

Operations Note 24a

24 January 2022

Restock species choice for felled larch plantations on an ancient woodland site

Purpose

This operations note is supplementary guidance to [Operations Note 24](#) and is provided for owners and foresters restocking previously larch-dominated plantations on ancient woodland sites. Such felling will usually be under the authority of a Statutory Plant Health Notice (SPHN)¹.

The purpose of this guidance is:

- to give advice on the restocking of the woodland
- to help conserve the environmental value and heritage interest of ancient woodland sites

This supplementary guidance sits within the overall framework of the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS). Sites in England that are ancient woodland should also be managed in accordance with the [Practice Guide for Ancient and Native Woodland](#).

This Operations Note applies to standalone felling licences and felling licences approved as part of the approval of a woodland management plan.

Background

Our ancient and native woodlands are one of our oldest land uses and most diverse ecosystems. They have often taken hundreds (if not thousands) of years to develop and, in the case of ancient woodlands, are irreplaceable.

Sites that were once ancient woodland but have been converted to planted forests are known as plantations on ancient woodland sites (PAWS). Many PAWS retain at least some characteristics or remnants of native woodland flora, which give them the potential to be restored to native woodland, contributing to policy objectives for native woodland restoration.

Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland (ASNW) features of interest are mainly tree, shrub, plant or soil-based, such as fungi, and are therefore static and immobile - there is no possible mitigation for their loss. Many woodland specialist plants rely on vegetative reproduction from themselves or short distance seed dispersal in order to reproduce themselves. They will not persist, even in the seedbank, beyond an average woodland stand rotation.

Other characteristic features or remnants might include:

¹ Served under The Official Controls (Plant Health and Genetically Modified Organisms) (England) Regulations 2019

- unusual or rare tree /understorey species (for example, Midland hawthorn, wild service tree, small leaved lime)
- large coppice stools
- archaeological features (for example, woodbanks, sawpits, etc.)
- deadwood hulks
- veteran trees

The minimum requirement of the [UK Forestry Standard \(UKFS\)](#) is to ensure these remnants are protected.

Restock species choice

When considering restock species choice, you should seek to identify any areas of the woodland with ASNW remnant features and propose a site-suitable species mix that will protect those features of interest.

The UKFS provides clear guidance that ancient woodland remnants are to be protected. This means that where there has previously been a deciduous conifer crop, such as larch, we cannot accept the restocking of the site with a dense shade-casting species, such as Spruce or Fir, over remnant ancient woodland ground flora and native understorey.

Such a dense canopy species change would lead to a loss in the range and abundance of biodiversity due to a reduction in light transmission to the understory following canopy closure and the build-up of a conifer needle litter layer, in which fewer species are able to persist. This would result in ancient woodland remnants not being retained.

Ideal alternative restock species to that of larch (or other deciduous conifers) would be native species or naturalised species. However, other non-native broadleaved tree species are acceptable as long as they do not cast a dense shade.

Addressing the shading impact

If it can be demonstrated that there will be no detrimental impacts to surviving ancient woodland features, a small component (<20%) of conifers may (at the discretion of the Forestry Commission) be included in the restocking mixture.

These should be planted as a fail-safe mixture (a predominantly broadleaved stand will be produced in the event of no further management). A fail-safe mixture can be achieved by planting conifers either singly or in small individual groups of 3 to 5 trees, scattered intimately throughout the predominantly broadleaved area. Line mixtures (alternate single species rows of conifer and native broadleaves) are not considered to constitute a fail-safe mixture and will not be acceptable.

Where there are no obvious features of interest, you may select tree species that meets the general principles of UKFS (is appropriate to site, etc.). This could include replacing conifer with conifer on PAWS (where the felling permission is not supported by a grant and there are no obvious surviving ASNW features). However, where publically funded incentives are being offered, the expectation will be for a gradual PAWS restoration.

Sources of further advice

[Contact your local Forestry Commission office](#)

[Apply for a felling licence](#)

[Phytophthora ramorum manual – Introduction page](#)

[UK Forestry Standard \(UKFS\)](#)

[The Forestry Commission GOV.UK website](#)

Versions

Version 1 issued 20 August 2019

Version 2 issued 24 January 2022