

Future Grant Support for Forestry - Consultation Paper February 2023

15 May 2023

Introduction

1. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the consultation paper on Future Grant Support for Forestry, dated February 2023. This response is on behalf of the Scottish Outdoor Recreation Alliance¹, a networking forum of organisations representing outdoor recreation interests in Scotland.
2. The Scottish Government's Forestry Grant Scheme encompasses a suite of forestry-related matters – SORA's focus is on the intersection between forest and woodland establishment and management, and informal outdoor recreation activities. We are answering the specific Questions that are relevant to our interests.

Comments and Observations

Question 1: Do you agree that grant support for forestry should continue to be improved and developed as a discrete scheme within the overall package of land support?

3. Yes – There is good reason to include forestry with agriculture within the SRDP. Land use and its management as seen from a recreational perspective is all part of the same process. Blocks of monoculture softwood plantations or stands of broadleaf trees within a farmland context all are part of rural or peri-urban land use and management, integral to the landscape.
4. Enabling legislation through the Agriculture Bill will allow for specific grant funding support schemes to be developed for agriculture and forestry, and also for woodlands within farmland, with the public benefits of public support being recognised, outdoor recreation being a key component of such schemes.

Question 2: Are there any changes that would allow for better complementarity between the forestry and agriculture funding options?

5. Yes - Scottish outdoor access rights and responsibilities are acknowledged as a public good and much valued by people, and the health and well-being benefits of recreational access to forests are recognised in Scotland's Forestry Strategy. This should be one of the essential standards forest and woodland managers must meet in order to receive this grant support.
6. Complementarity may also include the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement (LRRS) and its related protocols, the relevance of cross compliance in agricultural support mechanisms, and the application of the UK Forestry Standard to woodlands in farmland.
7. Setting out the recognition of public access as a minimum standard when planning new woodland or restocking projects could be achieved within a forest or woodland grant application by the production at the outset of an outdoor recreation audit. This audit, which may be a statement or map, could indicate where main paths and access routes, both formal and informal, are located in the woodland, and the location of types of gates, signage, car parks, or other recreational access infrastructure.

¹ The Scottish Outdoor Recreation Alliance is comprised of Ramblers Scotland, Mountaineering Scotland, ScotWays, Cycling UK Scotland, British Horse Society Scotland, Scottish Canoe Association, Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland and the SSA Outdoor Pursuits Group.

8. This could assist with better design of woodland features, accommodating existing patterns of recreational access, and potentially encouraging use of preferred routes in order to support access management. Access infrastructure is better considered at an early planning stage as retro-fitting to deal with issues arising from implementation is not eligible for grant-aid. This would ensure that recreational access is looked at strategically and not merely by providing a gate at either end of a fencing enclosure.

9. If access is reported as being restricted in such a way as to contravene a landowner's duty under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 to responsibly manage land as regards public access, the land manager should be subject to cross-compliance regulations. This would benefit from a clear escalation process that engages the land manager, Woodland Officer and the Access Authority in a dialogue with a view to resolving the issue; if unresolved this would lead ultimately to a proportionate withdrawal or repayment of public funds. However, we see this as a last resort, with a clear process of engagement resolving any issues before sanctions are applied.

Question 3: How can the support package for forestry evolve to help tackle the climate emergency, to achieve net zero, and to ensure that our woodlands and forests are resilient to the future climate?

10. We support the statement on page 9 of the consultation document: "Ensuring that forests and woodlands are resilient to climate change and responsibly managed for future generations to enjoy forms the basis for government support to manage existing forests and woods."

11. Public access to forestry and woodland connects people with nature, which may in turn increase understanding and support for climate change initiatives. It is thus important to ensure that woodlands and forests are responsibly managed as regards public access rights. Support packages should require the production of an access statement or map, as set out in our answer to Question 2.

Question 4: Do you agree that the grant support mechanism should have more flexibility to maximise the opportunities to blend private and public finance to support woodland creation, and if so, how might this be achieved?

12. Not Sure. The grant support mechanism needs to be explicit that this public money is supporting private investment to deliver a public good, and that this should include the economic/social/environmental benefits of public access.

Question 5: How could the current funding package be improved to stimulate woodland expansion and better management across a wide range of woodland types, including native and productive woodlands?

13. We would support grant eligibility criteria that considers natural regeneration without extensive deer fence enclosures, as this would be hugely beneficial for landscape as well as biodiversity. There's also a clear access benefit here as high fences and locked gates are the cause of many access problems. There may be a need to revise criteria on stem densities and species percentage mixes for grant support, as well as having a deer management plan in place to allow this to happen.

14. For all forest and woodland types we would welcome grant support for paths and informal routes, specifically for light-touch route management and repair, with differential grant payment rates for different path types. This could include all-abilities paths on shallow gradients with suitable surfacing and self-closing gates, but also measures for a 'stalkers' path' type of construction for popular routes on steeper gradients away from the main all-abilities routes through the forest or woodland.

15. Consideration of funding for hard standing for parking one or two vehicles safely would be beneficial in woodlands where parking for recreational access may be a challenge, so that gates and track bell-mouths aren't inadvertently blocked. This would facilitate use of bikes, canoes, horse-boxes and the like. We request that grant support for gates on vehicular tracks also requires there to be a 1.5m wide, self-closing, all-abilities gate adjacent to it, as standard good practice.

16. The public benefit of recreational access only accrues if people are enabled to use it.

Question 9: How can forestry grants better support an increase in easily accessible, sustainable managed woodlands in urban and peri-urban areas.

17. A specific focus on recreational access criteria could help with the provision of infrastructure to facilitate how people move through a forest or woodland, not just for existing usage, but also for the creation of opportunities that may assist with visitor management.

18. As mentioned in Q2 above, we think it would be beneficial if all forestry grant plans include a basic assessment of how public access will be affected (audit of main tracks and routes, fences, gates, stiles). Those which clearly have multiple objectives (areas already used for recreation or where there is potential for that to happen) would benefit from grant support to develop an access management plan which includes the above but also car parking spaces, signage, etc, and the expectation that self-closing gates are used widely.

19. We ask for consideration of support for restoration of tracks used for planting and which are no longer required, to reduce their width from roads into paths, where appropriate.

Question 11: How can the forest regulatory and grant processes evolve to provide greater opportunities for communities to be involved in the development of forestry proposals?

20. Woodland Officers who are assessing the forest plans and grant support applications may require and benefit from skills training on recreational rights and responsibilities, enabling them to understand community aspirations; not only communities of place, but also communities of interest and participation too.

21. It takes more effort to engage with communities of interest, such as walkers, riders and paddlers, than with communities of place which have a geographical focus. Guidance on demonstrating early engagement with communities of interest and participation would be a helpful condition for the grant process, actively seeking out social media sources as well as traditional media to determine where and how people use their access rights.

Question 15: The primary purpose of FGS is to encourage forestry expansion and sustainable forest management, of which a key benefit is the realisation of environmental benefits. How can future grant support better help to address biodiversity loss in Scotland including the regeneration and expansion of native woodlands?

22. We refer back to the response to Q5 in relation to natural regeneration without extensive deer fencing.

We hope that these observations are helpful to you in your review of future grant support for forestry. If there is anything further you wish to discuss on the observations above then please do get in touch with us and we will do our best to assist.

Supported by the Scottish Outdoor Recreation Alliance:

