

Restocking of harvested plantations

Restocking of harvested plantations should be far more carefully planned to rebalance the species mix and ensure delivery of public benefits for the public funding involved. This is also crucial as insurance against emerging pest and diseases (where undue dominance of one species comprises an unacceptable risk).

Industry interests make much of the “restructuring” that takes place when conifer forests are felled. Examples are showcased of forests that were 100% Sitka spruce before felling but after replanting have a component of open space, broadleaved trees and small areas of other conifers species (e.g. pine or larch) added. Whilst this is an improvement, these changes are often minimal and unimaginative and miss opportunities to develop more diverse and productive (in the wide sense) forests. Unfortunately at the same time, there are also areas of more diverse forest (usually planted in more enlightened times before 1960) comprising pine, larch, fir and spruce that are being “restructured” using the same minimalist recipe, ending up with some forests being **less diverse** following felling and replanting.¹

Opportunities that are typically being missed are:

- Identifying sites where broadleaves can be grown for high quality timber (plus their accompanying environmental benefits)
- Including areas of quality larch, pine and fir at sufficient scale .
- Expanding areas of native woodland within plantations to give larger networks with high habitat and recreational value; but also potential for biofuel.

The problems are worst on good lowland sites where there are many options other than spruce. Part of the problem is that managers have been “trained” to maximise the productive area of spruce and do not fully understand how to be grow and protect these other species; especially in the private sector. This all helps to perpetuate the dominance of spruce, which in an era of pests and pathogens is an increasing liability – a pathogen of Sitka spruce would devastate the Scottish forestry industry. It is generally accepted that increasing the diversity of trees species is the best way of offsetting the risks posed by pests and pathogens and associated problems of climate change. Current restocking practice is failing to address this problem properly.

What needs to happen:

1. FCS and the forest industry should adopt an agreed position on what is a sensible proportion of the future forest resource that should comprise spruce. FPG suggests that that should, in the long term, be about 35% of the total forest area.
2. Guidance on restocking practice should be re-appraised so as to ensure that the next generation of forests is designed to maximise opportunities, reduce risk and maximise public benefit. This could be done via changes to the UK Forest Standard and the UK Woodland Assurance Scheme.
3. Efforts should be made to promote the potential of broadleaved trees for timber and biofuel with the aim of increasing their uptake as part of commercial forestry.

¹ Data on this is hard to come by: the best indication is statistics on restocking by Forest Enterprise where the area of conifer and broadleaves is recorded annually and where the proportion of broadleaves has remained virtually unchanged at 8-10% for about the last 25 years. So rhetoric on restructuring does not match reality.