

Cross-Party Group on Nature and Climate

Wednesday 19 February 18.00 – 19.30

Minute

Present

MSPs

Mark Ruskell MSP, Monica Lennon MSP, Mercedes Villalba MSP, Maurie Golden MSP

Invited guests

Non-MSP Group Members

Juliet Caldwell (LINK), Deborah Long (LINK), Dan Paris (LINK), Richard Tipper (CEO Resilience Constellation), Jeff Waddell (National Trust for Scotland), Mike Grant, Thomas Widrow (John Muir Trust), Benjamin Wold Birmanis (John Muir Trust), Julia, Kirsty Richard (Scottish Wildlife Trust), Jason Ormiston (NatureScot), Reuben Duffy, Andy Marks (LINK), Ian Wall (RSE), Julia Leino (ERCS), Nicola Strachan (SPCA), Fiona Holmes (CNPA), Andy Rockall (Community Woodlands Association), Julie Stoneman (Plantlife), Clare Andrews (Stirling Uni)

Apologies

Beatrice Wishart MSP, Rhoda Grant MSP, Tim Eagle MSP

Agenda item 1: Welcome to CPG Nature & Climate

Mark Ruskell MSP welcomed members and speakers to the CPG meeting.

Agenda item 2: Speech from Jeff Waddell – Head of Nature Conservation, National Trust for Scotland

Jeff Waddell discussed the role of Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) and its impact on Scotland's biodiversity. Jeff pointed out several gaps in the approach to land management, emphasising the misalignment between FLS's corporate plan and the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS). He argued that FLS's current focus is heavily skewed towards timber production, rather than achieving ecological and biodiversity goals.

Key Points:

Misalignment with the SBS: The current FLS plan does not meet the biodiversity recovery objectives set by the SBS, lacking sufficient ambition to reverse biodiversity loss in Scotland.

FLS's corporate priorities are increasingly centred on timber yield, overshadowing ecological considerations. The plan currently lists only three priority species for conservation, signalling a narrow scope for biodiversity protection.

Action Required:

- 30–50% of the national forest estate should be actively managed for nature restoration to meet the 30x30 biodiversity target.
- Specific actions should be implemented to restore critical habitats such as peatlands and native pinewoods, eradicate invasive species like rhododendron, and reduce deer culling pressures.
- Expansion of native woodland cover, with a focus on biodiversity rather than just carbon sequestration.
- Development of a comprehensive Biodiversity Investment Plan to secure long-term funding for nature-based restoration projects.
- Jeff identified a significant gap in the expertise at FLS, noting that the current workforce is largely focused on timber production and engineering. He suggested that at least 30% of FLS staff should have ecological and biodiversity expertise to ensure that environmental concerns are given the focus they require.
- Unlike the strong leadership focus on climate goals (e.g., the Director of Net Zero), there is no equivalent senior leadership role dedicated to nature within FLS. This leadership gap undermines the effectiveness of biodiversity-focused policies.

Q&A:

Monica Lennon MSP asked how MSPs could push for a better alignment of FLS's corporate plan with the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy.

Jeff recommended that MSPs advocate for a clear spatial plan showing where FLS will meet the 30x30 biodiversity targets. This would offer transparency and accountability for nature restoration efforts.

Mercedes Villalba MSP queried why FLS has not prioritised nature despite the clear need for biodiversity restoration.

Jeff suggested that FLS's growing corporatised mindset, which increasingly prioritises timber yield over ecological outcomes, is a major factor behind this issue.

Mike Grant raised concerns about the global urgency of climate change and warned that the world is on track for 3.7°C warming. He emphasised that if forestry practices remain focused on timber production alone, they will not be sufficient to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises.

Agenda item 3: Speech from Dr Richard Tipper - CEO Resilience Constellation

Richard highlighted the importance of landscape resilience in the face of intensifying climate impacts. He emphasised that resilience in land management needs to encompass not just ecological diversity, but also economic and social factors, to create a robust, adaptable system in the face of climate extremes.

Three Dimensions of Resilience:

1. **Physical/Biological Diversity:** A diverse range of species and habitat types helps buffer against climate extremes, such as severe droughts or heavy rainfall, by providing more flexible and adaptable ecosystems.
2. **Economic Diversity:** Supporting a range of smaller, local economic actors (such as community landowners) is key to increasing long-term sustainability. These smaller players are more flexible and resilient to economic or environmental shocks.
3. **Cultural/Social Diversity:** Resilient landscapes are also culturally significant, helping communities maintain their sense of identity and well-being. This cultural connection to the land is crucial for community resilience in the face of environmental challenges.

Richard also warned about the risks of over-relying on voluntary carbon markets, which have faced challenges due to buyer scepticism and slower-than-expected growth. He explained that while the Woodland Carbon Code (WCC) is a respected standard, it is not a panacea for the broader challenges of climate and biodiversity loss.

He also advocated for innovation in the timber sector, pointing to ongoing research at Edinburgh Napier University aimed at promoting the use of Scottish timber in local construction projects, which could create new markets and contribute to sustainable land use practices.

Q&A:

Mark Ruskell MSP asked whether large-scale construction projects might conflict with biodiversity goals.

Richard acknowledged that there is tension but noted that examples from other countries show how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can scale up their impact collectively, which might offer a pathway for balancing construction with ecological preservation.

Agenda item 4: Speech from Morag Paterson – Co-Chair, Forest Policy Group and Community Councillor

Morag addressed the challenges faced by local communities in forestry planning, emphasising that communities are often excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

Impacts on communities:

- Forestry projects often limit access to natural areas that local communities rely on, affecting recreational and cultural connections to the land.
- Large-scale forestry operations can negatively impact local water supplies, disrupting private water sources essential for rural communities.
- Many forestry projects do not adequately account for local biodiversity, leading to poor ecological outcomes.
- Timber transport can damage rural roads and infrastructure, adding costs to local governments and communities.

Recommendations for Improvement:

- There must be better communication and engagement with local communities during both the planning and implementation stages of forestry projects. This ensures that local concerns are considered and that communities can actively participate in decision-making.
- Increased availability of tools like Community Place Plans would help communities to navigate the complex forestry planning process and advocate for their needs.
- Advocating for shared economic benefit models (such as joint ownership, crofting models, and leases) ensures that communities benefit financially from local forestry projects.
- This approach, which involves maintaining a permanent forest cover rather than clear-cutting, would provide both ecological benefits and jobs, thus supporting long-term sustainability.

Morag also noted a delivery gap, where policies and promises around community engagement and ecological outcomes are not being fully implemented in practice.

Q&A:

Mark Ruskell MSP inquired about how the Land Reform Bill might provide a framework for embedding community-led planning in forestry projects.

Morag acknowledged that while the framework exists, its implementation has been weak and would need stronger legal enforcement to ensure communities have a more significant role in land use planning.

Agenda item 5: Speech from Dr Pat Snowdon – Head of Economics and Woodland Carbon Code, Scottish Forestry

Pat discussed the role of the Woodland Carbon Code (WCC) in ensuring the integrity of carbon credits and ensuring Scotland's forestry sector contributes effectively to carbon sequestration goals. He emphasised that the WCC is focused on maintaining high standards

to prevent greenwashing in the carbon market, making it a robust and credible system for generating carbon credits.

The WCC aims to provide high-integrity carbon credits that meet stringent standards, addressing concerns about the quality of carbon credits from other regions.

The additionality test ensures that carbon credits are only awarded for actions that would not have occurred without carbon finance, ensuring that the market delivers additional environmental benefits.

Pat highlighted that while Scotland has seen a high number of native woodland projects under the WCC, many challenges remain around making smaller projects financially viable and ensuring their broader application.

Q&A:

Mercedes Villalba MSP asked about the evidence supporting the role of carbon credits in driving change.

Pat explained that the additionality test ensures carbon finance results in real, additional actions that would not have otherwise occurred. This test is a critical safeguard for ensuring the credibility of carbon markets.

Maurice Golden MSP raised concerns about whether government subsidies for competing land uses (such as forestry, agriculture, and renewables) were creating a situation where the government is “bidding against itself” for land.

Pat acknowledged the complexities of land use policy and the need for a more integrated approach to land management that considers multiple land uses, including carbon sequestration, agriculture, and renewable energy.

Agenda item 7: Questions and Answers

The Q&A sessions were held after each presentation, allowing members to engage with the speakers on the key issues discussed.

Agenda item 8: AOB and Closing Remarks

The next CPG meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, 18 June 18.00 – 19.30, chaired by Monica Lennon MSP.

Members were encouraged to reach out to Juliet Caldwell (juliet@scotlink) with suggestions for future topics for the group.