

Disposals of the national forest estate and the National Forest Land Scheme

Large blocks of forest¹ being sold within the National Forest estate disposals should be subdivided into smaller lots and the National Forest land Scheme should be broadened to include small groups who have local interests.

The Re-positioning programme approved by Scottish Ministers in May 2004 was intended to increase the contribution of the national forest estate to the delivery of FCS, and wider Government objectives² and the 2010 spending review set FCS a target of selling property to the value of £10 million within 2011/2012. Without an evaluation of the FCS land re-positioning it is difficult for FCS and for Ministers to be clear what public benefits are accruing to the Scottish people from the sale³ of public land.

Within the re-positioning programme the Forestry Commission maintains a commitment to make the national forest land holding *“as useful as possible by”⁴*;

- Selling relatively small areas of land as surplus property [up to 50ha forest land and 100ha open land], and
- By selling larger bits of land to create a revolving fund to buy other land [no limit on size]

Most land being sold within the disposals programme is composed of large conifer plantations (>50ha), which invariably end up in the hands of the affluent, the landed and industrial forest interests. This has been the case since the Forestry Commission became a major seller of public land under the Conservative Government in 1980.

Diversifying forest land ownership in Scotland is likely to result in greater levels of forest use⁵ and enterprise with more local investment and jobs than is currently the case. Subdividing large forest blocks within the disposals programme would allow a wider social stratum, groups of people with a desire to actively manage forest land, to gain access to forest ownership and management thus in part, fulfill Scottish Governments objectives to;

- Deliver multiple benefits
- Stimulate partnerships with nature and
- Link people with the land

Most large blocks of monoculture conifer receive little or no management between the time of planting and the end of the rotation and create little no local or public benefit.

¹ over 50 hectares

² *“.....agricultural land, land associated with houses and other buildings, unplatable land and relatively small and isolated blocks of forestry land which do not make a significant contribution to its objectives and which are surplus to its requirements”* Further *“The Commission may also sell area for development where this is in the public interest. Areas of forest land which are important for public access will not be sold unless an access agreement is in place”*

³ And purchase – the FCS uses money from the sale of forest land to create a revolving fund for land acquisition

⁴ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infid-77cdu2>

⁵ Forest Ownership in Scotland 2011, Andy Wightman

Since the introduction of the National Forest Land Scheme in 2005 to May 2011 some 2348 hectares of land has been sold by the Forestry Commission to community groups, environmental NGOs and to Housing Associations. This figure is made up of; land for community acquisition, affordable housing and surplus land and represents approximately 10% of the 22,284 hectares of land disposed of by FCS since 2005. A further 2172.1 hectares of land has been approved for sale or lease⁶ to May 2011, with the bulk of this surplus land for sale, concentrated in one Forest District⁷, where the purchaser is a multinational environmental NGO⁸.

To date no woodland crofts have been created within the National Forest Land Scheme.

The current leasing option within the NFLS sets leasing values on a purely commercial basis, i.e. in direct relation to the value of the standing crop, and this presents a barrier to forest leasing by communities. If leasing were structured in a manner that delayed full lease costs, until such time as the community had realized a proportion of the timber value – more communities may be able to take advantage of the NFLS option with no decrease in income to the Exchequer.

Ministers should consider the creation of a new category within the NFLS;

- The Local Stakeholder Interest Group (LSHIG)

The LSHIG would not be able to operate as a community group in relation to pre-emption on state land; rather it would be eligible to access sponsored sale of surplus land and could face eligibility requirements similar to those required for community purchase or lease, with an emphasis on sustainable management and local benefit. This would facilitate local groups, not necessarily representing the whole community, to own forest land with the prospect of realizing more money to the public purse and injecting a new dynamic into woodland ownership and management.

What can be done?

- The FCS should conduct an external and critical review of the national forest land re-positioning programme;
- Large forest blocks should be broken into smaller, accessible lots for sale;
- The National Forest Land Scheme should be amended to include Local Stakeholder Interest Groups;
- The leasing option under the NFLS should be amended to reduce financial barriers; and
- The Woodland Crofts option in the NFLS should be reviewed.

⁶ [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/NFLSApplicationsStatus26-05-11.pdf/\\$FILE/NFLSApplicationsStatus26-05-11.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/NFLSApplicationsStatus26-05-11.pdf/$FILE/NFLSApplicationsStatus26-05-11.pdf)

⁷ [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/NFLSStrathnaverFDMcommentsRSPB2.pdf/\\$FILE/NFLSStrathnaverFDMcomment sRSPB2.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/NFLSStrathnaverFDMcommentsRSPB2.pdf/$FILE/NFLSStrathnaverFDMcomment sRSPB2.pdf)

⁸ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7yydB6>