

Trees and Waders

A common statement from the Natural England Science Advisory Committee and the Trees and Woodlands Science Advisory Group

July 2022

This statement has been drafted in rapid response to a request for advice and should not be used outside of the decision-making context in which it was produced.

Defra requested that a small group of ornithological specialists from the Natural England Science Advisory Committee (NESAC) with other specialists from the Defra Trees & Woodlands Science Advisory Group (TaWSAG) work together to agree a common statement of evidence-based advice balancing the tree-planting and nature recovery aspects of the Nature for Climate Fund (NCF), specifically managing the risk to upland wader populations.

The evidence in this space to support decision-makers is incomplete and lacking synthesis. This common position statement outlines general considerations from which a decision-making framework can be informed and developed. The statement has been signed off by the NESAC and the sub-group members of TaWSAG.

NESAC and TAWSAG specialists agree on the following points:

1. Any land-use decision is never simply a problem between birds and trees but must also consider broader land-use strategies. A **multi-criteria analysis** setting out a range of options is always preferable. Any targeted trees-and-waders decision tool can only function properly within the context of the broader regulatory decision-making process.
2. Land availability for tree-planting¹ (indicatively ≈ 0.7 Mha), having accounted for a wide range of constraints including wader hotspots, sets a context that **there need not be a major conflict between the two policies at a national level**, but we recognise that it will be an issue in particular locations and for particular landowners.
3. Land management, particularly **predator control**, when sustained, can benefit local wader nesting success. But long-term, widespread, predator control in perpetuity, as a way to offset, wholesale, the negative effects of tree planting on waders, is not a realistic option.

¹ RSPB private communication May 2022

4. Optimally, NCF applicants should have a **wider range of financial incentives** available (for example through ELMS or Biodiversity Net Gain) so as not to disincentivise decisions to recover wader populations.
5. An impact of **climate change** on waders as well as trees is to be expected and should be further investigated, but there is no evidence to suggest it will be a critical factor for current decision-making.
6. **The cumulative effect** of tree planting (and other adverse land-use such as wind farms) on waders should be considered in decision-making. Assessment at the site scale, as currently done, has the potential to conceal large cumulative impacts of lots of small sites, each impacting small numbers of breeding birds. Further research is required to identify tipping points, i.e., if there are thresholds at which small increases in woodland cover would make a major difference. We note that BTO modelling on cumulative effects planting proposals, and of patterns of woodland cover in the landscape will deliver in September 2022 and is likely to further inform decisions.
7. The most valuable land for wader breeding success is at a distance from forest or other tall structures such as wind farms. There is no meta-analysis on the evidence for threshold distances from trees to waders and this needs to be done, addressing both the distance and magnitude of effect. **The current 1km buffer may be conservative** but should be retained pending the outcome of a metanalysis.
8. **Further information is needed** on the causes for generally low productivity in waders (for example Curlew) (other than tree-mediated predation) and how best to address them². This work is being led by the Curlew Recovery Partnership.
9. To date, **no woodland composition or structure types have been identified** that reduce the predation-edge effect of tree-planting on wader breeding success, although the decision-making framework recognises the differentiation between non-native planting and native woodland restoration for wider nature recovery ambitions.
10. **Doing nothing is not a good option** for waders or for tree-planting. Risks are inherent without human intervention. Land identified as contested with respect to afforestation and wader recovery should be brought into management for one or another purpose, considering objectives of broader land use strategies.
11. **A significant fraction of the current wader habitat should be** considered off-limits for afforestation or other land-use change. Beyond this, consideration should be given to some form of “Net wader gain” or compensation in situations where trees are planted on ground highly suitable

² We note a recent global metanalysis with important implications for conservation: Wauchope, H. S., Jones, J. P. G., Geldmann, J., Simmons, B. I., Amano, T., Blanco, D. E., Fuller, R. A., Johnston, A., Langendoen, T., Mundkur, T., Nagy, S., & Sutherland, W. J. (2022). Protected areas have a mixed impact on waterbirds, but management helps. *Nature*, 605(7908), 103-107.

for waders, through establishment of large-scale habitat banks, the aim being to increase wader productivity in other areas to off-set losses in planted areas.

12. We recognise the potential for **high nature values of new forest**, scrub-woodland, and wood pasture delivered by NCF.