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Submitted to Future Grant Support for Forestry
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Ministerial Foreword - Forestry in Scotland is a sector that we can be justly proud of.

1 - Introduction and Rationale for Providing Grant Support for Forestry

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?

Yes

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

While there does seem to be a market growing around Natural Capital (NC) there is a level of uncertainty about how these markets will develop. Having a set funding scheme for forestry helps to provide a bit more certainty (or a backup) for the landowner and potential partners in case the uncertainty around the NC market causes a potential project or agreement to fall through.

For example, as an agent I would recommend to a client if approached about compensatory planting that we follow the procedures within the FGS process so if the agreement falls through they are able to take the project through to FGS approval. Often without the backup of grants the risk to the landowner is too great as they may not be able to recoup the initial costs put towards due diligence and design.

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

Yes

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

For the region I work in the agricultural funding options are just not suitable, really the current funding options are only feasible to area where the trees will provide a secondary crop. The area I practice would need to have a better focus on shelter for life stock.

The challenge is further compounded by the increase in costs tree protection materials (fencing, tree guards...) as many of the calculations I looked at were not feasible even before the cost increases.

2 - Forests Delivering for Scotland's Climate Change Plan

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?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

It would be good to see better support from Scottish Forestry and in the funding packages for commercially managed forests and that do more to promote alternative management systems such as Low Impact Silvicultural Systems (LISS). Being able to manage a forest under a system such as Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF) will mitigate some of the negative impacts from forest management. Currently the grants focus on a few minor operations but ultimately does not encourage a widescale change of practice.

I think we need to be careful that we are not excluding how beneficial the growing of commercial forests can be for the climate emergency. The benefits of commercial forests have to be reviewed as a full lifecycle of a tree (carbon sequestration, providing habitat...) then as product (replacing more damaging building products, locking up carbon...). I would like to see the FGS support more productive forestry, as these crops can sequester more carbon due to their faster growth and then carbon can be locked up in timber products. This method of carbon sequestering will do more for the climate emergency in the next 40 years than native 'unmanaged' woods could. Scottish Forestry needs to better support and drive the planting of more productive forestry, because as a practicing forester it feels like they are against it.

4. Private investment through natural capital and carbon schemes can make a valuable contribution to climate change. 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,

Yes

Please explain you answer in the text box.:

There are high initial costs to investigating any potential project areas which can be prohibitive to some landowners. It would be beneficial to see funding that would be aimed at providing support to cover such costs as; site investigation surveys, agent fee's, consultation process, and so on.

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?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Capital costs need to be reviewed. Over the last few years material, labour and input costs have all increased significantly and have a big impact on cashflow especially in the initial years of the project. A specific example is fencing costs, the grant rate falls well short of quoted prices of £16-£19 per meter, and in more remote rugged locations found through out much of the area I practice I've even seen quotes of £23 per meter.

Make funding available to carry out initial site assessments to identify potential expansion sites. Even if the project is not taken forward at that time the data can then be stored/collated which could potentially drive future projects.
It would be good to see Scottish Forestry support productive woodlands more. I feel that there is often a negative bias towards commercial schemes vs a native one. Ultimately that decision should be driven by the site suitability, objectives and balancing benefits.

I think there needs to be additional consideration for sites of a greater difficulty and increase variability. There is a big difference in preparing and successfully establishing a site in Perthshire than there is areas of Inverness-shire. A greater establishment/maintenance rate could offset those extra costs and ultimately result in a more diverse woodlands.

In regard to management it would be good to see increased support sustainable woodland management, such as thinning. A provision for first thinning (usually uneconomic) would enable landowners to take these activities forward, which will result in a more resilience forest and open up a wider selection of species for commercial management.

There needs to be improvement on the application side. Currently I have no confidence telling a client that an approved contract will arrive by a certain date. That further impacts on my ability to talk to plant suppliers to secure the appropriate tree quantities and tree variety. It also impacts on contractor resource, as there is a huge shortage of suitable contractors and I cannot 'reserve' their services with the current level of uncertainty. This includes sites where I have made significant attempts to liaise early with Scottish Forestry to avoid any surprises, to only have multiple edits changes and reiterations push on me.

6. Do you agree that it should be a requirement of grant support that woodlands are managed to ensure that they become more resilient to the impacts of climate change and pests and disease?

Not sure

How can the grant scheme support this?:

In a way I would say that providing greater support for alternative management systems, maintenance and invasive species control is very important. However, the current disconnect between grant rates and actual costs is significant. For example, the grant rate for Manual Eradication of Rhododendron does not even meet the actual cost, yet the conditions of the grant say that the first year follow-up treatment is capture within that rate. So making it mandatory without the proper understanding or support will just result in landowners pulling back from planned activities.
As part of the initial grant a basic management schedule/objective could be set out.

3 - Integrating Woodlands on Farms and Crofts

7. Which of the following measures would help reduce the barriers for crofters and farmers wanting to include woodland as part of their farming business? Please select all that apply.

Knowing where to get reliable advice, Flexibility within options, Support with cashflow, Information on how current land use could continue with trees integrated throughout

Are there others not listed above?:

Clear guidance on timings/practices which will enable the farmer/crofter to "use" that land again (for example, when might sheep be able to graze within the woodland, at what time, at what density and what impacts are to be avoided). At the moment farmers/crofters are seeing woodland as a restriction of their land use, not how it may enhance it in the future.

8. Establishing small woodlands can have higher costs. What specific mechanisms would better support small scale woodlands and woodland ownership?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Increased capital cost to account for increases to material costs.
More support towards survey and professional costs.

In relation to Carbon Credits, the setting up of a co-operative to enable smaller projects/landowners to pool together to get a better price. Could be challenging to set up the agreements and cover risk where landowners do not meet their due diligence.

4 - Forests Delivering for People and Communities

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

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Review the criteria around woodlands in and around towns (WIAT). The 1km buffer is restrictive and often excludes areas that can be shared with communities that individually are <2,000 people. This also does not address use of properties by users not from the local area (such as tourists).

I think there needs to be an improvement of information to users. Time and time again I have had to deal with the fall out of gates being left open, all at a cost to the landowner. It needs to be address on a more national scale as it is not proving to be effective coming from a few individuals.

10. How can grant support for forestry better enable rural communities to realise greater benefits from woodland to support community wealth building?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Scottish Forestry can promote and support landowners that are actively managing their woodlands, which may indirectly provide benefits to the communities (recreational routes, support local jobs...).

Provide grant support or a system that may enable communities to manage/engage with woodlands that are under council ownership. Support to identify opportunities and support to develop management plans will be key.

There is a significant issue with finding local, appropriately certified operators/contractors in the local area. It would be good to see a grant scheme that could support training of individuals which could result in more members of the community associating woodlands with a benefit.

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?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

I think we have to be careful here, education and informing the public needs to come first. Unfortunately, I've seen too many objections come from unsupported biases.

I accept some of the education needs to come from the applicant/developer but support/info needs to come from the regulatory body as to what benefits a proposal may provide.

12. How can the forestry regulatory and grant processes evolve to ensure that there is greater transparency about proposals and the decisions that have been made on them?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

There needs to be an improvement in the public register as the information seems to be lacking.

I think the issue log, or a summarised version of the issue log needs to be made viewable at time of consultation. Something that shows both the impacts and benefits a scheme provides, highlighting that a perfect balance may not always be achievable. I have seen the suggestion of a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) would be beneficial, and I would agree. Both for the process and the benefits of forestry.

13. Forestry grants have been used to stimulate rural forestry businesses by providing support with capital costs. Do you agree that this has been an effective measure to stimulate rural business?

Yes

a. How could this approach be used to support further forestry businesses?:

Improve clarity in the schemes and make the process more user friendly. Currently the system is very challenging to navigate through and is not intuitive. Not only does it represent challenges for a practitioner it can exclude others from utilising it. So it needs to be more inclusive.

A level of pragmatism has to return to the process.

b. How could this approach be used to support further skills development?:

Provide funding to enable contractors to attend skills development courses, such as a practical course on CCF. Currently I feel it is generally attended by managers who then have to "train" contractors. I think it would promote better buy in if contractors could do this themselves.

Provide support to enable contractors to do skills development for themselves and their employees.

Capital funding to enable contractors to cover the costs of equipment.

14. How could the FGS processes and rules be developed to encourage more companies and organisations to provide training positions within the forestry sector?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

Firstly, there needs to be work done earlier on, so that members of the community will see forestry as a viable career option. Contractors are already struggling to attract people to the role and so I don't think it is related to individual companies/organisations not wanting to provide training.

The approval process for grants, permissions and amendments need to improve. The time it takes to get approvals back can be significant, with time delays and last minute changes. This uncertainty hampers a managers/agents ability to plan all aspects of an operation; securing plant supply giving nurseries confidence in their throughput, ensure that contractors can set work programs early and secure sufficient, well trained staff..... This creates unplanned delays and contractors can find it hard to retain members of staff, and therefore they are unwilling to put extra cost into training as they may just be training a member of staff that will move on.

The grants need to increase the payment rates as they are currently well behind, and that is just when it is compared

5 - Forests Delivering for Biodiversity and the Environment

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?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

A specific improvement I can think of is that the grant system should recognise the Caledonian Pinewood Inventory as a special designation site. There is several funding opportunities that are available for SSSI but they are not available for Caledonian Pinewood sites and I think there would be several landowners that would be interested in improving the management of these sites if there was assistance.

Additional/improvement of incentives for Regeneration and native woodland creation (including riparian zones). One of the challenges for improving native riparian zones is the extra costs associated with watergates or the additional fencing required. So it would be good to see an extra cost associated with watergates, especially on larger watercourses.

I think it is important for the Grant support to recognise existing woodlands that are in poor condition and could be improved.

I think it is also import that the biodiversity benefits of a commercial woodland are properly evidenced and recognised by Scottish Forestry. There are several priority species that are well documented as being present in commercial conifer forests. Ultimately Scotland only has 18.5% forest cover and increasing commercial forestry will not only give biodiversity improvements but it will play a role in reaching net zero targets.

16. Herbivore browsing and damage can have a significant impact on biodiversity loss and restrict regeneration. How could forestry grant support mechanisms evolve to ensure effective management of deer populations at:

Landscape scale?:

Improve funding for assessment of deer numbers. Helicopter counts are good, but the impression I get from the wider community is that they are viewed with a bit of scepticism and ultimately have a high cost. Being able to utilise such systems as drone counting more frequently throughout different periods of the season may give better confidence in the numbers.

Encouragement of deer control in all woodland types, beyond establishment stages. A better control of deer numbers across all areas will provide improvement and ultimately managers may have more options when it comes to species used in commercial stands.

While I don't necessarily feel that this responsibility should sit with the forestry grant scheme I do feel that if the price being received for carcasses were improved there could be a greater desire to cull more deer from land owners.

Grant support to enable meat to be processed and sold locally may be a benefit. Not only could that create a demand but venison can be a more sustainable supply.

Additional Grant support for strategic fencing, which could be used to control movements. Or even allow a bit more flexibility in placements of fences, for example a slight adjustment/addition of a fence that might encompass riparian/transition zones that wouldn't necessarily meet the stocking requirements of the current FGS conditions but still allows habitats to develop free of browsing pressure.

Small scale mixed land use?:

Some of the items above could apply.

Additional fund to support the cost of individual tree protection, possibly taking into account the higher cost of materials that do not rely on plastics.

If you wish to make any other relevant comments, please do so in the text box below.

Please add your comments here.:

[Redacted] I have been amazed at how challenging it is to work through the grant system for woodland creation. At the start I approached it quite naively, expecting support from Scottish Forestry when taking a proposal forward because of the benefits that woodland provides, where in reality I don't feel that support at all. I am now more hesitant to promote woodland creation to a landowner as I have had my fingers burnt being too positive, I now prepare them for a more negative response. I feel like a lot of time/process is wasted going back and forward on elements where a great deal of evidence supports it, but for some reason this needs to be proven in duplicate for each individual application. I would like to see SF approach from a position of support for applications, not a position that requests "prove it" when there is good evidence out there already.

For example, lets say an issue was raised SF provides support by saying, yes there is a impact but a proposal provides these other benefits. At the moment it is simpler for an agent just to remove any items that are causing further delays. [Redacted]

About you

What is your name?

Name:

[Redacted]

What is your email address?

Email:

[Redacted]

Are you responding as an individual or an organisation?

Individual

What is your organisation?

Organisation:

[Redacted]

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