

Forests for the Future

By Rod Leslie



- 1. Resolve the future of our favourite National Forests forever by giving them 'inalienable to the Nation' legal status parallel to equally iconic National Trust properties.**

This seems unlikely under the present Government – but it is an obvious manifesto commitment for Labour. Inalienable land needs to be carefully chosen – the heritage and multi-purpose forests are the obvious starting point, with the small commercial that become community woods being added.

- 2. A new Remit for the Forestry Commission in England to mandate it for what it does today: multi-purpose, locally empowered land management – and move away for ever from the outdated timber focussed organisation that disappeared two decades ago.**

FC's delivery and remit need to be separated: FC has a very good delivery record even when the remit is now seen by many as wrong: the planting of the conifer estate was a triumph of delivery however you see the impact.

FC has been bedevilled by (1) the continuing perception that is mainly about timber and (2) that it is a business that should make money.

We need to be clear that FC's future remit will be led by public benefit; the challenge will be to ensure that the popular belief (probably including some members) that public benefit management and good silviculture & timber production can't go together does not take hold: multi-purpose delivery is a key quality of the best forestry and ICF has a clear role promoting it.

The immediate financial situation surrounding forest sales is a threat to forestry as a whole in England. In France the Government did a formal deal with ONF to provide a medium-term framework for it to reduce its cost to the taxpayer. It should be remembered that (1) FC has never actually been asked to pay for itself and (2) its finances are part of much wider Defra problems like RPA fines.

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- 3. Bring England's unmanaged woodlands – 500,000 hectares – to life, delivering carbon savings equivalent to 250,000 households, saving iconic wildlife like Nightingale and Bluebell and generating £200 million of new business in the countryside.**

Unmanaged woodland should be ICF's principle focus. It combines everything we believe in and has much bigger benefits than costs to Government. In particular, the carbon benefits are laid out clearly in the woodfuel strategy and woodland biodiversity is a key issue alongside farmland birds for Government. There is considerable potential to enhance rural economies at low cost to Government.

The resource is already almost entirely broadleaved and suffers principally from fragmentation and low current timber value due to past abuse rather than the sort of access problems familiar to Scots & Welsh foresters.

- 4. Support Government de-regulation by taking UKWAS certified forests – the international gold standard – out of Forestry Commission regulation.**

This is an area in which we should agree with the Government. My personal experience is that certification did leave FC (FA) as just a rubber stamp – it also played a key role in forcing the FC estate closer to its communities, the results of which we have seen in the support for FC from local forest groups.

One thing ICF should question is the much quoted 18% private sector certified, which sounds very low – if this is 18% of all non-FC woodland in England, bearing in mind the unmanaged 500,000 ha, it actually equates to a very respectable 44% of the area (400,000ha) generally accepted to be in management.

Certified owners would still be required to *notify* FC of their plans to avoid problems with perceived illegal felling.

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Government will claim this allows further reductions in FC. The work involved in regulating certified forests is minimal and woodland officer time should be profitably directed towards unmanaged woodlands.

- 5. Planting with purpose: planting new trees for real needs: beauty and shade in our cities, places for people near where they live, big new forests like the National Forest & Forest of Dennis and new purposes for forests as we address climate change, low carbon and flood management.**

This is the opportunity to get away from vague calls for more trees to a purposeful promotion of new planting for clearly defined public benefits. It is the opportunity to celebrate & publicise what has been achieved, especially around our towns and cities where forestry is creating a new paradigm and to promote the role of trees in climate change – the Carbon Code, trees in cities – with a specific, immediate opportunity around the April conference – and trees in ecosystem services – flood management etc.

- 6. Save our trees from terrifying new diseases by unified action by Government and the Private sector to understand the problem through effective science and act quickly to combat the threat.**

Promote the role of Forest Research.

- 7. Create a level playing field for carbon by applying similar values to all of low-carbon wood's uses, avoiding market turmoil caused by Government subsidy to bio-energy.**

There appears to be a real risk to established wood industries from subsidised energy demand, especially larger companies which may buy and manage indiscriminately and for the short term. The whole issue also provides an opportunity to promote wood as a low carbon product whether for construction or energy.