

Written submission from CONFOR

Introduction

Confor welcomes the opportunity on behalf of its membership to respond to the Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee (RACCE) call to submit evidence on the Scottish Government's "Proposed Framework - Scotland's Third National Planning Framework".

Confor is a members' organisation, funded by and accountable to businesses in the forest industries. Our aim is to promote the market for wood, forest products and forest services, and to help improve the industry's competitiveness.

Confor's remit covers all parts of the industry supply chain, from nurseries through to woodland owners, timber growers, contractors, harvesters, hauliers, sawmills and other processors.

General comments

Why, when forestry is not covered by normal planning legislation, should we wish to contribute to this debate? The answer is simple. Forestry is the second largest primary land use in Scotland covering 18% of the country, and supports the success story of an industry employing 40,000 people and generating £1.7bn for the economy (source Scottish Enterprise: Roots for Future Growth).

Scotland's forests and woodlands are therefore one of our most important assets which underpins our economy and our quality of life. Planning impinges on how that success can continue to deliver to government's agenda for mitigating climate change and contributing to sustainable, low carbon economic growth.

Expanding the woodland resource

Confor welcomes Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to increase the rate of new woodland creation (para 4.19), though the framework paper omits the important aspect that 60% of this new woodland should be of productive species. This is vital to sustain the investment in our globally important sawmilling and wood processing sector – see 'Scotland's Forests: realising the potential' at http://www.confor.org.uk/Upload/Documents/37_ScotlandsForestRealisingthePotential.pdf

Local planning authorities prepare Forest & Woodland Strategies for their areas – these play a pivotal role in facilitating new woodland creation schemes, which undergo intensive scoping and consultation with the public and all relevant third parties.

Protecting the woodland resource

Local planning authorities have a role in making conditions for compensatory tree planting when they approve development schemes (e.g. windfarms) which involve removal of woodland. Scottish Government's policy on the control of woodland removal is important and should be followed – see <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/woodlandremoval>

Development sites for sawmills and wood processing plants

Local Development Plans should recognize the specific and unusual nature of the requirements for new sawmills and wood processing plants, and respond positively should the industry have demand for new or additional facilities.

Biomass / woodfuel

The framework paper rightly recognizes the ascendant role of woodfuel – the planning authorities are in a position to influence the opportunity for Scotland to maximize uptake of the Renewal Heat Incentive (RHI) in public buildings, hospitals, etc where there is the greatest potential for us to meet the targets in Scottish Government's heat strategy. Woodfuel should be used wisely, and virgin wood from Scotland's forests should only be used for heat or CHP plants, or at small scale for local electricity generation. Planning authorities should consider adopting a presumption in favour of renewable heat technology in any development proposals in their area.

Use of timber in construction

Planning authorities should support campaigns like 'Grown in Britain' - see <http://www.growninbritain.org/> - which are influencing the increased use of home grown timber in construction.

The role of woodland in development

Carefully designed woodland landscape can help 'hide' new development, and provide a framework for green or brownfield development. Local planning authorities are obviously well placed to advance the idea of such woodland creation and tree planting in their area.

Timber Transport

The framework paper naturally concentrates on the many opportunities for urban development in Scotland, and good communication routes between our cities, towns and development sites. However it fails to recognize the importance of maintaining our rural roads and infrastructure, upon which the timber industry depends. Further strategic investment is required in virtually every local authority area to keep the minor roads fit for purpose to serve extraction of timber from our forests. Through the work of the Timber Transport Forum (TTF) regional groups have been formed to facilitate dialogue between the industry and the local authorities, and this work should be recognized and supported – see <http://www.timbertransportforum.org.uk/Default.aspx?pid=1>

Considerable success has been achieved through the TTF and these regional groups in creating a unique system of voluntary 'Agreed Routes' whereby timber traffic avoids local communities and weak stretches of public road, wherever possible. This invariably places a financial burden on the industry. The partnership approach involves an expectation from the industry that in return for keeping away from sensitive local roads, the roads authority will maintain agreed haulage routes at a fit for purpose level. Some of this work is also being supported through the

Scottish Strategic Timber Transport Scheme (SSTTS), for which Scottish Government has provided core funding. Work carried out under this scheme has been warmly welcomed by many rural communities, has moved thousands of timber lorry miles off the public roads, either through modal shift or onto in-forest roads. The framework should acknowledge all this work and make a commitment to continue funding for the SSTTS.

Conclusion

Forestry and its downstream industry is one of Scotland's greatest success stories, but its future does depend on a sympathetic planning regime and supportive local authority planning departments. With that, forestry can continue to deliver against many of Scottish Government's agendas, and indeed will increase its contribution given the necessary support.