

22 March 2017

Mobilisation of research funding from the UK forestry sector

Purpose

1. To provide Commissioners with an update on progress with increasing the levels of engagement with and funding for research from industry and the wider sector.

Background

2. The paper on this subject to Commissioners on 15 December 2016 set out the rationale and background for seeking greater engagement with and funding from industry and the wider forestry sector. Discussion at the meeting suggested some changes to the proposed model in the paper, and Commissioners expressed a desire for regular updates on progress.

Progress

3. Since the last meeting, there has been some positive progress.
 - The National Strategy for Tree Improvement has been discussed by sector representatives and useful feedback provided. This is now being incorporated into a final version of the strategy and its accompanying action plan, with a planned launch date of 25 May at the Future Trees Trust (FTT) Annual supporter's meeting at Cirencester. Geraint Richards from the Duchy of Cornwall, and Graham Taylor from Prior and Rickett have agreed to act as initial co-chairs of a steering group. Both these individuals are leading and respected figures in UK tree breeding. Membership of the steering group is being sought, and a draft terms of reference for it has been written. One FTT member has already pledged an unsolicited £10,000 over each of the next 3 years to support the initiative. This money, plus some contributions from the Forestry Commission and Confor will be sufficient to support the steering group work initially, and allow it to decide how best to fund its ongoing work.
 - For other areas of research, Confor and ICF are organising a meeting to be held at Silvan House with 20-25 key sector leads on 4 May 2017 to explore the appetite for further engagement. The overall objective will be to discuss areas where the sector will see a real benefit in supporting research, and identify opportunities for using a similar approach to tree improvement. The model concept will be explained and a series of case studies will highlight areas where collaboration is

already happening. Confor will engage a taxation expert to talk about tax incentives for research, and other opportunities for leverage will be explored.

A revised model

4. The current model uses forest research funding from government in the UK as a hub with spokes linking to it. Under the revised model more emphasis is placed on strategies leading the research and acting as the key hubs. This places the emphasis on vision and aspiration, rather than current research programmes. The development of the National Tree Improvement Strategy has indicated clearly that industry engagement and enthusiasm is significantly increased when they have a role in setting the agenda. Annex 1 shows the revised version.

5. The model allows for each area of interest to be based around a shared strategic vision, which will be delivered by a combination of partners, such as Forest Research, industry, academia, NGOs and others. This adds critical mass and profile to funding bids, and should lead to greater and more rapid uptake of the results.

Resource Implications

6. Minor. CFS engagement will be to provide a small amount of seed corn funding, and facilitate and assist the process.

Risk Assessment

7. The risks remain as before, with the major risk being if industry fails to respond to the challenge and the capability and capacity to undertake forestry research continues to diminish.

8. To mitigate this, the proposed approach builds on initiatives to increase industry collaboration that are already underway such as the National Tree Improvement Strategy, Observatree, work on Hylobius control, and others. Support from industry and the wider sector is positive, when their agendas are being supported.

9. Greater financial support from outwith government will inevitably, and rightly, lead to a demand for greater say in setting the research agendas. This is an issue which should be considered at the Forestry Governance Project Board as it looks to future governance arrangements for research.

Communications

10. The process needs to be as open and transparent as it can be to develop the confidence and trust for a long term arrangement of mutual benefit. The National Tree Improvement Strategy provides for regular communication with key stakeholders to ensure they are kept abreast of developments, and opportunities which the research provides.

Implementation and Evaluation

11. The success of the National Tree Improvement Strategy will provide evidence that the model works, and the FC role will be to continue to facilitate and support, but not lead the process.

Recommendation

12. The Board is asked to discuss and note progress with this issue.

Roger Coppock

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Annex 1 – Conceptual research model

