

Ref: FCDAG 09/2024

DAG Minutes: 26/09/2024**Location:** The Priory Rooms/ teleconference**Chair:** Joe Watts**Secretary:** Sarah Lawson**Attendees****DAG Members:**Andrew Weatherall (RSPB) **AW**Graham Garratt (ICF) **GG**Poppy Sherborne (NFU) **PS**Graham Clark (CLA) **GC**Neville Elstone (ICF) **NE**Simon James (Small Woods) **SJ**Julian Ohlsen (SW AFG) **JO**Paul Orsi (Sylva) **POr**

Online: Adrian Jowitt (Natural England) **AJ**, Nick Phillips (Woodland Trust) **NP**, Jackie Dunne (Confor) **JD**, Luke Hemmings (NPFG) **LH**, Clive Thomas (Soil Association) **CT**, Richard Hunter (Confor) **RH**

FC/Defra:Joe Watts (FC) **JW**Sarah Lawson (FC) **SL**Evelina Budrike (FC) **EB**Penny Oliver (FC) **PO**Sara Spillett (Defra) **SS**James Murdoch (FC) **JM**Alex Holsgrove (FC) **AH**Wayne Barnes (FC) **WB**Nik Evans (FC) **NEv**Chris Tomlin (FC) **CT**

Online: Dean Smith (FC) **DS**, Fred Toft (FC) **FT**, John Place (Defra) **JP**, Rachel Sparks (FC) **RS**

Apologies:

Barnaby Coupe (Wildlife Trusts)

John Blessington (Local Gov)

James Russell (Community Forests)

John Bruce (Confor)

Cheryl Lundberg (RFS)

David Lewis (RICS)

DAG Minutes

Welcome

JW opened the session and welcomed all. JW raised the minutes from the last meeting and the action log and asked for any comments on either (none).

'State of the Nation'

- Full suite of Defra ministers appointed and building our relationships with them.
- Spending Review has been key focus and FC have been inputting into this from variety of departments. Bids have been input to Treasury. Discussions ongoing in terms of what departmental funding will be. Degree of uncertainty whilst this is ongoing.
- SFI Agroforestry has been launched.
- 5th edition of UKFS published October last year - end of 12-month transition period. Linked to this we have launched the new UKFS practice guidance for riparian woodland and a further iteration of tree health pilot was launched in September.
- Steph Rhodes will be leaving the FC in November, moving to Ofgem.

NE commented regarding the Spending Review and in terms of working with partnerships. We are not sighted in this - looking at a one-year timeline and wondered if there is anything to share and whether you think you will be able to spend anything on partnerships?

JW responded that we have put in a bid and this has been translated through Defra's bid to Treasury and needs to be filtered back down the line. Not useful to share what we bid for until we know more.

SS commented that it was a robust case put forward by the Forestry Commission and Defra were proud of the overall bid put forward and it is felt that we are in a good position to defend what we are asking for. There has been a huge amount of work input to this and grateful to Forestry Commission colleagues for this.

SJ raised that we are experiencing a cliff edge come March nothing to bid for. Going to lose some talent within organisations.

JW noted and acknowledged the uncertainty.

JO commented that not had any update of CS Higher Tier. There are concerns that woodland improvement has stalled.

PO confirmed that it will be discussed in later session.

Felling & Restocking Definitions Document

DS (Farming Regulation Development Manager, FC) presented the slides

SJ raised regarding thinning that the definition 'even' seems naïve and relates more to commercial forestry and didn't think it is very helpful in terms of regulations. It has been abused a lot over the years and feel there are better definitions. You don't want to overthin to create open space, you want the canopy to close. That's the key thing with thinning. Also, with coppicing restocking you don't mention coppice layering which is a common way of restocking and definition doesn't cover this.

JM responded that the term even thinning is there to counter the sort of people that either don't know what they are doing or who are deliberately pushing the rules. We are not intending that to be strongly regimented across every square metre. Accept that it could be expressed a little differently.

AW commented the definitions are welcome. However, concerns over natural colonisation definition as talks about natural processes. Huge problem in upland Britain with invasive seeding of non-native conifers, so think there needs to be differentiation between native woodland seeding from potentially invasive species.

GG asked isn't that more specific to actual circumstances. Will be dealt with through the details as to what species are going to be accepted as natural colonisation rather than putting on a blanket ban.

AW responded that definition of natural colonisation should refer to nativeness. Important that get definitions right. There should be a separate category for introduced species. Want a general understanding of what natural colonisation is and that should be with native species.

POr commented not just for non-specialists, it's useful for everyone. It's already published so what are you going to do with the feedback. It's an important document and need to get it right.

JM asked if feedback could be sent to **SL** within the next fortnight and this can be collated and sent on. Happy to receive feedback and open to making necessary tweaks.

NP commented not clear on difference between clearfelling and thinning. Feels some of the wording could be confusing. It's not completely clear and could be risks of misinterpretation. Not totally clear on-site basis. Also, there might be people thinning for

wildlife habitat or other things beyond tree growth and would be good to acknowledge this within the definition as people may read definition of thinning and think it doesn't apply. Broadening the range of objectives would be good. Also wasn't sure where things like chemical control, ring barking, where you might want to leave standing deadwood, where you can't extract trees. Not sure how this would connect with the definitions, where it would require a felling licence.

JD commented still think there is a gap between thinning and regeneration felling which can be difficult, particularly when dealing with ash dieback. With this you might be thinning in one part of your wood and then it becomes a gap in another part and its uneven. Hard to define between thinning and continuous cover work. As long as we are getting it right on the ground and restocking the areas or allowing natural regeneration where we can, we've dropped from a regeneration fell to a thin in some areas which believe is acceptable.

WB agree with **JD** it can be challenging in terms of differentiating between selective felling and thinning especially in terms of ash. In terms of **AW's** comments, natural colonisation is the process rather than going into specific detail rather than artificial colonisation. Looking at what you're recruiting is the next stage in terms of the description.

JM responded that he agrees with **WB** and **GG** in that the natural colonisation is the process and it's further down in the felling licence application processing that we start to talk about acceptable species. If there are a lot of invasive or non-native species in the area, then this is a conversation to have with the Woodland Officer. However, from a regulatory perspective you would say it is nature whether it is invasive or native. We would look at what species are going to be coming up and that is part of the process but for these definitions, this is looking at earlier in the process. We will address those concerns within the process but further down the line.

CS Restocking Rates

PO (Head of ELM, FC) and **NEv** (Economist, FC) presented the slides.

NE questioned what it is we are actually trying to buy. Even within that you have flexibility to push the rates and look at which of the objectives you want to push harder. Given PAWS failings at the moment, would guess you want to push those both the rates and the effort part. But then what else do we want to buy?

GG raised a philosophical point looking at land use. There was a thought as people are generating income by selling timber, why should we spend public money on helping them put the next crop in. That money is raised from previous investment but landowner

isn't able to then change land use and is stuck with an obligation from a restocking point of view to continue with woodland cover and therefore shouldn't the state have an obligation to compensate for that loss of freedom. Also commented regarding restocking woodlands, it is an expensive thing to do and people put it off resulting in a woodland that isn't as diverse and resilient as it should be. Feel need to look at funding broad spectrum restocking for those reasons.

NP commented how do we maximise the public value for this public money. Government on ancient woodlands has got a clear policy legal driver for PAWS restoration so the test as to whether these supplements are currently working would be what is currently happening on these ancient woodland sites in relation to policy. Do you have any trackers on the uptake of non-native and native restocking on ancient woodland sites? Current calculations suggest that 85 times more PAWS is going through the Tree Health grant than the restoration grant. Aware that might change but can you share data on how it is currently going. Also is there a way we can streamline the journey as have one part of government's public grants wanting restoration and then the tree health grant. Is there anything getting in the way rule wise to prevent this being streamlined and make it easier for the applicant to take advantage of the woodland PAWS restoration option as well so it's not just about planting trees but also the wider things in terms of restoration.

PO responded that don't know overall data answer and something that need to refer to the Evidence team.

JW commented that for next meeting could get an ancient woodland/PAWS restoration stocktake from Policy team.

JO commented regarding the Tree Health Pilot Scheme. There were two factors involved in the cap limiting what we did. The first is the spreadsheet that we were asked to complete which is incredibly complicated. Also, as it was Ips schemes down in the Southeast where you have scattered trees, the intention was good but the practicalities at this smaller scale and with keeping deer and boar off your trees, it's just not sufficient.

JD commented the woodland tree health grant is incredibly welcome, however some of the key problems are; firstly, the cap is a bit of an unknown. You have to play with the figures until they hit the cap, but it should be made to work and needs some thought. If you are felling due to ash dieback mostly people are needing to fell more than just the ash and they are taking a massive hit as you are only supporting the element of ash not the whole work. Also, the felling licence details often then don't match the woodland tree health because your felling licence has to be for the whole work so it's then difficult to match the two. Yet the woodland officers are trying to get the ash section to match the felling licence conditions and so it might not work on the ground. On the tree health pilot

queried whether there is a cap as under the impression that its percentage of costs and standard prices. In experience the money available outside woodlands is very difficult as it's not sufficient to cover work. Also difficult to predict management costs ahead rather than claiming what you've actually done. In terms of PAWS and in CS Higher Tier, unfortunately there is a lot of ash dieback, phytophthora and storm damage impacting what could be a PAWS project. The work might not be counted under PAWS but it will still be under UKFS and may be counted elsewhere.

PO responded that the caps are in the pilot as well as the main CS Tree Health scheme but interesting that you are picking up a slightly different view if you are looking more broadly across the woodland area. The caps are equally applied in the restocking side of the pilot but the pilot also has the felling in there as well.

NP raised whether on ancient woodlands sites whether there could be an option for planting and natural regeneration together so you would be planting to meet the woodland definition part of government policy but if you also allowed somebody who wants to do natural regeneration for the other bits of government policy which are about restoration and could be a good way of meeting two policies with a slight tweak so may be worth future consideration.

AW commented on **GG's** point regarding landowners being locked into something that is expensive and thinking about whether you could have something that was about going above UKFS minimum, building in greater resilience.

JW responded that associated with the felling licence is a legal obligation to restock and therefore we are then challenged by government to fund something where there is a legal obligation to fulfil that. There is something about picking up the extra and the above and beyond perhaps we could recognise this in a grant.

JO commented that in Scotland they promoted the over and above primarily in timber production. If you restocked with a more productive/better breed species you received a restocking grant which seems sensible.

NE commented that we are looking at productive through the lens of foresters rather than society. We should be taking this back to 25-year environment plan outcomes and then we are delivering what society wants which gives a more robust message.

PO responded that we are looking for people's feedback and looking at what we need to incentivise. We also won't launch into a massive suite of this and might try bits because we need to try and get it right. We have had the feedback we were hoping, maybe the cap process isn't the right one to do. But this is why we want to get people's views so we

can look at different ways of doing things and how we can take this forward from the current tree health support and into woodland management.

NE commented that woodland management incentives are moving towards 25-year environment plan and wondered if we could use the same mindset around restock as then you would have the same mindset across the piece.

GC commented regarding felling in terms of ash dieback before restocking, particularly on protected sites where it can be a lengthy process to get an agreement. You can easily lose years getting a decision and then the work getting carried out, which has a cost impact and can lead to an unworkable, uneconomic situation. Feel that there is a case for some extension of help to deal with these situations.

PO responded in terms of ash dieback we have been looking at how we address that as we don't support the felling of ash at the moment, only the restocking side of things because you don't have the same SPHN issue but think it comes into the broader management side of things and in some ways it's more of a woodland management issue than a tree health problem and feel we need to look at it in that context.

LH commented on recent experience in Northeast with grant funded restocking on wind blow which has been critical to getting some of the smaller woodlands replanted. Question of what your policy priorities are, guess we are not at the stage yet where timber security is a government policy but I suppose net forest cover still is. If you are wanting to support more diverse woodlands then looking to support diversification of productive woodlands through more diverse restocking may be an option.

JW responded that it is good to look at other restocking grants and we can learn from these as well.

GG picked up on **NE's** comments about the environment plan and looking what woods can do for society as feel there is an opportunity in existing woodlands that are not performing what they could do for society. If you happen to have some woodland on your farm or estate there is no compulsion to do anything with it. Having a restocking situation which is financially viable through grant assistance is beneficial.

PS agreed that for these individual landowners this might be their only experience of managing trees and if that is a bad experience why would they continue and plant more trees. The user journey needs to be beneficial for their own business and for society. Think it is good to take a cautious approach in how this is being looked at.

JD asked if considered making the woodland tree health similar to the tree health pilot so enter the full restock and have the whole plan which would be more sensible for

owners. You don't get this in the woodland tree health because of reaching the cap and it creates difficulties because it's different to the felling licence conditions. If it was the same and you entered a percentage for the grant it would be easier to understand and it would match the felling licence conditions. Also following on from **GC's** comments, there are issues with estate management as often there is not much of an option beyond clearfelling and restocking. Think you need to look at how to support this. If there was more on roads making it more accessible and reducing the whole cost of felling and restocking if there were better roads on to these estates. The cost of restocking is now much more expensive than it used to be due to the level of browsers so if we want more resilient woods we need to think about it.

JW responded that observed whether there is scope when the tree health pilot comes to an end to bring it into CS and actually make a more uniform woodland management offer that includes tree health rather having it as a separate process.

PO emphasised that this session was about gathering thoughts and feedback and happy for any further feedback to be sent across directly. Will continue to come back to the group to test ideas. With the Tree Health pilot the plan is to try things in the interim that we don't have in CS Tree Health but the idea is to have one scheme but think there is a wider point about how we bring this more into woodland management in general. It's a capital scheme at the moment in tree health, whereas the Higher Tier woodland management is a revenue scheme with capital items but there is no reason why we can't think about that differently.

JO commented that working on small scale when you have scattered areas you need to be careful if its an ancient woodland site and perhaps there is a happy medium of small scale restocking and letting other areas regenerate but the rates don't cover for this so you either have to plant more trees somehow or have another approach.

WB agreed that UKFS can constrain operations on ancient woodland sites compared to others. In terms of scale, having to do little bits to satisfy UKFS can be more expensive than with larger scale operations.

JW reflected on why there are caps in place. Part of it was offering a menu approach so that people could design their approach to suit local conditions but then there were people putting in very expensive schemes and we therefore needed to apply a control. We need to ensure we get value for money but still allow people to be creative and innovative to reflect different sites with a single grant.

PO agreed it's important to come up with that can be universally understood so all can apply as we can't have a bespoke situation for every scene. Also mentioned that

intervention rate has been increased from 40% to 60% for FY2 which is an improvement.

JD commented if you understand what people are trying to achieve so they can put everything in that they need to do the restock instead of having this window in the middle and working out where to put the money to good effect. Look at applying the cap at the end rather than at the beginning as currently its really complicated.

LH queried whether the road cover applied to roads connecting woods rather than just inside woodland.

PO confirmed it does although need to look at what is reasonable and consider each case.

GG queried need for civil engineer to undertake and sign off stoning work through stewardship funding.

PO responded that not aware of this as standard and it should be related to the specification and needs of the track you're putting in.

JD commented that with ash felling, the highways and councils have picked up on this and looking to get work done within 21 days. We are not seeing how they have surveyed the trees and often they are trees that have previously been surveyed and paid for. It's getting very expensive and the tree health pilot is impossible to use in these timeframes.

RS responded that the ash offer has changed considerably and the ash EOI form is due to go online and it is very different. Would be interested in feedback and to hear if it works better for you.

Woodland Management and Higher Tier

PO (Head of ELM, FC) and **JP** (FCP, Defra) presented slides.

JO commented that have taken up woodland improvement through Countryside Stewardship and we have made a start on a lot of properties but we need a lot longer for some of those improvements to really come into fruition. This hold up is not welcome and it has an impact across the industry. Queried whether management plans have to be in place before the application or during the application process.

JD raised that within the farming industry when there has been a potential they couldn't get on to a new grant, they have introduced rollovers and do not understand why this couldn't be applied in this scenario.

NE highlighted the loss of investment through delays in announcements and the risks and uncertainty that is being created for businesses, contractors and nurseries etc, which leads to slowing down the delivery of your legal targets and is a real concern.

NP commented that legal targets on nature recovery and woodland improvement are going to do the vast majority of the heavy lifting versus tree planting. The uncertainty this is creating on the ground is potentially causing people to switch off from this.

GG raised that although it may be a short delay in terms of the applications, it takes a long time to get woodland owners interested in managing their woodland particularly where there is no imperative for them to do so. If they drop out it might take years to rebuild that interest and also you have the issue of woodland management plans timing out so a year's loss could have a five year knock on effect.

SS echoed the views of others and the loss of momentum is a real concern when trying to reach our tree targets. This is the first time in 20 years that a woodland management offer isn't available to landowners and managers. Understand the changes with the election and new ministers but opening next year at some point seems very vague and would appreciate something firmer.

PS commented that the gap in funding is a real concern for those delivering on the ground but also the impact on delivery. As we know there will be a gap, it is important to know what plan B option looks like in the interim. Also questioned as we have seen little on what the higher tier offer looks like since the beginning of the year can we expect it to look the same or will there be much change.

JD agreed that this is important because in the meantime we are doing woodland management plans and do not want to go back and change them. They are approved to UKFS standard and so we may need a deeper conversation around this.

JP responded to acknowledge concern and strength of feeling around this. We have announced the actions we are proposing to put forward and we are working those up in more detail and when we publish them, we will make that information available to you. We can perhaps look at sharing that beforehand but can't promise anything at this stage. Regarding rollovers, we want people to do a new woodland management plan to ensure it is current. In terms of broader communications about re-engaging people and getting them to reapply that is something we need to work with you in forums like this in helping get the message out and support people to help us deliver our targets. Would be happy to come back to a future meeting when we are closer to being able to say more.

JD raised that doesn't feel this is sufficient in terms of understanding why rollovers haven't been used. Many woodland management plans don't sit exactly with the agreements we've had in the past.

NE commented that he does two other non-exec roles and feel we have moved from co-design to publish and defend. Worry about the loss of that. The rates illustrated were really welcome but it is about the detail of how that is rolled out and there is a huge amount of learning that has gone into pilots and that could be brought to you from the partnerships that have delivered that. Not seeing any forums where we can look at that detail. There are examples where experience from within the group could help shape the detail so you can better deliver against your objectives rather than publish and wait for objections.

JP responded that they have been working to co-design the actions and have based the actions that we are looking to bring forward on what we have been told is important. Feel there has been an element of co-design, whether we follow that with further information and getting that out there before we publish, I will take that away. There is a question of getting the information out there and the offer open and working through any issues in a co-design way. We want to get the offer out but we want to make sure it works.

PO commented on extensions and mirror agreements in woodland we have never offered them. Our re-application rates are about 30% so not everybody comes back and we have been ok with having gaps and people don't have to have continuous agreements. Mirror agreements need to be exactly the same as previous agreement so if there was felling or thinning it doesn't work. We would only be able to pick out a few that didn't have any changes and that is why we haven't done this before, however acknowledge that previously we have had continuous offers.

GG replied that if there are parts of the target that have been achieved it shouldn't act as a barrier to extending the agreement. Feel there is more value in keeping people in the system than saying you have achieved some things and therefore we are not going to give any funding. Have had 12-month extensions on HLS agreements.

PO commented CS Higher Tier are 5-year mirror agreements whereas HLS given extensions.

GG queried whether would be able come out as this is what happens with HLS agreement extensions, they let you come out into new stuff.

JP commented that some of HLS have shorter agreements but they are also not the full mirror agreements as we do take the woodland element out. There is the option to come

out if you get offered another agreement but you would need to wait until the end of your agreement year or possibly take penalties. Ideally, with woodland management we would want people to reapply and come into a new agreement especially as the offer is hopefully going to be better.

JO commented that interested but not surprised by the 30% re-applying. Why not do exit interviews to get a better understanding? If you can get some benefit from the delay, then let's organise this new scheme with a longer-term view than the current scheme. Need to look at making them a continuous process so don't have to start all over again.

PS raised that it would be good to understand how many people are going to have expiring CS Higher Tier agreements with woodland options at the end of this year. Wondered if there has been a lot of queries from anyone.

PO responded that it was just over 200 and not received queries although the area teams might have been getting some.

AW commented following **JO**'s comment that although it would be good to understand why people are dropping out, but it would also be interesting to know why people are staying in.

JD commented that with CS Higher Tier having been run since 2016, woodland owners are getting used to having a continuous amount of money coming in and therefore improving woodland management. Feel that some of the drop off is to do with organising woodland management plans which is a huge piece of work. By the time one scheme is ending you are still sorting out the next plan and we end up with breaks. It would be useful to think how we could improve this so we don't have the breaks. We still don't know what's coming at us and don't want to have to go back and change things. Although if a plan meets UKFS it shouldn't matter if every wording for CS Higher Tier is in there. This is a separate agreement but the sooner we get details the better.

LH raised that there is an appetite out there for new applicants as well renewing ones. It would be useful to understand the delay as it seems like a bit of a mystery why we can't have further information.

JP responded it is partly the change in government and the spending review, as well as the systems. We just want to make sure we've got all the systems ready but that's why we want to publish something in terms of detail and enable advice to start but can't give any dates.

GG commented looking at woodland management plan and already have existing CS agreement with ride management map, wording suggests a further map is required for woodland management plan showing how rides will be mapped in the future but can there not be a certain amount of discretion in the plan.

PO confirmed this and there needs to be a conversation with the woodland officer as part of the process. This is there to guide people to ensure that they are thinking about these things if intending to come into Higher Tier. Management plan needs to support Higher Tier so you expect those things to be in there even if it is just a high level objective to match that.

Pre-application

JD asked what we will do for woodland management plans in its last few years. Also would like to know more information about the Woodland Condition Assessment and how that's going to be applied. Do we need to use the new Woodland Condition Assessment? Would also be good to have further information on some of the supplements, particularly those that we have not had before, to help us plan.

PO responded that if you have a plan in year 8 or 9 that's kind of plays to re-doing your plan. As we are moving to ten-year agreements ideally we want people that have probably got about 5 years left as looking to do a review at year 5 of the process. This would be helpful, but we haven't laid down rules regarding this. Regarding the Woodland Condition Assessment, as we want people to complete this and it will be funded by a specific capital item in the first year and we want people to re-do it in year 9 to see the progress. If people have already done a Woodland Condition Assessment we need to think about whether we'd be asking for you to do it again.

CT commented that we would like people to use the new Woodland Condition Assessment. It makes things so much easier on the online app.

GG commented regarding the woodland management plan and looking at time and effort. I look to start my management planning process at least two years ahead and this has seemed sensible given the timeframe. Recently, had one rejected because it was not in the last year of the agreement. Putting this restriction in place puts undue stress and pressure on people. Worried it will be raised that don't want doubling up on felling licences in management plan – is there evidence to substantiate that as a real risk. There is concern that can't get it done in time frame and will then drop out of the system.

JM commented we don't like doubling them up but we can work around them so need to have further conversations.

PO has requested further details are sent on so can be looked into.

JO mentioned that the application is going to be online but asked if the mapping is going to be online. Having it all saved on the system would be useful and an improvement.

PO responded that it will probably be uploading maps into the system.

POr asked if we start a management plan using a separate deer or squirrel management plan can you amalgamate this into the new species management plan. Does it have to be in the new format to get the supplement or can you amalgamate it if you have already written the plan?

PO responded that if it is written but hasn't been used then not going to make people re-write it and the format is very similar.

JD raised that it would be useful to have a mechanism when we are online to go in and out and save what we are doing. Also would be helpful when online it we could pick the map shape rather than the ID numbers.

PO responded that this would need to be taken away as a requirement and speak to the RPA. Will also check regarding the map shape but thought from the demo that we saw earlier in the year that this could be done.

Ips Typographus Grants & Regulations Response

JM (Head of Woodland Regulation Implementation, FC) and **JW** (Head of NGR, FC) presented slides. Also assisted by **FT** (Ips Typographus Project Manager, Plant Health Forestry, FC).

SJ commented that interested regarding the exemption of Christmas trees and asked if it is because you can't police it.

JW responded that it is due to the height and volume as if the tree is below 3 metres there is not enough material for it to be attractive.

JO asked if demarcated area gets extended does the blanket use of spruce get extended at the same time.

JM advised not going to respond to hypotheticals. If the area gets extended there will be further decisions as to whether any new areas included are subject to the same controls that are expected to be put in place shortly.

JO commented in the area at the moment, spruce is semi minor component but don't have to go much further west for it to become increasingly significant. We have all these data sets of management plans and planning licence applications and should we not just switch on that layer of GIS to know where our risk is. Also asked about if there is any biological control. Also noted that in relation to Kent landowners served with SPHN the costs of resolving this are falling on them to help support the protection of the rest of the UK forestry growing stock and feel aggrieved at this.

FT commented regarding biocontrol that unfortunately there isn't one. The closest thing we have in the UK is the woodpecker and on some of the outbreak sites this is the first thing that comes in.

FT comments following meeting

The best spruce distribution map to share externally is currently one from a [2019 NFI report](#), which can be found [here](#). Further breakdowns into SS/NS by nation can be found on the 2019 NFI report page. Internally, we are working with the NFI team on a machine learning (AI) derived spruce distribution map. This is currently being worked on and we expect a 3rd iteration to be with us over winter. The accuracy of this map has improved significantly, however, it is still not accurate enough to be hosted or shared externally. We of course have a good knowledge of spruce distribution under public ownership across the UK. Noted about SPHN costs, however, the THP scheme has been instrumental in getting traction with smaller, less profitable Ips sites. Many other Ips sites, although sometimes felled before maturity, do turn a profit with the sale of the timber, and our development of an operational response policy allows for significantly more timber to be moved in round from outbreak sites when compared to responses in 2021/22. The THP scheme also provides support for reinstatement and restocking, even if the site's felling ops were profitable.

AW mentioned that Ips has been found on NRW site in Wales and trying to ascertain whether this is blow-over from the continent or from southeast of England. Asked if Ips typographus been found in traps outside of the demarcated area in middle to western England. Looking at the map it looks like it is following the pattern of ash dieback spread. Have real concerns as the focus is on southeast England, makes job really difficult in Scotland and Wales where there is a lot of spruce. England is not communicating about the dangers fast enough to build resilience and we need to be moving faster. Also raised that he was at a meeting and discussed putting a ban on planting Norway spruce but entomologist said it would also affect Sitka spruce.

FT responded regarding Ips in traps, beetles in a trap do not equal outbreaks and we have found Ips typographus in traps since the 80s when we started trapping. Sometimes single beetles are found outside the demarcated area which are followed up. In terms of response with Wales and Scotland, there is an Incident Management Team (IMT) that meets fortnightly and we have also carried out some training recently with their plant health officers to bring them up to speed with identification, signs and symptoms and we are working closely with them.

FT comments following meeting

To reiterate the points I replied with at the meeting, we meet with Wales and Scotland at the fortnightly IMT, we have recently trained their plant health ops team on Ips surveillance and we also have training

planned in this week for our survey framework contractors based in these regions. With regard to Ips being found in Wales, a small number of Ips t beetles were found in a trap in south Wales earlier this season, which was followed up with intensive ground surveillance. No breeding population was discovered during ground investigations. For further information on this interception see: [Welsh Government press notice](#) and [supporting blog post by Natural Resources Wales](#). As mentioned, beetles in a trap do not equal an outbreak, we have caught Ips in traps at ports, piers and processors since the 1980s, and only in 2018 did we find a breeding population as a result from continental blow-overs.

JD asked thoughts on regeneration of spruce in these areas.

JM responded that we don't want to support planting but looking at what we do with regeneration that is still being worked on and this will be communicated in due course.

FT comments following meeting

Regen destruction is instructed in the Ips eradication SPHN. There are ongoing discussions around regen management as part of the spruce planting prohibition.

NE raised whether the boundary of the demarcated area based on science or based on government regions. It's important in terms of principle if you need to shift the boundary that it is science based.

JM responded that at this stage we are not talking about shifting the boundary rather extending the restrictions within the existing boundary.

FT commented that the boundary of DMA is drawn up with a 50-kilometre buffer from any known outbreak site and that is why it has been expanded in the past as the buffer has needed to be increased.

FT comments following meeting

As mentioned, currently devised from 50km from known outbreak locations as mandated in the GB-wide Ips contingency plan. Not mentioned, we are currently updating the Ips contingency plan (due to be published late 2024/early 2025). In these updates, the DMA response plan will be reviewed.

PS asked if the number of affected agreement holders within the area is available.

JM advised that the mapping team are currently working on this.

Customer Focus

JW (Head of NGR, FC) presented the slides on behalf of Steph Rhodes.

NE commented that there is another strand which is partnerships and how they translate, communicate, connect and advise. Different people work under different grant schemes from a range of different parts of government and we need to look at what's working and what could be improved together as a group. It seems like a different work

strand and we need to come together to look at the interactions and sharing that with partnerships.

GG raised a point about the language used and the term 'customer' as this is someone buying a product but as a woodland owner or as someone representing a woodland owner this sits at the other end of the chain. It would be preferable if we could find a different way to describe the relationship.

JW responded that it is an important point because landowners are suppliers and we are procuring public benefits. It's not the current terminology but agree that it is an interesting way of looking at it.

AW commented that enjoy relationship with Forest Services. Aware of KPIs being published for Forestry Commission as a whole but not seen them for Forest Services.

EB replied that they have been published and she will send across to AW.

LH asked if there would be an aspect of assessing the more recent strategy. There has been a shift in terms of engagement and promotional engagement as well as a more proactive approach from the FC in terms of trying to work directly with landowners and it would be interesting to see whether that has had a proportional benefit in terms of the amount of resource taken. Impression is that a lot of schemes that have come through that kind of direct engagement, there are quite a lot of small EWCO applications, which is all important but at the same time get the feeling from the front lines that woodland officers are still under pressure with big workloads and wonder in terms of delivery metrics whether you could be getting more of your objectives achieved by putting more effort and funding into existing relationships with people like ourselves. The default position is almost an adversarial relationship with the Forestry Commission, which is obviously not what we want but some people feel that is the approach they take, they kind of feel they are trying to be caught out. With a more collaborative approach there can be positive results. Looking at what we did with the Crown Estate last year, working with a dedicated team of people within the FC we had well over 100 hectares sorted within a few months. When the pressure is applied in the right place it does have results. It might have a big proportionate effect on the overall recognition of the FC and the work you do.

EB responded regarding how many applications or agreements actually land from promotion engagement we actually track that on a leads tracker.

JD commented that when she is submitting something contact is made with the Woodland Officer and they have a direct discussion. This can often speed up the process

or even if they just know that it is coming down the line it helps the relationship and this works really well.

NP commented regarding identifying customers and making sure it's not just existing customers. We've got lots of new targets and we're bringing in new grant schemes. To make these really successful is as much about understanding those who aren't applying or have an understanding of the Forestry Commission as those that work really closely with you. Think you need to consider how you go about doing that because without that you will struggle to get the scalability you are after.

SJ stated that hoping to see something about how you could get information or advise from us in a more timely fashion. We have heard a lot about things that have already been approved and gone through. It would be good as part of this to look at ways to get that information to us so we can contribute as we actually represent a lot of the customers you are talking about and there is a lot of expertise that should be utilised within the group. The other aspect is how you can get information from us and one way is others in the group to bring papers to this group and present, so we can all be better informed. Are we actually going to get the right customers to give us what we want to hear and is it better to utilise your representatives more? It's all about giving us this information and for us being able to give feedback.

JW responded that there is a standing invitation for members of the group to bring papers and present to the group.

SS commented that she has only been working in this area for the last year and it's impressive the work that the Forestry Commission has done. The call for what is needed is really positive and the Defra Continuous Improvement team are happy to continue to work with the Forestry Commission on the customer improvements you want to make.

POr commented much of what you mention is actually about culture. **LH** said that he feels it's quite adversarial particularly with newer woodland officers which is a cultural thing and that must be coming from somewhere and understanding that could help. Also in terms of creating subgroups those involved need to get paid. Those on the ground dealing with woodland officers, admin officers, operational teams, allowing them to come along to these subgroups, they should be receiving payment.

JO commented regarding subgroups and worry about whether this would be meaningful or whether it would be better to go out to the industry or to the landowner groups and speak to them individually or in small groups. Also commented that we are faced with a lot of change and should acknowledge that things have come a long way. It is vital that you get to communicate with the person at the far end of the process and it's important

to speak to those that aren't managing their properties. We need to get to them and find out what they want from the Forestry Commission.

NE commented that he spoke to an agent recently who does scheme stuff all the time and he commented that they did not understand the codes that are spoken about in the application forms.

WB commented that there is an inconsistency in terms of how our staff deal with agents and owners. It's fair to say that there have been challenges because we have expanded so much over recent years. We are bringing on board new staff and it takes time to get them to deal with customers the same way. So there may be an adversarial relationship because they think they have this regulator role and may come across as unhelpful or less supportive. However, it's not how we are trying to do things but it is something we need to work on.

EB advised in terms of subgroups we are thinking this would operate at a lower level to fix smaller issues that didn't need to be addressed on this platform. Also we could look at 3 strands so that we would go to the customer direct and then partnerships and then potentially land agents. Will look to summarise thoughts and how we see it working and either bring that back to a future DAG meeting or circulate to the group.

JW commented that even if there is a subgroup would be keen at regular intervals for feedback to the whole group so we have full visibility.

Tree Protection Project, Managing Ancient & Native Woodland Project and WCA Updates

CT (Policy Adviser – Natural Environment, FC) presented slides

AW asked if webinar had been publicised.

CT confirmed that details had gone out in an eAlert and there is a blog as well.

AOB

CT raised the EPS (European Protected Species) survey will be sent out in the next couple of weeks looking at your experience of EPS and the good practice guide so please ensure that you look out for that and provide responses.

JW also raised the FLOv2 testing group that are looking for individual woodland owners to take part in the testing group and if interested the link to sign up is in the email sent out before the meeting.

SS commented that Rebecca Waite from Defra is soon to leave her role and will be Chief Executive of the Cotswolds National Landscape.

Meeting ended 15:00