG, which at present we are taking forward through our support of the Scottish Woodlot Association, and liaison with Forest Enterprise on forest sales and lotting.

4 Deer Management

Last year FPG submitted a proposal for a new licensing system for deer management to the LRRG. We were pleased to be invited to give evidence to an inquiry about deer management by the RACCE committee this spring. This inquiry may have provided some encouragement to raise standards across the deer sector so we have subsequently worked with Scottish Environment LINK (the umbrella body for environmental NGOs) to develop a set of recommendations which identify policy changes necessary to establish public confidence and secure a proper balance between public interests and the exercise of private rights (Deer Management - Six Key Attributes of a Better System).

Work on this topic is on-going, including support for Reforesting Scotland's plans for a "Deer Fest" in 2016 which aims to bring together a wider range of interests in the discussion around deer management.

5 Woodlots

An FPG sub-group has been active throughout the year in supporting the Scottish Woodlot Association. SWA (established in 2012) aims to create opportunities for people to rent small forest lots for timber production, helping landowners to maximise their forestry potential, by providing advice, guidance, support and the security of a legal framework for both parties. So far, new woodlots have been created on privately owned land but FPG believes that this model of "family forestry" is also very suitable for uptake on the NFE. We were delighted that a members' debate at the Scottish Parliament in October highlighted widespread support for this new form of tenure. Following the debate, FPG members assisted SWA in the production of a briefing paper for the Minister, which has led to closer dialogue with Forestry Commission/Forest Enterprise on developing mechanisms for woodlots on the NFE.

6 The democratisation of forestry – new topic

A sense of political re-awakening in Scotland at present has stimulated a debate about how resources are shared, both natural and financial, and the role of the state in either managing them directly, or regulating their management by others, through policy and legislation. FPG's core concern is that participation and control in forestry becomes extended beyond the relatively narrow set of parties who currently own/manage forests and exert control over forestry. To this end we are engaged in developing a set of principles for the democratisation of forestry. This project will take a "light touch" approach, by production of a number of short papers and blogs, aiming to stimulate discussion and draw in the many wider voices which are not usually represented in the forest policy arena.

7 Other new papers

Three new papers for FPG will shortly be available on the website. These are:

Restoration of the uplands: Following a presentation at our spring meeting on the degraded state of the Scottish uplands and their potential for renewal through natural reforestation, we commissioned the ecologist Helen Armstrong to produce a paper highlighting the ecological and economic potential for restoration.

Development and woodland: paper from Neil Sutherland (architect) analysing the benefits of encouraging housing and small business development within forests and woodlands, current obstacles to this (chiefly within the planning system) and recommendations for recognising the potential of woodland environments for strategic integrated rural development.

Forestry and construction: paper from Bernard Planterose (architect) considering how forestry might be tailored more carefully towards meeting construction needs, present and future.

ENQUIRIES AND SUGGESTIONS:

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