**Introduction**

Forestry and woodlands are key land uses in Scotland. Not only do they deliver across Scottish government priorities such as addressing the nature and climate crisis, but Scotland also has a strong cultural association with its forests. As targets are set to increase to 18,000ha by 2024/25 our landscapes will change significantly, creating both opportunities and threats for communities (local and interest), biodiversity and the wider environment including water and soils. These key elements must be built into Scotland’s woodland expansion journey through early and quality engagement with forestry proposals. The refresh of the Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) provides us with the opportunity to update the scheme to respond to policy priorities, current and future challenges and remove barriers to access and delivery of the schemes. This briefing outlines key recommendations to inform the upcoming FGS review. It is based on a thorough review report of the current grant scheme produced for the LINK Woodland Group. We believe that the points below are the best-value adjustments to make in order to position the Scottish forestry and woodland sector for the future.

| **Summary of asks**Diversify the species, age and structure of forests to increase their resilience* Adapt the FGS to meet the new UKFS new suggested minimum for any single species at 65% and offer a ‘resilience supplement’ to those schemes that go below the 65%.
* New planting on open ground should ensure no loss of priority species or habitats through improved prior assessment, effective and transparent consultation, and adapting schemes to deliver connectivity with areas of high-nature value.

Increase support for management of existing woodland * Landholdings with ancient woodlands, PAWS or Caledonian Pinewood Inventory sites, must demonstrate that these woodlands are in positive management before additional forest or woodland creation is supported through the FGS.

Support and facilitate sustainable deer management * The FGS should drive a reduction in deer numbers and their impacts to levels that allow natural regeneration and colonisation, using the Woodland Herbivore Impact Assessment methodology for assessing whether browsing impacts have reached the necessary levels on the ground.
* Deer fencing should only be used as a last resort to enable habitat recovery. The savings made in fencing expenditure should be transferred to supporting the above deer population management, which should result in no net increase to the cost requirements of the FGS.

Increase support for natural colonisation and regeneration to achieve a significant proportion of our woodland expansion aims for the future* Assess the success of natural colonisation at 15 years rather than the current five years to increase confidence. This is a no additional cost option.
* Offer a ‘nature supplement’ when natural colonisation is targeted at buffering ancient woodland and part of PAWS restoration.
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**Diversify the species, age and structure of forests to increase their resilience**

Rationale: Diversifying tree species, age classes and structure within native woodland expansion, designed landscapes and commercial afforestation will increase the resilience of woodlands and forests to the threat of tree pests and diseases, which are increasingly prevalent in Scottish and UK woodlands. The reviewed draft of the UK Forest Standard (UKFS) is also moving in a positive direction by reducing the maximum that can be allocated to any single species within a forest management unit. We recommend that this maximum for a single species is set at 50%, to counter the risks to tree health from pests, diseases and abiotic threats (drought, fire, flooding, etc.), all of which are exacerbated by climate change. We therefore propose that creation and restock projects that ensure that this level is met are rewarded with a ‘resilience supplement’ through the FGS. Furthermore, to support wider resilience at landscape-scale, forest expansion, i.e. new planting on open ground, should ensure no loss of priority species or habitats through improved prior assessment, effective and transparent consultation, and adapting schemes to deliver connectivity with areas of high-nature value.

**Key asks:**

* **Adapt the FGS to meet the new UKFS new suggested minimum for any single species at 65% and offer a ‘resilience supplement’ to those schemes that go below the 65%.**
* **New planting on open ground should ensure no loss of priority species or habitats through improved prior assessment, effective and transparent consultation, and adapting schemes to deliver connectivity with areas of high-nature value.**

**Increase support for management of existing woodland**

Rationale: While we do not wish to see any reduction in the support available for woodland creation, we would welcome an increase in the funding available for woodland management. A review of the current grant structure shows that of the approximately £274m approved grant assistance since the start of the current FGS, £232m went to forest and woodland creation. There is a clear need for both woodland expansion and management of existing woodland to meet Scottish government net-zero and biodiversity ambitions. However it is perverse that new woodland and commercial forestry can be created when our existing woodland, which is a vital carbon store and is key to underpinning biodiversity, is not being managed, even when the new woodland and existing woodland are in the same ownership. We need to first ensure that we restore and secure existing woodland.. Many of our recognised ancient woodlands are in ongoing decline, including Scotland’s rainforest, Caledonian Pinewood Inventory (CPI) sites, mountain woodlands and Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) and these are of particular importance for climate and biodiversity.

* **Key ask: Landholdings with ancient woodlands, PAWS or Caledonian Pinewood Inventory sites, must demonstrate that these woodlands are in positive management before additional forest or woodland creation is supported through the FGS.**

**Support and facilitate sustainable deer management**

Rationale: The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy final draft acknowledges that woodland biodiversity faces ongoing decline due to deer numbers and their impacts. Further progress is urgently required to reduce deer populations, now estimated by NatureScot to be at one million animals and increasing. This will contribute to both improving the condition of existing woodland and facilitating increased natural colonisation and regeneration across our landscapes. Natural colonisation and regeneration, where trees self-seed and spread themselves, needs to play a more integral and complementary role in the expansion of Scotland’s woodland. There are numerous benefits to this such as providing a variety of habitat structure in new woodland, adaptation to local conditions, mycorrhizal suitability, enabling adaptation to climate change, and reducing the pressure on nurseries to produce native trees. In its response to the Deer Working Group recommendations, the Scottish government recognises that fencing is rarely appropriate as a long-term solution and the costs associated with this are ever increasing. Fencing can also be a barrier to public access in forests and woodlands. The FGS budget for fencing options should be rebalanced towards other underfunded options for deer management, including supporting increased deer stalking effort. The savings made by reducing the public money spent on fencing should be directed to cover the costs of supporting the long-term rebalancing of deer populations to levels that allow natural regeneration to occur across much more of our landscapes. Further, as woodland habitats recover and expand, the food and shelter available for deer will be able to support healthier populations, whilst improving deer welfare.

**Key asks:**

* **The FGS should drive a reduction in deer numbers and their impacts to levels that allow natural regeneration and colonisation, using the Woodland Herbivore Impact Assessment methodology for assessing whether browsing impacts have reached the necessary levels on the ground.**
* **Deer fencing should only be used as a last resort to enable habitat recovery. The savings made in fencing expenditure should be transferred to supporting the above deer population management, which should result in no net increase to the cost requirements of the FGS.**

**Increase support for natural colonisation and regeneration to achieve a significant proportion of our woodland expansion aims for the future**

Rationale: This is linked with the sustainable deer management section above as reduced deer populations and deer impacts can facilitate the conditions needed for natural colonisation and regeneration. Alongside tree planting, natural colonisation and regeneration of woodlands need to play a much more integral role in meeting woodland cover expansion targets. This is in line with the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy final draft priority action to accelerate restoration and regeneration. We strongly recommend that the Scottish government stops referring to ‘tree planting’ and instead uses ‘woodland expansion’ to denote that, as in many European countries, natural colonisation and regeneration can make a major contribution to realising expansion targets. There are numerous benefits to this such as providing a variety of habitat structure in new woodland, enabling better adaptation to climate change and disease pressures, and reducing the strain on nurseries to produce native trees. However natural colonisation can take time to establish and the risk of failing to deliver the levels of regeneration required by the current FGS is a major barrier to land managers taking this option. To increase land manager confidence in embarking on natural colonisation projects, the FGS needs to provide more flexibility and encouragement for people considering a natural colonisation approach.

**Key asks:**

* **Assess the success of natural colonisation at 15 years rather than the current five years to increase confidence. This is a no additional cost option.**
* **Offer a ‘nature supplement’ when natural colonisation is targeted at buffering ancient woodland and part of PAWS restoration.**

This briefing represents the views of the LINK Woodland Group. Further details are available here: <https://www.scotlink.org/our-work/our-land/woodlands/>.

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

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