

The case for forestry

Establishing new woodland provides society with ‘environmental net gain’ alongside social and economic benefits. New woodlands funded by government comply with UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) requirements and provide a blend of environmental, social and economic benefits that no other habitat type can match.

Over the last 25 years, no other land use type has been created and managed in accordance with a technical standard based on evidence provided by ecologists, archaeologists, planners, ornithologists, hydrologists, soil scientists, social scientists, pathologists, entomologists, landscape architects, foresters, health professionals, leisure managers and regulators.

No other land use is underpinned by a standard that is backed by government and based on internationally agreed criteria and indicators.

No other land use has a regularly reviewed technical standard that balances social, environmental and economic considerations to guide planning and operational decision making. Each review takes into account advances in scientific research and the associated evolving evidence base.

Compliance with UKFS helps de-risk the decision-making process and ensures that, where woodlands are supported by grant funding, there will be an overall benefit for nature, the economy and society.

Environmental benefits

Increasing tree cover is the key stone of nature recovery in England. Whilst woodland was the dominant habitat type following the end of the last ice age 12,000 years ago. Over time, tree cover was cleared to make way for agriculture and by 500BC around half of England had been cleared of treesⁱ. By 1905 woodland accounted for just 5% of land area in Englandⁱⁱ. However, even now natural processes will restore woodlands as the natural climax community on many open spaces from heath to farmlandⁱⁱⁱ. This process of nature and landscape recovery can be accelerated via planting trees that are well matched to typology, soil type and climate conditions.

Different woodland types support different plant and animal communities. The provision of valuable habitat is not the preserve of ancient native woodland. Dormice, nightjar and woodlark are often found in younger stands of conifer. Well managed conifer forests with plenty of light and structure can support a wide range of wildlife, including woodland birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, plants and fungi. Mature conifers provide roosting holes for bats, nest sites for kites, goshawk and pine martins and seeds for red squirrels, siskins and crossbills. Mixed and broadleaf woodlands provide habitat for a myriad of ‘red’ and ‘amber’^{iv} list bird species including woodcock, honey buzzard, cuckoo, nightingale, willow warbler and bullfinch. Creating new woodlands, and connecting existing woodlands, benefits many species and these positive impacts must be taken into account when considering proposals.

Economic benefits

The UK forestry and primary wood processing sector supports 32,000 jobs^v and contributes £2billion GVA to the economy^{vi}. Secondary wood processing businesses support a further 60,000 jobs. More jobs are supported by companies producing pulp, paper and paper products and yet more in the bioenergy sector which has grown considerably in the last decade. The economic benefits provided by forestry and primary wood processing are comparable to the those of the dairy products sector and are greater than those provided by the UK fishing fleet^{vii viii ix}.

The expansion of the forest resource through the 20th Century led to direct foreign investment, often in areas of high unemployment, from international companies including Egger, Iggesund, Norbord. The UK consumes 56 million tonnes of wood and wood products, a year, 80% of which is imported^x. There is a huge global market for wood and wood products, one that is estimated to at least treble by 2050. The construction industry is moving towards low carbon materials and is set to use more wood into the future. There is potential to increase the share of home-grown wood in the UK market. Doing so would provide economic benefit whilst reducing the pressure on forests in other parts of the world. In addition to established markets for timber, woodland creation opens up carbon markets to land managers. There are also emerging local markets for ecosystem services including the provision of clean water, flood mitigation and biodiversity. Other business opportunities in the leisure and tourism sector such as the provision of camping, horse riding, game shooting, wildlife viewing and cycling can be supported, or enhanced, by creating new woodlands and increasing tree cover. Successful businesses such as Center Parcs, Go-Ape and Forest Holidays exist thanks to forests planted for timber production. The entire productive function of woodland, the ability of the land manager to generate income from their holding, and the potential for economic growth, must be considered when evaluating a woodland creation proposal.

Benefits to society

Climate change is one of the most significant threats to both society and the natural world. Woodlands in England currently remove 8.3 million tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere every year^{xi} and are a key part of government's drive to hit net zero emissions by 2050. Our carbon budget projections are challenging. To meet them, and benefit society, it is essential that those who want to establish well designed woodlands are empowered to do so as quickly and efficiently as possible. Regular visits to woodland have been shown to provide a range of physical and mental health benefits. Forest Research estimate that the annual mental health benefits associated with visits to the UK's woodlands to be worth £185million^{xii}. Increasing tree cover and creating new woodlands, particularly near population centres, provides a greater proportion of society with an opportunity to enjoy the range of health and recreation benefits woodlands provide. The asset value of these economic, social and environmental benefits in English woodlands is in excess of £66 billion^{xiii}.

Woodland creation is an important part of climate change adaptation. Tree planting can help lower temperatures locally^{xiv}, reduce flood risk and protect soil from erosion. Tree cover on open habitat can help reduce the impacts of wildfire and the speed at which it spreads. How increased tree cover will change the capacity of a site to both adapt to climate change and help mitigate climate change must be considered when evaluating woodland creation proposals.

Conclusion

The asset value of economic, social and environmental benefits of English woodlands is in excess of £66 billion^{xv} and government wants to increase the contribution woodlands make to economic growth, net zero and nature recovery. Via demand led grant schemes, it is encouraging more landowners and managers to plant trees. Land use change will have an impact on species currently on site, the appearance of the site and flow of ecosystem services from it. It will have an economic impact on the owner and on businesses that rely on wood. When assessing woodland creation proposals, the overall net impact of the project including impacts on nature, the economy and wider society must be taken into account and no single issue should dominate the decision. Adherence to UKFS will ensure a balanced approach to project assessment and decision making is taken.

References

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