

# Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands submission of 18 August 2023

## PE1812/FFF: Protect Scotland's remaining ancient, native and semi-native woodlands and woodland floors

Thank you for your letter of 4 July 2023, seeking further information on several points in relation to the above petition.

I will address each of the points in turn.

### **The timescale for completing a new register of ancient woodland**

Scottish Government officials are progressing plans for the register and will work in collaboration with public bodies including NatureScot and Scottish Forestry. Ensuring the register will be fit for purpose, and able to act as a positive driver for the protection of ancient woodlands, will be a significant and long-term undertaking. It is not possible to provide a timescale for completion of this work, but I am happy to keep the Committee updated. The Scottish Government recognises the importance of the register as a tool for ensuring our precious ancient woodlands are adequately protected.

### **The scale of the non-native conifer problem affecting ancient woodland populations, and what action the Scottish Government is taking to support the removal of these invasive non-native species**

#### **Scale of the issue**

Evidence of the current state of woodland ecological condition across Great Britain is provided by a statistical assessment (undertaken by Forest Research) of 15 indicators of woodland ecological condition. These measures of ecological condition include occupancy of native species, vegetation and ground flora, tree health and veteran trees. The data is developed from the National Forest Inventory of 15,000 sample plots with a methodology and outputs agreed across forestry and environmental agencies across the UK. The benchmark is ancient semi-natural woodland in good condition.

The amount of native species was one of the measures, and the study showed that the proportion of native woodland that scored as in favourable condition for nativeness of occupancy was 81%.

The Forest Research National Forest Inventory (NFI) provides ecological data on all types of woodland using data drawn from the Woodland Ecological Condition (WEC) assessment. This is a systematic and statistically robust evaluation of ecological condition in all types of woodlands. Results are produced approximately every five years, with the next cycle of reporting due in 2024-25.

The [Native Woodland Survey of Scotland \(NWSS\)](#), published in 2014, provided high level statistics for the composition of Scotland's native woodlands. At the time of the survey, the composition of those woodlands recorded as ancient and semi-natural in the Scottish Ancient Woodland Inventory (SAWI) were around 5% non-native conifers (c. 4,155 ha). On Planted woods on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS), recorded within the SAWI, the figure for non-native conifer was around 1% (520 ha).

The recent Caledonian Pinewood Recovery Project report, with survey data on the Caledonian Pinewood Inventory sites, showed that non-native trees were found on just under 30% of plots per site, with the majority being found within or adjacent to the National Forests and Land. This led to a specific study being commissioned by Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) to allow a better understanding of the impacts and formulate management plans going forward. As a result, a programme of work over the course of the next five years will tackle 2,650 ha where non-natives are affecting stand condition.

### **Guidance, mitigation and removal**

The UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) highlights the importance of our ancient woodlands by requiring forest managers to avoid introducing non-native trees. Scottish Forestry guidance (Guidance for Forest Owners and Managers: Managing invasive and non-native forestry species 2015) advises that the top priority should be prevention, then rapid response, and then control and containment.

Scottish Forestry also advises land managers that careful consideration needs to be given to protecting priority habitats through the long-term forest planning and woodland design process. Considerations include site-specific recommendations made by site ecologists within survey reports, the need for buffers, and careful species choice adjacent to

sensitive habitats. Scottish Forestry would not approve a non-native forest adjacent to an ancient woodland without some mitigation such as buffering. As we deal with the legacy of forests planted prior to the formalisation of long-term forest planning, there will be a period where risks to sensitive habitats must be managed through direct intervention. Scottish Forestry offers grant aid to assist the landowner, through the [Forestry Grant Scheme](#) for removal of seedlings on sites where the seedlings will, for example, affect the hydrology of a raised bog or blanket bog, and hinder the recovery of the open bog habitat. The Woodland Improvement Grant also provides support for a suite of capital items that will benefit priority habitats and species. This includes improving the condition of native woodlands and restoring PAWS to native woodlands.

Further details can be found at: [Woodland Improvement Grant – Habitats and Species \(ruralpayments.org\)](#)

Scottish Forestry will review the need for further development of support in this area in light of stakeholder responses to the recent consultation of Future Grant Support for Forestry which closed in mid-May 2023. Responses are currently being reviewed and analysed.

### **The action being taken to enforce existing protections, and your view on whether current enforcement is a sufficient deterrent**

The Scottish Government, Scottish Forestry and NatureScot are in agreement that protections in place for ancient woodlands against tree felling are adequate.

As noted in my previous reply to the Committee (1 June 2023), existing protections have been further strengthened by Policy 6 of the new National Planning Framework (NPF4). The Policy states that development proposals will not be supported where they will result in any loss of ancient woodlands, ancient and veteran trees, or adverse impact on their ecological condition (and any adverse impact on native woods, hedgerows and individual trees of high biodiversity value).

As I also outlined in more detail in my previous reply, a range of enforcement options are available to authorities, depending on the specific circumstances of any unauthorised felling incident. A prosecution may be pursued in cases where it is in the public interest to do so, with the final decision resting with the Procurator Fiscal.

We understand that overgrazing by herbivores and, in some cases, invasive non-native plant species, are also impacting on the condition of

ancient and native woodland sites. We remain committed to tackling these issues, and other negative drivers, as part of our vision to be nature positive – halting biodiversity loss by 2030 and reversing declines by 2045.

**When the Scottish Government expects to introduce the Natural Environment Bill and whether this Bill will include further provisions to protect ancient woodland**

We expect to introduce the Natural Environment Bill during the current Parliament. Subject to formal approvals, a public consultation will be launched shortly on the full strategic framework of our new Scottish Biodiversity Strategy, Delivery Plans and elements of the Natural Environment Bill. I would encourage any stakeholders with an interest in biodiversity and habitat protection to engage with this consultation exercise.

I hope this response has been helpful.

Yours sincerely,

**MAIRI GOUGEON MSP**