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Dear Christina

European Union EU Forestry Strategy

Thank you for your letter of 14 October asking for further information on how the Scottish Government's current domestic forestry policy reflects the principles and goals of the new EU Forestry Strategy.

As you rightly point out there has been a long history of EU interest in forestry, even before the first EU Forestry Strategy was agreed in 1998. The intervening period has seen an increased profile for forestry and forestry industries, particularly in relation to biomass, climate change and the green economy. In addition concerns about forestry beyond the EU have also had a high profile and have been tackled through initiatives such as forest law enforcement and the EU Timber Regulation. Given developments in the last 15 years, Member States and the Commission recognised that the strategy needed to be updated to address the new pressures on forests.

As there is no common EU forestry policy, the strategy does not form part of any new regulation. In this respect, the principle of "subsidiarity" is relevant in that forestry policy is not an EU competence, although many areas of EU policy that have a bearing on forestry, such as energy, obviously are.

Overall the Strategy aims to improve the coherence of policy making at the EU level and importantly within the Commission. It aims to strengthen the principles of sustainable forest management, such as through linkages to pan-European guidelines. It also aims to improve the competitiveness of forest industries and job creation, especially in rural areas - actions I particularly welcome. Therefore the EU Forestry Strategy is designed to support and facilitate, rather than supersede a country's own actions.

In addition the future implementation of the strategy is likely to be set against the commitments of the forthcoming “Legally Binding Agreement on Forests” which is being negotiated at a wider European level.

To help implement the Strategy, I understand that an EU Forest Action Plan will be developed. This will set out policy areas to be taken forward through co-operation between member states and more specific actions for the Commission. This will help guide any new initiatives or legislation that may affect forest activities in a way that complements existing efforts and ensures a consistent approach to sustainable forest management, for example in the development of the next Rural Development Regulation.

Turning to domestic forest policy and its links to the Strategy. As you correctly mention, Scottish Ministers already direct domestic forest policy. Powers over forestry came to the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and I think the success of the forest sector has been considerably helped by decisions being taken about Scotland’s forest resource in Scotland. The development of international forest policy continues to be led by DEFRA, and we remain committed to working collaboratively with our counterparts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland especially on important issues such as tree health and research.

The two principle policies which reflect the principles of the EU Forestry Strategy in domestic actions are the Scottish Forestry Strategy (SFS) and the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS).

The Scottish Forestry Strategy and its Implementation Plan set out the key themes and priorities for the forestry sector. In doing so the SFS draws upon agreed definitions of sustainability and international commitments, such as biodiversity legislation, reflecting a number of aims and objectives set out in the EU Forestry Strategy.

Given the current constitutional context, the UKFS is the reference standard for sustainable forest management at the member state level. It articulates how international and EU agreements and industry best practice on sustainable forest management applies to forest managers. It provides a common approach and guidance for the development of domestic forestry practice and the monitoring of operations, for example, in assessing woodland creation schemes or tree felling.

In addition the UKFS is the basis of forestry practice for the independent UK Woodland Assurance Standard, which is used for voluntary independent certification. Following the considerable work by the forest sector, some 57% of the woodland area in Scotland is now independently certified.

To that extent the SFS and the UKFS reflect the EU Forestry Strategy’s key principles, that forest management should be sustainable, as agreed by pan-European Guidelines and the recognition that forests have a multi-functional role in the environment and society.

As the Strategy moves forwards to implementation we will continue to work closely with colleagues from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to make sure Scottish priorities are represented in the development of the EU Forestry Action Plan.

I hope this information is useful.

Kind regards



PAUL WHEELHOUSE