



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 15 January 2025

Session 6



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RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
*Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Brendan Callaghan (Scottish Forestry)
Stuart Goodall (Confor)
Sarah Madden (Woodland Trust Scotland)
Dr Ruth Mitchell (James Hutton Institute)
Graeme Prest (Forestry and Land Scotland)
David Robertson (Scottish Woodlands)
Andy Rockall (Community Woodlands Association)
Professor Ian Wall (Royal Society of Edinburgh)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament
Rural Affairs and Islands
Committee

Wednesday 15 January 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:06]

Decision on Taking Business in
Private

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning, and welcome to the second meeting in 2025 of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. This morning, we have received apologies from Elena Whitham. Before we begin, I ask members who are taking part to ensure that all electronic devices are switched to silent.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of whether to take item 5 in private. Do members agree to do so?

Members indicated agreement.

Forestry and Woodland
Management in Scotland

09:06

The Convener: The next item of business is a round table on forestry and woodland management. We are joined this morning by eight stakeholders, and we have up to two hours for our discussion.

We have quite a few participants, so I ask that everyone be succinct in their questions and answers. If you wish to participate at any point, please indicate that to me or to the clerks. However, there is no expectation that you will answer, or attempt to answer, every question or point, especially if you feel that your point has already been made. Likewise, if you feel that a part of the discussion does not relate to your area of expertise, do not feel that you need to participate.

First, it will be helpful if we all introduce ourselves.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am a Labour MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Graeme Prest (Forestry and Land Scotland): Do I press the microphone there?

The Convener: I should say that the microphones will be operated for you automatically.

Rhoda Grant: They are being operated by the guy over there.

Graeme Prest: Fantastic—that is amazing. This is my first time here.

I am the director of land management and regions for Forestry and Land Scotland.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am an MSP for South Scotland.

Professor Ian Wall (Royal Society of Edinburgh): I am a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I am the MSP for Midlothian North and Musselburgh.

Stuart Goodall (Confor): I am the chief executive of Confor.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Sarah Madden (Woodland Trust Scotland): I am the policy advocate for forestry and land use at Woodland Trust Scotland.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am a Scottish National Party MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Brendan Callaghan (Scottish Forestry): I am the director of operations and delivery at Scottish Forestry.

Dr Ruth Mitchell (James Hutton Institute): I am a woodland ecologist from the James Hutton Institute.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Andy Rockall (Community Woodlands Association): I am the director of the Community Woodlands Association.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am the MSP for Shetland.

David Robertson (Scottish Woodlands): I am the investment director at Scottish Woodlands.

The Convener: I am the convener and Scottish Conservative MSP for Galloway and West Dumfries. Welcome, everyone.

Ariane would like to declare an interest.

Ariane Burgess: I declare that I am a volunteer member of the Community Woodlands Association.

The Convener: Thank you.

I will kick off with a nice, easy question. Are the planting targets that have been set out by the Scottish Government at the right level, especially considering the difference between non-native and native woodland planting targets?

Sarah Madden: Yes and no. You will all be aware of the Climate Change Committee, which advised that Scotland should be planting 18,000 hectares of new woodland per year by 2025. That was prior to its warning that Scotland's 2030 climate goals were no longer credible. Shortly after that, the forestry budget was cut by 41 per cent.

We share the view that Scotland needs more ambitious targets for tree planting. The Climate Change Committee has already advised that Scotland needs to double its rate of woodland creation. The Woodland Trust Scotland is primarily concerned with the creation, protection and restoration of native woodland—in particular, our ancient woodlands and the Scottish rainforests—so we would like a higher proportion of native woodland to be included in the planting targets.

The Scottish Environment LINK briefing suggested a half-and-half balance between native and commercial woodland. We are not quite set on what figure we would support, but we would like the proportion of native woodland to be increased significantly.

We were quite encouraged by the recent planting figures shortly before the budget was cut, and we emphasise that a reduction in the budget equals a reduction in what will be delivered: it is as simple as that.

Stuart Goodall: Similarly, we see the target of planting 18,000 hectares a year as a minimum. Ultimately, if we are going to achieve our net zero goals, which will involve activity across a range of industries and sectors, forestry will need to be a key part of that. We reckon that 15 per cent of the contribution to achieving net zero might come from forestry and tree planting. There is real difficulty in achieving progress in a number of the other areas: however, that 15 per cent contribution is achievable. If grant funding—we will probably come back to that later—and other funding were available, we would be moving towards achieving the level of planting that is needed. As I said, the target of 18,000 hectares is important as a baseline.

On content, we have always worked on the basis—there has been an informal agreement between the Government, industry and environmental organisations for a long time—of a 60-40 split between productive and native trees. I also emphasise that native planting is a significant component within the productive planting proportion—it is not as though a planting scheme is either all native or all conifer. With modern standards, 10 to 15 per cent of the productive planting is of native trees.

Also, the forests that were planted in the last century, which were all conifer trees, are now all being restocked to modern standards. There has been a significant shift from conifer planting to native woodland planting, and there is a native component in productive planting. It is important that that is factored in to policy, because it can easily be said, "Let's have 50-50 by grant type," but the matter is much more complex than that.

The important thing is the purpose of the planting—why we are doing it. We know that, in Scotland, availability of wood fibre will fall away in about 20 years because we have not been planting over the past 20 years. Therefore, there is a need to increase wood fibre availability just to keep the same level of activity in Scotland's industries.

That question of purpose is where the evidence base needs to come in to underpin figures. It is important that we do not just come up with an arbitrary breakdown; we should set targets on the basis of an analysis of need.

Professor Wall: I want to pick up on one of Stuart's points, on the purpose of planting.

Large, crude numerical targets for tree planting are actually counterproductive. There are two

issues. One is the general policy of the Government on trees and the other applies to the Government's financial expenditure. That expenditure is aimed at doing things for the public good, such as carbon sequestration, which has been touched on, and—as we all know—anything from flood resilience to biodiversity and tourism.

My point is that just saying, “Increase the number of trees being planted by 10,000 or 100,000” might not actually help us to meet policy goals. In some cases, it could genuinely damage our doing so.

The issue is that planting trees is complex and skilled professional work that requires real ability and judgment. Some trees that are planted actually release CO₂, while others do not. Some accumulate it quickly, while others do not, but some live longer. There are all sorts of things to consider.

09:15

What is required is that, when the Government spends its money, it should set its targets. If the money is for carbon sequestration, how much is to be sequestered by a given amount of public money for that benefit? The target could be for biodiversity, community improvement or whatever. Just using a crude figure is genuinely counterproductive, and there is scientific evidence to demonstrate that.

The Convener: Given that forestry supports something like 38,000 jobs and has a significant impact on the Scottish economy, does there need to be, to give industry confidence, some sort of target to give assurance to investors that there will be timber in the long term? Whether that concerns sawmills or the construction or building industry, does there need to be a more tangible target to reassure investors that they will get a return on investment?

Professor Wall: I do not think that that actually matters very much. People might say that it does, but the situation is more complicated than that. First, there is an international market: people are not operating just in a United Kingdom market or a Scottish market but buy from all over the world. Roughly a third of all imports of timber into the UK are for burning for biofuel. They come mainly from North America and so on. There are all sorts of issues to do with the timber processing industry. We do not make any plyboard, which represents 8 per cent of our imports to the UK. It is a much more complex issue than just having big targets.

On the idea that you can be confident about the situation in 35 years' time, I used to run a commercial company and I know that, for a business, that timescale is so far in the future that it is not recognisable. I do not think that that is the

important thing. I am not saying that you should reduce the numbers; I am saying that you should spend the money where you can be confident that you are getting the public good that you are seeking, rather than hoping that, somehow, if we throw enough at it, enough carbon or enough biodiversity will be the return.

David Robertson: My day-to-day job is to engage with investors across the UK and across the world to bring capital to Scotland to help the Government to achieve its targets. I can absolutely assure you that strong targets being set by the Government is one of the major drivers for investment in this country as far as timber is concerned and as far as productive forestry is concerned—and for more and more nature restoration projects as well. It is not only about people coming to invest in timber; it is about people coming to invest in Scotland, to help to achieve the targets that the Government has set.

In round terms, Scotland's forestry strategy requires that 200,000 hectares be planted between 2019 and 2032 in order to change our forestry land cover from 19 to 21 per cent over that period. We are halfway through that implementation period, but we have achieved only 25 per cent of that ambition or target. We are way behind on that.

There is private capital available to help us to achieve the targets, ambitions and outcomes that we need for our net zero ambition in Scotland, for our timber industry, for employment and for the range of other benefits that forestry provides. We need certainty from targets that do not shift and budgets that do not change, with certainty of outcome from the regulators and on processing of applications to get trees in the ground. That is a really important factor for investors. I can absolutely assure you that having strong Government targets and strong Government support for the sector are things that drive people here to deploy capital.

Dr Mitchell: Our targets are currently set per hectare. There is an assumption that we will get various goods and benefits from them, but not every hectare has equal value. As Ian Wall said, planting produces various goods, and we need to be clear about that. Just meeting a target of planting so many hectares will not necessarily provide us with a level of carbon storage to meet net zero, nor will it automatically provide biodiversity benefits. We need to be clear that we need to plant trees where we will get carbon storage and where we will get biodiversity benefits. Trees on the wrong soil types will result in carbon loss, so we will not get carbon benefits, and some trees will not provide biodiversity benefits. Trees are not all equal, and different trees provide different benefits. We need to be

clear, therefore, about what goods we want and about how we monitor and assess what value is being brought.

The Convener: Colin Beattie has a supplementary question that relates directly to this subject. I will then bring in Sarah Madden.

Colin Beattie: We put a lot of focus on planting for the future and the difference between non-native and native woodland planting. However, in recent times, some people have said to me that we need to think further ahead than that. Some woodlands, whether they are native or non-native, will not survive climate change, so, for the long term, we will have to plan for different species. The question is, which species do we plan for and how do we go about that? I have not seen great focus on that.

Dr Mitchell: We need to think further forward with regard to diversifying our woodlands. In general, the approach historically—in the commercial world, in particular—has been to put all our eggs in one basket, although we are moving away from that. However, we do not know what is going to happen with pests and pathogens—there has been an increase in those affecting our tree species—and in the future climate.

One of the ways to try to increase resilience is to diversify our native and our non-native woodlands. Again, however, we need to think about what benefits they will actually bring, because tree species do not all support the same biodiversity. We could, for example, diversify with species that are native to the UK but are not considered to be native to Scotland. We need to think about what species we are diversifying with.

That brings us on to subjects such as deer management, because if we are going to diversify our woodlands, we need to ensure that the trees will survive and grow. Deer management and its palatability are among the things that we need to consider when we are thinking about which tree species to plant. Nevertheless, we certainly need to consider other tree species in order to increase resilience.

The Convener: I will bring in Brendan Callaghan to speak for the first time, and then Sarah Madden and Stuart Goodall.

Brendan Callaghan: I should point out that I work for Scottish Forestry, so I am a civil servant and I advise ministers. I will share our input and advice to ministers in shaping things such as the woodland creation target.

The ask from the climate change policy team is absolutely to maximise carbon sequestration over time. That is very much informed by modelling and greenhouse gas emissions, on an annual basis

and into the future. The straightforward ask in that respect is to commit to the highest target, and the highest amount of carbon, possible.

However, as others have said so far, what is realistic and achievable in woodland creation depends on a range of factors. The most significant is probably the continuity and confidence of investors. To get to 18,000 hectares broadly requires private individuals and landowners to make available about £200 million in capital for the value of the land in their investment. They will do that only if it makes sense for them.

In arriving at a target to aim for, therefore, we have to be conscious of what is realistic and what the current level of activity is. It is very much like a supertanker. If there is a high level of activity at a certain pace, that will drive future years of planting, and as long as that can be maintained over a period of time, we can build confidence and grow. Unfortunately, however, the wider UK Government's financial situation affected the Scottish Government last year, and the funds were not available to sustain the budget and the forestry grant scheme. That has led to a hit in confidence and likely a hit in delivery.

The net effect of that is that the momentum or the level of activity—the pace of the supertanker—has been dramatically affected, and we cannot simply switch that back on immediately and quickly. Nevertheless, we are absolutely aiming to maximise the carbon sequestration of both woodland management and woodland creation. We are not at the target for the maximum possible woodland creation in Scotland, so we essentially need every hectare of native woodland planting and every hectare of commercial planting that we can get, as long as they are acceptable in environmental terms and are delivering an appropriate mix.

Given the range of investors and the balance of land types that we have in Scotland, that typically leads to a situation in which we are getting about half and half. If we were to say that we wanted only native woodlands, we would, in effect, be closing off half the woodland creation opportunities in Scotland, and likewise if we said that we wanted only productive woodland that rapidly absorbs carbon in the first 10 or 20 years. That is the challenge that we have here. With regard to funding, that has been a constraint—I am sure that we will come on to that—but we are absolutely looking to maximise and optimise the use of public sector funding to deliver the optimum mix of benefits in that area.

The Convener: Before I bring in Sarah Madden, I have a question. You talked about the budget, and we all appreciate that there are budget constraints. Ultimately, however, the

Government's priorities are where the funding goes. We have seen the rural affairs budget flatline over the past five or six years, and this year, despite a record block grant from the UK Government, we have still seen the rural budget flatline and, in real terms, decrease. We have not gone back to the levels of funding that we saw prior to the last budget. Nevertheless, the budget is about Government priorities, and it would appear that the rural budget is not necessarily a priority, because that is the only sector whose budget has, in effect, been cut.

Do the budget decisions reflect the impact on long-term confidence in the sector? Last year, the budget was, in effect, halved and, despite the increase in the block grant this year, the funding has still not returned to the level that it was at prior to last year's budget. Does that reflect the importance or significance of tree planting to the Scottish Government?

Brendan Callaghan: Ministers and the Scottish Government have been in a difficult position, particularly regarding the 2024-25 budget year, which we are currently in. There is no doubt—Ms Gougeon has acknowledged this—that that reduction was not welcome, and she acknowledged that it has affected confidence and the pipeline of investment.

Nevertheless, I think that the action that has been taken in proposing an increase in the 2025-26 budget will go a long way to restoring that confidence. Our analysis is that the budget as it has been proposed—obviously, it has to come to Parliament to be discussed and approved—is likely to be sufficient to deal with the demand that we have and with the pace of the activity, because the supertanker was dramatically slowed. The situation has also been influenced by global macroeconomic factors—recent years have not been a great time for raising funds.

It is a difficult call for ministers and for the Scottish Government as a whole, but forestry has been prioritised somewhat within the rural budget in the proposal. In our view, that is a very positive step. We will hear from other stakeholders as to whether it is enough, but we think that it is enough to satisfy the demand and the pipeline of projects that are likely to be ready to be planted.

Sarah Madden: I will comment briefly on Professor Ian Wall's point and on the right tree, right place concept that Dr Mitchell described. We absolutely agree with that—we are not advocating for planting trees left, right and centre where it does not make sense to do so. Regional land use partnerships have a role in strategic land use planning in that regard. They show great promise, but they have been a bit of a half-baked idea so far. I would really like to see where they could take us. They also have a strong role in prioritising both

public and private finance and channelling where that goes.

On targets, and the point about RLUPs, in order to maximise the biodiversity benefit from woodlands, Woodland Trust Scotland thinks that the priority should be to expand existing woodlands—we would get the most biodiversity benefit from that—and to improve their condition, in addition to the ambitious planting targets that we would like to see.

On the point about resilience and species, ash dieback is the most well-known example. We expect up to 80 per cent of our ash trees to be gone within the next two decades, and 950 species rely on ash trees. That is an illustration of one of the problems of one particular species.

09:30

On our resilience, Woodland Trust plants only trees that are grown and sourced in the UK and Ireland. We think that that is one of the best ways to protect our native and commercial woodlands from pests and diseases. There is a direct link between the increase in the importing of trees and the increase in pests and diseases that we are seeing. We would like grant-aided planting or a portion of it to use trees that are sourced and grown in the UK and Ireland.

Our local nurseries, big and small, are really important. They should have the means—they would if they were better funded—to breed more resistant species, particularly the northern and western province trees. That would have much better implications for local economies and jobs. Our nurseries and where we get our trees are important for resilience.

The Convener: I will bring in Ariane Burgess for a question on the split between broadleaf trees and conifers.

Ariane Burgess: Brendan, you brought up the fact that we are getting about half and half, based on the land that we use. I want clarity on whether we have mapped that. Do we know that for certain? How do we know that?

Brendan Callaghan: If anyone is really curious, all the schemes and species details are on the Scottish Forestry map browser website. Anyone who is clever enough could download that data and find that out for themselves. We provide a return to the forest research annual statistics, which give a conifer-broadleaf split at the stage at which somebody claims that they have planted the woodland, because there can be a little bit of a difference between what is approved and what is planted. The statistics provide a map and a table of the species breakdown. We collate that information for everything that is approved and

everything that we are aware has been planted. We analyse that information, we split it up and we provide it. Last year, we were at roughly 7,000 hectares out of 15,000, which is 40-something per cent.

There are numerous categories. Sometimes, native species can be planted but in a productive mix. Oak and birch, which are native species, might be planted at high density, but we do not count that as native woodland, because they are planted at a higher density for future timber production. That will provide some of the habitat benefits, but not all of them. For example, last year, that accounted for about 600 hectares, so it was not insignificant.

Ariane Burgess: What I am trying to get at is that, in looking at all of Scotland's land and land use, what has come up in the conversation so far is that we need to know whether we are planting the right species in the right place to get whatever public good we are trying to get. Has our land been mapped with light detection and ranging—LIDAR—or whatever, so that we can understand where the right places are to put the different trees? Are we able to get to that level of understanding?

It seems to me that, rather than being about today, this conversation is about a long-term future and understanding what we have in terms of Scotland's land and what we are going to plant there.

Brendan Callaghan: We do not have full LIDAR coverage, but efforts are on-going. That could be helpful in relation to some of the constraints on woodland opportunities. There have been exercises previously. In 2012, a woodland expansion advisory group did a geographic information system analysis that looked at constraints on woodland creation, which identified that, depending on the classification, there were between 1 million and 2.5 million hectares of land that were potentially relatively unconstrained by known national data sets for woodland creation.

To go back to David Robertson's point, all that that tells us is that it is fine to have a target to create 200,000 hectares of woodland in the next 10 years, because there is potentially that amount of land. The difficulty is that that does not mean that landowners will be interested in planting trees on that land. As a regulator and as the body trying to encourage woodland creation, we can only deal with the people who come forward. We are actively promoting engagement with farmers and trying to help and support them to do small-scale woodland creation and diversify the landscape.

We are doing less of the larger-scale stuff, because that can drive itself. In some pilot schemes in the Borders, we have explored having

more data sets. For example, we have gathered information on habitats and bird species to see whether we can make that available at a sub-regional level to make clear to landowners and investors which areas are likely to be suitable for woodland creation. That is quite difficult to do and very intensive, and any data of that nature can change over time. At the moment, we are still really reliant on a case-by-case approach. If someone approaches us to say that they have some land and are interested in a particular type of woodland creation, we will ask them to identify all the sensitivities and will ensure that those are fully explored as part of the process.

The Convener: I am going to do something that I should probably have done at the start, which is set out the themes that we will be exploring. At the moment, we are asking one question, which is growing arms and legs, and we are moving backwards and forwards. I will set out the themes that we are going to discuss, so that people can make comments at the appropriate time.

Theme 1 is the current schemes. That will be followed by the themes of economic outcomes, social outcomes and environmental outcomes. I will pull everything back and we will start from scratch, because I have a long list of people who have indicated that they want to speak. At the moment, we will try to stick to the theme of the current schemes. I invite Rhoda Grant to ask her questions, and then we will have a question from Tim Eagle.

Rhoda Grant: We have heard a lot about whether the Government has the right targets that will deliver the right trees in the right places. Given that those targets are broad brush, will the available funding deliver them? If not, what do we have to change? We have heard that the targets may need to be more specific. What do we need to change to ensure that the targets are met and that the funds are available?

Dr Mitchell: I suggest that we need accurate monitoring of what goes on. There was a Scottish Environment Protection Agency report that looked at planting in Argyll. I will try to find the information in my papers. If I remember correctly, of the plantings that SEPA looked at, only about 30 per cent—I am sorry; I have found the figure. Only 53 per cent complied with the water environment controlled activities regulations and the UK forestry standard. Admittedly, SEPA was looking only at some plantings in Argyll, but that report gives examples of some of the failures.

I think that we need stricter monitoring of what goes on on the ground and appropriate comeback if the guidelines are not followed, so that they are followed and implemented. We do not have data on whether other aspects of the UKFS are being followed. That report from SEPA looked only at

aspects relating to its remit, but some aspects of the UKFS relate to other remits, and I do not know whether we are clear about how accurately those are being followed.

David Robertson: I will pick up on that point, Brendan Callaghan's comment earlier and the point about grant availability and funding.

We are one of the most highly regulated forestry industries in the world. We have contracts that we adhere to in the process of carrying out planting and afforestation, and there should be repercussions if people do not adhere to those. It is partly for regulators and partly for the Government to ensure that that happens.

I would not be as concerned about implementation quality. There will be occasions when the weather is a problem, especially on the west coast and in Argyll. There may also be issues with pollution that are uncontrollable and would happen regardless of where there was forestry activity on the site. We need to try to take out those slightly different aspects.

On the budget side and the question of whether we have enough money to achieve our targets, the answer is probably not, but private investors will fill the gap. I come back to my point about confidence, because, if they have confidence in outcomes and in timescales, private investors will bridge the gap in Government funding, which is used and is absolutely essential as a stimulus to bring people here, whether they are resident in Scotland, the UK or elsewhere in the world. That stimulus is vital in bringing people here, because it gives them confidence that tree planting is something that the Government supports. If grant aid is removed completely, the comfort and certainty that the Government has bought into this—that the Government has skin in the game—disappears, and people will then go to Australia, New Zealand or somewhere else where the Government does support it. It is important to raise that point.

On Brendan Callaghan's point about budgets, to an extent, the industry, as a whole, was an easy target for a budget cut, because we had not achieved our targets in the years leading up to that budget being announced last year. Therefore, it was quite simple to say, "We'll remove 40 per cent of their budget, because they're not spending it anyway." The bigger question is why we were not spending that money to get trees in the ground and to get schemes approved. That comes down to regulation and, again, certainties of outcome. It is about process, knowing what to expect from an application when you start the process and the application process not changing part of the way through because somebody else has come in and wants to run the process differently.

Certainty, certainty, certainty is the message that I can give on that front. Investors will come—they are ready—but they need absolute certainty about outcomes and what they will achieve. That applies across the board to conifer planting, native planting and nature restoration. If we have certainty, we can achieve all of those things.

Professor Wall: I understand what David Robertson is saying about certainty, and I agree with him about short-term processes: if you start a process, you need to know that it will continue in the same way as you go through it. However, with regard to the wider understanding of certainty, I am slightly surprised to hear him say that, because this is about the speculative planting of trees. The rest of our discussion is going to include things such as climate change, new species of insects and so on. If you want to speculate and invest in tree planting, the one thing that you can guarantee—the only certainty—is that there is no certainty. We are talking about a minimum of 35 years, and that is just for rapidly growing Sitka. If you are growing other mixed species for commercial purposes, the time involved is much longer.

The other important point to make—this is extremely good, financially—is that trees are free. All that you have to do is to let them naturally regenerate. David Robertson is smiling at me, but it is true. If the target is increased tree numbers and you protect land from deer, which are the problem, trees just naturally grow. We could grow many more trees in Scotland by controlling the deer population. It is a slam dunk, as the Americans would say. Why worry about spending money or whatever? One of the things about planting trees is that the first thing that you do is release carbon. There is always a negative to planting trees; it just depends on how bad it is and how quickly the tree grows—that is just a fact. Potentially, the least carbon is lost via natural regeneration and it costs nothing. The committee should commend that approach to the Government. It is a deer problem and nothing else.

David Robertson: Professor Wall, you might be surprised to hear that I totally agree with you. We can achieve tree establishment by natural regeneration, but that is not a solution to Scotland's biodiversity crisis or its net zero crisis, and it will not contribute to timber security in the UK. I have been a forester for 35 years—since the day I left school—and I have been involved in many regeneration projects in the Highlands and across Scotland. They work, but they are very slow and the outcomes are incredibly difficult to determine. They are a good way to try to preserve existing important habitats, but they cannot be used as a proxy for forestry planting to sustain the industry and Scotland's net zero ambitions.

09:45

Graeme Prest: We can see where this fits in, but I have a point about species choice and deer based on my experience of having managed 9 per cent of Scotland's land area. Would it be appropriate to raise that?

The Convener: Yes, if it relates to our current schemes.

Graeme Prest: My organisation is a significant land manager, so I have some points about achieving success.

The Convener: I might bring you in later on that point.

Graeme Prest: That is fine. I can give you that option.

Stuart Goodall: Professor Wall said that the issue of confidence in future wood supply is not important for investment. Everyone who I have spoken to is investing between £30 million and £100 million in a site. The first question that they ask is, "Am I going to have the fibre available over the next 30 years to be able to get my return?" With less wood available over the next 20 years, we are facing a situation where some people will invest and others will close—it is as simple as that. I can provide much more information about that, but I can 100 per cent refute Professor Wall's point—that is just not the case. It is simply not true that sawmillers or panel makers just say those things.

I will pick up on the point about the role of natural generation and the view that trees are free. Ultimately, if forestry was that simple, we would not need professional foresters; we would just put up a fence and say, "That is fine; it is all okay." As David Robertson pointed out, if you want high-quality trees, you need to plan: the trees need to be planted with the right spacing, and they need to be protected. That is a massive investment, which requires a huge amount of expertise, and it builds on the many years of experience and university studies of professional foresters. The suggestion that these things can happen by themselves and that all the solutions will be found is fundamentally wrong. I think that it is really dangerous to look at it in that way.

Rhoda Grant asked whether funding was available and if there is enough of it. Quite simply, there is not. The amount of funding that is available just now is effectively massaging down, for want of a better term, the level of demand. People are aware that there is only a certain amount of money that is available for planting, so they adjust when they bring schemes forward. For various other reasons, schemes that would normally have been approved have been held up. We know that, over the next couple of years, quite

a bit of planting will be approved around the pipeline. From talking to people who are involved in developing projects, we know that native woodland projects and productive wood producing projects take three to five years. The activity is simply not there; levels are falling off a cliff, which is very worrying. We cannot see that from the official figures, because they do not record it. It is all about what is coming further downstream. If we are going to take away anything from this meeting, it is that confidence in the sector has been hit massively by the cuts from last year. A lot of it is about trust.

Contrary to what Professor Wall has said, it is complex—professional advisers, professional foresters and people with investment experience are looking at risk, premiums and all those things. Whether those in the sector will be able to get the funding that is available is key. Trust and confidence have been hit hard. If we do not provide reassurance and confidence, and if trust is not built up again in the sector, we will be sitting here in two or three years' time and planting will have fallen away and we will be failing to hit our targets.

The Convener: I am conscious of the time and that there are still quite a few people who want to speak. I will bring in Ruth Mitchell, then allow Tim Eagle and Rhoda Grant to ask questions.

Dr Mitchell: Thank you. I want to pick up on the point about our current schemes focusing, at least in part, on targets for maximising carbon storage—that is often one of the reasons why we are trying to increase our woodland cover. However, we need to set that in the context of the fact that, in Scotland, we store more carbon in our soils—that is where the bulk of our carbon is. According to Scottish Government data, we have 3,000 megatonnes of carbon in the top 1m of our soils, compared with only about 50 megatonnes in our vegetation. That means that we need to think about our soils and how we preserve them, and have regard to the fact that some of the ground preparation that goes on with tree planting can release carbon. In Scotland, we are still able to plant on soils that have 50cm of peat, compared with England, where there is only 30cm. If the aim is to increase carbon storage, we need to reconsider the types of soils that we are planting on. If we do not do that, there is a danger that we will actually be releasing carbon.

The Convener: Tim Eagle, that might dovetail with the question that you have about current schemes.

Tim Eagle: Maybe.

The Convener: Or maybe not.

Tim Eagle: Stuart Goodall made some good points, and I might come back to them when we talk about the economy later on.

We have spoken quite a lot about targets, but the other stage of the current scheme process is the application process itself, which David Robertson just touched on. I have had a few emails from people saying that the process takes a long time and changes as you go through it, and that that massively affects investment and confidence in the sector, which impacts on what we are trying to do.

There is a big difference between a 2,000 hectare commercial tree plantation and 1 acre of native tree planting on a farm, which I guess is the sort of thing that Sarah Madden might argue for. Can anyone tell us what the application process is like and say what we need to change about it to make the schemes easier to enter?

Andy Rockall: I was going to raise that point. Roughly speaking, people do a cost benefit analysis when they are considering an application—“Is it worth my time for the return I’m going to get?” With regard to small woods, we often find that the people we talk to in community groups find that the return is not worth the investment of their time, because small woodlands receive only small grants and there is a lot of paperwork and bureaucracy in terms of application, monitoring, reporting and claiming. That all means that people are not making applications for small woodlands. Having more small woodlands would not contribute to the national timber supply, but it would increase the resilience of woodlands and forestry in Scotland, it would diversify the woodlands and it would score well in relation to all sorts of other public goods.

David Robertson: Brendan Callaghan is better qualified than I am to talk about the grant application process, but the one thing that I know is that the levels of grant that are available at the current time—I do not mean the total budget; I mean the levels of individual capital grants that are available for planting—are a major problem for our ability to develop schemes, especially in the farming sector. To date, the average size of scheme that has been planted during the existence of the forestry grant scheme is 24.8 hectares—that is across the whole area that has been planted. So, a huge amount of small-scale planting is happening, which helps us to achieve our targets. What we hear about are large-scale projects that end up in the press or face community backlash but, in terms of us achieving our targets, small-scale schemes are carrying a huge amount of the weight. However, those small-scale schemes are stopping because the grant rates will not support them.

I used to be able to say to a farmer that grant coverage would amount to somewhere between 80 and 120 per cent of their costs, which would mean that they might break even and that, with a fair wind, and if they have a really economical scheme, they might make a little bit of money which would contribute to some improvements on the farm, such as an extra bit of fencing. However, the grant rates have not changed since 2015 and, in the past four years, inflation has been absolutely massive across the rural sector and has affected plant costs and the cost of fertiliser, fencing materials, labour and so on. That means that I would now have to tell that farmer that the grant would cover between 60 to 80 per cent of their costs.

If I go to a farmer and say, “You might have to dip your hand in your pocket to pay 25 per cent of the costs of doing this,” they simply say no, because why would they do that? They are not excited about that. Grant levels, especially for small-scale woodland, are really important and need to be focused on. I totally agree with Andy Rockall that that it is going to be a major issue for the industry if we want to achieve forestry targets.

Brendan Callaghan: I largely accept that. Within the constraints that existed just over a year ago—I think it was November or December 2023—we tried to address the issue. By that point, inflation had risen by roughly 28 per cent since the scheme had been developed—especially in the post-Covid years.

We managed to do some things, but the cost is still an outstanding problem. Small-scale schemes have an inherent cost, because if you need a forestry agent to work on your scheme for two or three days, whether it is for 1 hectare or 10 hectares, it costs £1,000. It is even worse if you are on an island, because you possibly have to pay for the agent’s travel, which can take three days.

We focus our efforts on trying to balance that with some of our initiatives, such as supporting the Woodland Trust’s croft woodlands project and paying for farm woodland assessments in central Scotland. The development of the forestry grant scheme, which will commence shortly in line with the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 and its secondary legislation, is the way to address the cost problem. The current scheme has certain IT and legislative framework constraints, but we are always trying to spot opportunities to address those things.

We did a certain amount of work last year, which was positive, but it has not helped everyone and things have definitely become harder. A wider change is needed, because we hear a lot from stakeholders that they are often uncomfortable with the level of funding that is being made

available for large schemes. We know that we need a higher rate per hectare for smaller schemes, but that is quite difficult to do within the current mechanism.

David Robertson: Just to reinforce that point, I asked some of my colleagues for feedback in preparation for today's session. One of my colleagues in south Scotland said that, between 2015 and 2021, there was an average of 10 to 15 schemes per annum for farmers in south-west Scotland, whereas, over the past three years, there have been two. In the farming sector, there has been a massive drop-off in the uptake of schemes, and those small-scale woodlands are vital to helping us to achieve what we want to do.

Rhoda Grant: Just to sum up what people are saying, there seem to be two very separate reasons for the development of forestry. One reason is the storing of carbon, which could be done through natural regeneration, but there is also the timber industry issue, whereby we are importing lots of timber from places that we are not so sure about.

Is it right that we are trying to fund those two different things from one pot, and with one target? Should we look at them separately and recognise that the timber industry is a carbon store, especially if we use timber for products that have a long shelf life?

Stuart Goodall: That is a really good question. There is a temptation to ask what the different reasons are for planting—industry, carbon, biodiversity, people, wildlife and so on. This cuts across some of the evidence that we have heard, but, ultimately, there is no forest that we plant that just does one thing. We tend to categorise them and say, "This is a commercial wood-producing forest," or "This is a native forest."

As Brendan Callaghan said, you can plant native trees and produce timber, but this is about how you plant the trees and whether you manage and protect them. Every single forest that we plant for timber will have biodiversity benefit. Last summer, Scottish Forestry produced some work looking at species. We often hear that species will live in broadleaf trees but not in conifer trees. However, a large number of species that are associated with woodland are very happy in conifer forests. If you are creating a new forest that has a diversity of conifer and broadleaf areas, you are providing habitat for a wide range of species. There is a lot of biodiversity benefit in that.

That leads me to conclude that, ultimately, we need to keep encouraging a range of forests. As Ruth Mitchell said, we should be measuring what they are delivering and then establishing what they are producing in terms of timber, carbon and

biodiversity. That is happening across all types of forestry.

The Convener: I know that one or two people want to come in on the back of that response, but we will probably touch on the issue again a bit later on.

We will move on to theme 2, on economic outcomes, with a question from Ariane Burgess.

Ariane Burgess: I have an opening question and maybe a couple of supplementaries after that.

I am interested in the idea of Scotland as a forest nation and in how we reduce our reliance on importing timber and start to use the timber that we grow in, say, our construction sector and so on. I know that a number of you have had those discussions, so I would be interested in hearing about that. I am also interested in whether, along with Scottish timber being used in housing in cross-laminated form, there are other opportunities for sustainable forestry management.

Another issue that I have been hearing about is how we get people into the industry. We say that we want to grow the industry, but the problem that we have is that people are not coming into it. That is a part of all of this, too.

In short, it would be interesting to hear your thoughts on reducing our reliance on imports and making Scotland a forest nation with the timber that we grow here.

The Convener: Who would like to kick off on that one?

Graeme Prest: On the second question, which was about getting people into the industry, I work for Forestry and Land Scotland—which manages 9 per cent of Scotland's forests, so we are the biggest manager of public forests in the country—and I recognise the issue that you have raised. Anyone to whom I speak in the sector will say that one of our biggest challenges is getting people into the sector. Others will probably add to that.

Let me share a few of the things that we are doing, as they might be of interest. We find a lot of demand for apprenticeships. If we advertise for a dozen apprentices, we can get 500 applicants, so there is a strong interest among people who want apprenticeships and want to work their way through the sector. That is an important thing that we are doing.

We also find people from all sorts of other sectors wanting to change mid-career and get into forestry, because they want to do a job that makes a difference. They recognise the climate and biodiversity crises and know about the timber sector.

Therefore, there are things going on to get people into the sector. I am sure that others will

add to that. How we present the sector is critical to how we support and stimulate people to come into it. I might be stating the obvious, but we need the skilled people that Stuart Goodall talked about.

Like David Robertson, I have been a forester for a very long time, and I have been fortunate in my career since I started at university in Aberdeen, which I should say no longer teaches forestry. There is this chain of education, promotion of the sector, people taking different routes in, and growing interest in the sector among those who have the skills to do all the things that we have talked about. Without that foundation, we cannot achieve anything.

I just wanted to share that experience.

The Convener: Stuart, do you want to reflect on that as well as touch on the use of local timber and the balance between exporting and importing?

Stuart Goodall: I thank Ariane Burgess for raising the issue, which we have discussed before. We are passionate about using more timber in society and in the economy and about more of it coming from within Scotland. We are in a strange situation, as we are building a lot of timber-framed houses but with imported timber while the timber that goes through the sawmills here is sent down south, with some of it ending up in houses in England.

There is a real need for us to be able to do that, but often there is a challenge, because of the way in which the established construction sector thinks about sourcing timber products. There was certainly a perception in the past that Scottish timber was of low value and unsuitable for use in housing. There has been huge investment in Scotland and in forestry research in our universities to look at how we identify what makes a structurally strong piece of wood, so that we can do more of that in Scotland.

There might be an opportunity to involve the public sector and the Scottish Government in helping us to break through by sourcing Scottish timber as part of the procurement process for affordable housing. We are keen to do more there, because it would be good for reducing road miles as well as everything else.

You also mentioned cross-laminated timber and engineered timber products. In many parts of Europe, North America and Asia, timber of relatively low value or of small dimensions is used in high-rise buildings, where glued laminated timber is replacing steel. We have the capacity to do that sort of thing, but the big challenge is the cost of building a CLT mill and developing a market. It might cost £30 million, £40 million, or £50 million to build that mill, and we would then need the demand to be there. There is a lot of CLT construction going on in London; however, even

that is not enough assurance for people to build a CLT mill in the south of England, because demand is too sporadic and uncertain. There needs to be real demand to give the assurance of a return over 20 or 30 years.

The Convener: Is there a role for Government in influencing the uptake of those innovative timber products in Scotland?

Stuart Goodall: If we want bite, we need something more predictable and controlled. We might want more uptake, but encouraging people or showing them best practice does not make them change their behaviour. There is a lot of ingrained behaviour in the house-building and construction sector, even in basic ways. For example, architects and specifiers involved in building projects have something in their software that tells them to define a certain category of timber that excludes home-grown timber. It does not need to say that, but it is in there, and there is really no desire to change it or to develop new supply chains. The public sector has that ability; through its own building projects, it can say what it wants to happen. That is where we can start to bring some confidence to the market.

I have one final point about training people and bringing them into the sector. We have an ageing workforce, so we do need to bring people in. With some welcome seed funding from Scottish Forestry and the Scottish Government, we are setting up a company called UK Forestry Training Service, which is likely to be in south-west Scotland if it has a physical manifestation. We have seen a market failure and are stepping in to establish training courses and do outreach work to bring people into the sector. Forestry and Land Scotland has promised some funding for that, too, which is fantastic.

People are not being signposted into the sector, so we are having to work hard to bring people in and to overcome a lot of the misinformation about the sector not being high-tech or not paying well. It is a really high-quality and diverse sector. It is absolutely vital for not only the forestry but the native woodland sector that we have those professionals.

Andy Rockall: For me, building the forest nation is about building on the existing work of community woodland groups across Scotland. There are approximately 200 community woodland groups in Scotland, all with an attachment to their local woodland or forest, and they work hard to deliver benefits, be they social, economic, biological or biodiversity related, that they determine for themselves in their local area.

Expanding that idea, which we at CWA work hard to promote, is a way forward. We are talking about building a connection between people and

woodlands and forestry. According to a survey of our membership, we have about 200 posts across Scotland, so there is a connection in small—and often rural—communities between the woodlands and creating employment and bringing people into woodland management in a variety of roles.

David Robertson and Stuart Goodall would recognise some of those roles in relation to their forestry operations, but there are also community rangers, engagement people and people who work with young people in the woodlands to deliver forest schools and education. Those posts and jobs come out of the community connection to woodland. We are keen to see support for building on that work, and we are looking at whether there is a way of growing it across Scotland.

David Robertson: Following up both of those comments, I think that, in answer to Ariane Burgess's question, education is a major and significant point in the background. One of our clients is funding a marvellous initiative in north-east Scotland, which is working with Stemovators to get professionals from our business into primary and secondary schools to talk about the industry and what we do, in order to break down the barriers and myths about what forestry is and what woodlands are not. That is where we need to start.

We also provide education to specifiers, such as architects, who continually fail to specify Scottish timber because of their perception that it is of poor quality and not suitable. We have that kind of issue.

Training initiatives are vital. The same client who is funding the Stemovators project in north-east Scotland is also funding a traineeship process to bring up to 10 people into the sector and give them the skills. Because of health and safety matters, we are highly regulated with regard to what people can and cannot do without the correct certification and the correct health and safety and personal protective equipment. That client is funding the PPE, training and certification for chainsaw and pesticide use to help people come into the sector. We need more of that work with communities if we are to stimulate the opportunities for young people to come into the sector.

As a business, we have taken on 60 graduates in the past six years. Those graduates have not always come through the traditional forestry route; in fact, it is really difficult to get people who have gone through the traditional forestry routes, because traditional forestry education is on the wane in the UK. As a result, we are taking in people from complementary fields, such as GIS specialists, geographers and people who have studied agriculture and land management. We are taking a wider range of people into the sector,

which is to our benefit, as they bring a wider range of skill sets.

Professor Wall: I broadly agree with Stuart Goodall. There is a real problem with the timber processing industry not just in Scotland but in the UK. According to the Structural Timber Association, 80 per cent of all structural timbers, such as glulam and CLT, are imported, with most of them coming in from Sweden. The problem is that it is an international market, not a Scotland or UK market. People buy and sell that stuff all over the world, so you are competing with big players in Europe and America and to enter the market, you need large sums of capital. It is partly about confidence, but first of all it is about capital. You can have all the confidence in the world, but if you have no money, that confidence will get you nowhere.

It is a complex problem. Among other things, our report recommends that Scottish Enterprise take a lead role, because you need to co-ordinate private industry, the housing associations and the specifiers. Actually, architects are not the problem, because they design hardly any houses; indeed, quite a lot of buildings are not designed by them. Architects are good at exploring things such as glulam beams—they like that, because it requires skill.

10:15

The real issue is the standard specification for housing, factories and so on. If Scottish Enterprise were to co-ordinate that with Government support, the industry, the research institutions and so on, it might be possible to make a start. Indeed, grants could be given. We are not against grants; we would just ask, "What is their purpose?" Would a grant that assists a firm in tooling up to start creating some of the things that we are talking about be helpful? If so, we should give it to the firm.

Stuart Goodall is right—there is nothing wrong with the quality of Scottish timber. That myth has gone, by and large. We have this enormous resource and we just do not use it. If you look at the figures, most of it goes to paper, pulp and short-term use products, whereas we need it to go to long-term products so that the carbon is sequestered. If you just take trees and turn them into paper, they can rapidly become carbon again. If you put the timber in a house, a factory or an office, it is there for at least 100 years.

Emma Roddick: The RSE report covered the fact that the Forestry Commission used to be known for building homes for forestry workers. The industry does not do that any more. I do not know whether Graeme Prest is in a place to speak to that, but I am happy to hear from anybody else

who might have something to contribute on whether consideration has been given to putting housing into rural communities, in particular, and that being a potential economic and social impact from forestry.

Graeme Prest: We used to have a huge number of houses, as you know. If you go across Scotland, you can see houses and even villages that the Forestry Commission built. That day has gone.

One of our big challenges with getting staff, particularly in the west of Scotland, is housing. We have a direct issue with recruiting people because of the availability and cost of housing, so we are working with housing associations on more novel approaches. As we manage a lot of land, we are, with the housing associations, considering whether there are areas that could be used for social housing. Part of the benefit for us would relate to recruiting staff, because there would be an opportunity for people who come to work for us to stay in some of those properties.

We are actively pursuing that, particularly in Argyll and Lochaber. It is early days, but it looks promising. I would be happy to give you a further update on that.

Andy Rockall: I will make a quick observation. Many community groups, particularly in the rural parts of Scotland, are using some of their land to develop housing for local people, because housing is such an issue across the board in rural areas. Communities are taking it upon themselves to try to solve the issue themselves.

The Convener: Given that we have a housing crisis, which is more acute in rural Scotland—we all appreciate that it is a driver for rural depopulation—do you have a specific role in going a little bit further and procuring or building houses for people who work in the forestry sector?

Graeme Prest: It is not our area of expertise—it is a long time since we were in that market. What we can bring to the table is more the land and the desire to work with others to make that happen. It is about bringing our skills and the public land that we have and working in partnership with others.

That sort of discussion is an answer to Emma Roddick's question, and there are positive signs that something will come out of that. It is a different way of working. It is about ensuring that we use our skills and work with others who have skills and that the housing that is built benefits the communities. It is a good approach.

Stuart Goodall: Housing, as we all recognise, is a big and acute issue in certain parts of Scotland. We get feedback from members that they are struggling to get people into an area because the housing is just not available, so they

have to buy their own housing or enter into long leases to provide the accommodation that will encourage people to come.

There is an interesting unintended outcome from investment in land use change. We have seen a few examples of marginal sheep farms with buildings on them. Because the farmer has not been able to invest in them, when an investor purchases the land, they have either to sell the houses off or to develop them themselves. In some situations, where there had been only one farmer working on the land, there are now businesses, families and quite a few other people in multiple buildings. That land use change has had a catalytic effect on the ability to unlock investment.

Ultimately, people look at land and ask how they can get the best investment from it, and often there are buildings on it. I am not saying that this is some sort of simple built solution, but things are happening that we had not expected as a result of those developments.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to the theme of social outcomes.

Emma Harper: Good morning. Some of your answers will probably be on issues that we have already covered, as social benefits for local people in our areas are all intertwined with the issues that we have been talking about—housing, skills development and the recruitment of apprentices.

I will come to Stuart Goodall, first, on local issues regarding ownership and employment. Forestry coverage in Dumfries and Galloway is 31 per cent. Forestry is a big industry in the south-west of Scotland and you mentioned the south-west in relation to skills. I am interested in hearing about how rural communities in Scotland benefit from forestry and woodland.

Stuart Goodall: The first thing that I would flag up is that a lot of work is being done on the concept of community benefit. We are working with member companies such as Scottish Woodlands and people who are bringing investment into Scotland, such as Gresham House and Foresight, on how local communities can benefit from the creation of new woodland.

The first step is to raise understanding and awareness of how important local community benefit is. That awareness is now being embedded in the sector, so people are saying that it is something that they need to look seriously at. The question then becomes what form it takes. What kind of things could we be doing? We are commissioning somebody to work with businesses in the sector and with people who are looking at community benefit standards to say what things we could offer. The simple, go-to thing is often cash. People say, "Your wind farms are bringing in

money. Can we have a pot of money from the planting?” Unfortunately, when we create woodlands, the investment is all up front. We get a grant that contributes to the cost and we do not get our income until 30 or 35 years down the line, so that does not work so well.

However, there is land and there are jobs. A whole range of different types of jobs are associated with creating, designing, planting and protecting a forest. Generally speaking, those jobs are being delivered—especially in south-west Scotland—by local people, because an ecosystem of businesses has developed over the decades. We are looking at how we can measure, identify and encourage the delivery of jobs so that we can show that it is happening and see whether there is more that we can do. It is about keeping those jobs local, because there is no desire to bus people around Scotland—that is of no benefit. I do not think that that is happening very much, but we continue to look at how we can make sure that we are doing as much as possible locally.

We are also looking at other things. For example, Foresight bought a forest and a bit of land and the local community spoke to it and said, “It would be fantastic if we could have access to the bit of land next to our village.” That has been agreed to, so the community now has use of that land and they are planting it. They have a long-term lease for, I think, 20 to 25 years. That means that they do not have to take ownership, with all the issues that come with that. They see it as hugely beneficial and something that they can use as a catalyst. That is an example of what we are looking at to see whether we can do more of those types of things.

Similarly, people have been keen to talk to me about how we can keep people local. Forestry is a big employer in the south-west and we have to ensure that, when people leave school, they understand where the job opportunities are. We need to connect them to opportunities not only in existing industries such as farming but in the emerging ones such as renewable energy, wind farms and forestry. We need to think about how we can work with local communities to get local people to work in the industry. There is a shared interest there, and we need to think about how we make that happen.

Those are all things that we want to do. To put it glibly, I put those things under the heading of being a good neighbour. We want to change perceptions around forestry. It has been seen in a negative light in the past, and we want it to be seen positively in the future. We are therefore keen to do more in terms of community benefit, engagement with local people and the creation of local jobs and opportunities. We have an

opportunity to target a lot of those things in the south-west.

David Robertson: We cannot overemphasise the change that forestry often leads to on communities’ access to land, which might not previously have been unrestricted. That is especially the case in areas that have been converted from agricultural use, which, despite the fact that we have access legislation in Scotland, might have had signs encouraging people not to access areas and would have had livestock in fields and so on. Under forestry regulations, that changes. The land is generally open for people to access at any time. There are no periods when access is restricted because of lambing or because there is a bull in a field, so there is much more open access. However, that is only a small part of the issue.

Employment is one of the key issues, and one of the misrepresentations of the industry is that forestry activity leads to depopulation. That is not something that we see. There is absolutely no doubt that the employment profile changes. You do not see the farmer on a quad bike with a dog in the field every day. However, although you might not notice them, there are vehicles coming in with forestry contractors who are in there working two or three days a week, or five days a week during the establishment process—the amount of work changes, but that employment is still very real and, in most cases, is still very local.

More than 400 separate contractors across Scotland work for us. We are a forestry management business, and we subcontract out all the work that is done for our clients on their properties. Those 400 businesses employ more than 2,600 people and, if you look at the postcodes of those people, you will see that they are almost exclusively rural. Those people are living and working in the rural environment. It would be nonsensical for us to take somebody from Dumfries and Galloway to work in Aberdeenshire or somebody from Aberdeenshire to work in Northern Ireland or wherever, so we use local contractors, and it is undeniable that there is local benefit from employment in forestry.

Andy Rockall: It is encouraging to hear Stuart Goodall and David Robertson talking about community benefit and what might be on offer to communities. From our perspective, working with communities that are already engaged in woodland, we can say that the benefits are maximised when communities have real agency and control over their destiny. In relation to the offer that Stuart Goodall talked about, I suggest that the simplest thing would be to ask communities how they might benefit from a scheme. I am sure that that is part of his thinking,

but it is worth raising that point. Communities with agency deliver more for themselves.

A board member of one of our member groups that has been in existence for around 20 years said to me that the community woodland gave their community a heart. It is a small rural island community that is dispersed along a road that is much travelled by tourists. Over the 20 years since the kernel of the woodland was established—the kernel of the heart—the community has developed 13 or 14 seasonal posts and done a range of things. It has a campsite and growing areas, it runs growing projects for people with additional needs in the community and it has recently built two toilet blocks because the local authority is withdrawing that service. The community woodland and the connection between it and the people brought that community together.

10:30

The answer to Emma Harper's question is that the benefits to that community are not about numbers or anything like that; they are about cohesion, confidence, assertiveness and people's willingness to do things for themselves. That is what the community's connection to the woodland brings that community. That is the prize. Some trees will come, which is great, but the community gets more than just trees.

Graeme Prest: I will split my answer to cover the interrelated subjects of employment and work with communities.

Forestry and Land Scotland employs about 1,200 people, with the vast majority living and working in rural areas. As others have said, we had an enormous workforce decades ago, but the work on the ground is now done largely through contracts. There is a chain of work from planting and harvesting to maintenance and recreational work. The headline figure is 1,200 staff, but there is a lot of other work. David Robertson talked about contractors, and we have those, too. They are mostly rurally based. I do not have the figures to hand, but I can get them. The numbers are significant, particularly in areas such as Dumfries and Galloway.

We take on apprentices, who are really good people, but then we lose them. For that reason, last year, we started offering our apprentices a job afterwards, subject to their being successfully on track with their apprenticeship, so that they will continue working with us. That has become a successful way of bringing people in, often from rural communities across Scotland.

That is on the employment side, but I will also add to what Andy Rockall said about work with communities. As a public body, we have been working with communities for many years. I agree

with Andy that having long-term relationships with community groups across Scotland has brought wider benefits. Partnerships have evolved. Some are straightforward, informal relationships; some might be based on a more formal memorandum of understanding; and some involve community asset transfers—you may be aware of that scheme, which allows communities to acquire public land. There is a range of approaches and they bring benefits right across Scotland. I very much agree with Andy. There is a lot going on and much potential.

The Convener: You mentioned community asset transfer. I feel that there has been some pullback by Forestry and Land Scotland and Scottish Woodlands and that there seem to be more barriers to community involvement. There have been issues with community asset transfer for small areas of forestry in Kirkcudbright and Dalbeattie and recent issues with the purchase of the Clatteringshaws visitor centre. Transfer seems to be increasingly difficult and it seems that Forestry and Land Scotland is acting more commercially than it did in the past.

There has been less investment in the 7stanes mountain biking centres, which have almost fallen off the tourist map after being such a jewel in the crown for Dumfries and Galloway. We have also seen less promotion of the dark skies, although Galloway had the first dark sky park in the United Kingdom. I feel that the eye has been taken off the ball regarding the importance of the public's forests, if you like. Public sector forestry seems to have lost sight of the importance of access and of the activities that take place alongside forestry. Are my concerns misplaced?

Graeme Prest: You suggested that we are becoming more commercial. We are a public body but most of our income comes from trading in timber for renewable energy and we get only a small amount of money from the Government. We are unusual in being a public body that is largely reliant on commercial income to do the things that we do.

That links to things such as the CAT at Clatteringshaws, which is a brilliant example of where we have a great public asset and, rather than trying to do it all ourselves, the approach is about working with others to get additional public and social benefits. We are delighted about what has happened with the asset at Clatteringshaws. We have limited funding, which affects what we can do directly, so we are interested in working with others and doing things in partnership.

You also mentioned the 7stanes centres. We had the UCI cycling world championships at Glentress and we made a significant investment there in advance of the event. I was there, and it was rated as the best venue to date for mountain

biking as part of the UCI world championships. The status of the 7stanes centres, particularly Glentress, is right up there in world terms.

The Convener: I suppose that that is one stane.

Graeme Prest: It is—there are another six. *[Laughter.]*

To add to that, we have been doing some work on master planning for other areas to see how we can develop them, again with others. We are looking at Dalbeattie and another place.

The Convener: Is it Kirroughtree?

Graeme Prest: No, it is in the Borders. There is one place in Dumfries and Galloway and one in the Borders.

David Robertson: It is Innerleithen.

Graeme Prest: Yes—Innerleithen. We are looking at master planning and how we can work with partners to develop those areas. I will use the example of Glentress again. We have a new development there through Forest Holidays, which has 50 high-quality cabins. That is a private investment and we get a lease income, so it is good for the economy but it also supports funding of the forest.

You are right to pick up on the fact that we are changing tack a bit, convener. We want to work with others.

Sarah Madden: Woodland Trust Scotland is a charity, so we rely on a lot of volunteers attending our planting days and doing seed collection, for example. We are very grateful to our volunteers and we could not work on the scale that we do without them.

One of the policy solutions—or a first step—to more community involvement is local place plans, as part of the planning system. I banged on about those in my previous role, too. They are a way for communities to set out exactly what they want their local area to look like, or their desires for the area. Local place plans would be a really good way for developers of any kind, whether we are talking about the forestry sector or the built environment, to see how they can support community priorities as part of the wider community benefit, even if that is not directly related to a particular project.

One of the issues with getting local place plans off the ground is the absence of community capacity building. We have seen amazing examples of community ownership and asset management, but it can be hard work—as I know, because I volunteer in a community organisation outwith my full-time job. We need communities to be empowered to do those things in the first place and to know how to ask for what they want. For

example, in my town, many people do not even know that these options exist.

Another issue is that, as I understand it, communities are not financially supported to produce local place plans. It tends to be communities that are more organised or are well off that have the resources—or the expertise to find the resources—to produce a plan, so many communities can be left behind. Addressing that is a potential policy solution.

I also want to touch on the network of climate action hubs that the Scottish Government has set up. I will give a full disclosure: I am a director of my local hub. More needs to be done to bring the hubs together to further embed them in the conversation and in community climate action generally. The hubs need to be linked with, for example, commercial forestry projects in order to increase community benefit. The hubs' members are local development trusts, schools and so on—they reach every corner of local communities—so addressing that missing link has potential in that regard.

Andy Rockall: In response to Graeme Prest's observations on CATs and Forestry and Land Scotland, it does not sit well with me that public groups and communities need to apply to the Scottish land fund for public money to take over a public asset in the national forest estate. That seems to be slightly circular. Some of our member groups lease land and some groups operate under memorandums of understanding with Forestry and Land Scotland. We would like there to be an increase in the mechanisms that allow communities to access land and for them to be promoted more and to be more widely available. As things stand, it appears that community access to land is at the discretion of local management in Forestry and Land Scotland. A greater national emphasis to make that more available to communities would perhaps be beneficial across the board.

I will also respond to Sarah Madden's point about community capacity. Of course, I would argue for more support for organisations that support communities to get involved in forest and woodland management. The biggest capacity issue that we come across in communities is time, not capability. Although I take the point that some of it is a patchwork—not every rural community has an accountant or a forester—there are skills in every rural community. People are short of time, which prohibits them from making applications to schemes and from all sorts of other activities. It stops them getting involved. Finding a way to create time would solve a lot of problems.

The Convener: Tell us about it. *[Laughter.]*

Brendan Callaghan: One of the ways that the forestry grant scheme supports local employment and business development is through the harvesting and processing grant option. It is a relatively minor part of the forestry grant scheme but, over the scheme's life, which is about 10 years, we have supported 252 projects, and £5.6 million has been committed in grants. The grant is only for small businesses or new businesses in the forestry sector. For a number of years, we targeted tree nurseries, because that was a capacity limitation.

We have not yet finalised our report, but we have been evaluating the scheme by going back to a proportion of those who have received the grant to ask what benefits they have derived from it and whether they have delivered what they were expecting to deliver. It is an extrapolation, because we did not speak to everyone, but our evaluation showed that 173 jobs have been created. That evidence will be published later this year as part of the work on developing a future forestry grant scheme. Even though that is small compared with the enterprise companies, there is a stream of activity through the forestry grant scheme that supports small-scale timber development and projects such as deer larders, which can help with estate management, and tree nurseries. Some of the grant funding is also going to community nurseries.

The Convener: I will bring in David Robertson and then Emma Roddick to ask a final question on this subject.

David Robertson: I will pick up on some misconceptions about the industry and the way that it communicates with and consults communities. There is a general consideration that the industry sometimes tries to avoid community consultation, but I do not think that that is correct at all. I think that we are very engaging. Some of our staff are extremely passionate about taking local communities with them on the journey of forestry development.

Stuart Goodall cannot say it, but I can: Confor has produced an excellent document called "Engagement with Local People and Communities", which provides guidance for applicants to improve what they are doing.

The sector is on a journey to improve, but the guidance and the processes that we have often pitch us against each other rather than helping us to collaborate. It is not uncommon for us to see, in a community consultation exercise, members of staff being verbally and racially abused. We have had to call the police to community consultation events about forestry developments. The process for engagement needs to be reviewed and considered in a more rounded way.

10:45

That starts with us, as an industry. Many people in the industry are doing a very good job in developing the process, but that needs to come from both sides. The regulator needs to play its part in ensuring that the dialogue and discussion is fair, open, representative and not misleading. There is currently a huge amount of misleading commentary about the forestry sector among community groups. However, community groups have been instrumental in bringing together the guidance that Confor has created, which is a big step forward. I highlight that the industry is doing as much as it possibly can to take that forward.

The Convener: You have probably pre-empted some of Emma Roddick's next question, but I will bring her back in.

Emma Roddick: That was helpful context, in fact. I want to explore the perception that community engagement, particularly ahead of planting projects, is not impactful and that, when people make suggestions, that does not change the outcome or the plans. What is being done, and what more could be done, to challenge that perception and to ensure that engagement is meaningful?

David Robertson: I will jump in. That is a good point. On what is being done, the community guidance that has been developed by Confor, which I hope Stuart Goodall will go on to cover, is instrumental in that regard. We follow the current guidelines that are in place through Scottish Forestry as the regulator. We engage early with communities and advise them of the intention—what we hope to achieve and what our client's objectives are for the property. We carry out a scoping exercise with communities to ensure that they can have an input to the process.

Quite often, we go to the community meetings with what the community views as a preconceived idea or a design for a development. It needs to be understood that, in order for us to encourage people either to invest or to convert their own land, we need to give them a concept on which to base their decision. Quite often, we have a plan in mind as to what we would ultimately like to achieve, but it is not set in stone. We are often criticised by communities for coming along with a plan. They say, "You're not consulting with us—you already have a plan in place," but we have to have a plan in place before somebody will consider the process of consulting, if you understand where I am coming from. The process is complex.

We have an issues log, which is used to consider and take into account all the points that the community presents. As part of the process, Brendan Callaghan and his team will go through those issues with us to look at mitigation and we

try to take on board concerns and opportunities and facilitate access—whatever we can do to work with the community in relation to the project.

It is a wide-ranging process, and it probably needs to be reviewed from the regulation side to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

Stuart Goodall: To build on what David Robertson said, we produced good practice guidance on stakeholder engagement through undertaking a process with community and stakeholder representatives in the south of Scotland as a pilot. That experience—the process, not just the outcome—was incredibly interesting, and we hope that it can provide a shared understanding of what good engagement looks like.

With regard to the process, there are issues—to which David Robertson alluded—with people's expectations and what can reasonably be achieved through the process. As part of that discussion, we almost got to the point—which we had to get over—where, initially, people felt that they should have the right of co-design. Say that an owner of a piece of land wishes to plant a forest in line with the UK forestry standard to deliver what the Government wants; we see the same thing happen with housing, for example, all the time. People will then say, "We want to actually sit down with you and design the forest. We want to say to you what we think it's appropriate to have in here." However, that option is not available.

It was a really good discussion to have, because it allowed us to start getting a common understanding of the process and of what is good practice. When you are developing housing—I have been in this situation myself—you do not ask local people how you are going to build the houses, what houses you are going to build, where they are going to be placed and all the rest of it. However, they have a right to provide input. In forestry, we give people the opportunity to provide input far more than is the case with those other processes. There is a real attempt to reach out.

That does not mean that everything will be perfect from tomorrow. We develop the guidance and provide training courses for the foresters who are involved in projects. The way that I put it—some people might have heard this before—is that people get into forestry because they want to be around trees and away from people. If we say to them, "Deal with unhappy people," they say, "Well, I don't really want to be doing that and I'm not quite sure how to do it." We are providing training, advice and support. Those things will play out and we need to monitor them. That is a process, and we are committed to trying to do it better.

Without going into a huge amount of detail, I note that there are a lot of projects that go through fine. At the end of the day, we have a relatively small number of projects that capture all the attention, which makes people think, "Oh my goodness, there's a dreadful thing going on here and there's a massive problem." Generally, a lot of them progress just fine; that just applies occasionally, to a few projects. However, with those latter projects, we can quickly see a group of people who are very opposed to them becoming active, organised and effective in seeking to get media and political involvement.

What worries me in that regard is that they make lots of sensational statements in order to grab a headline in a newspaper. We have a scheme that we can use as an example of that if we need to, and we could dig up a whole range of media coverage—online, television and press coverage—that has those types of headlines and initial paragraphs. However, when you read the articles, the substance is not there: the statements being presented are sensationalist and, in almost all those cases, inaccurate. That is creating a lot of pushback and a frenzy. It pushes apart forestry people and local people, because the issue becomes contentious and leads to people butting heads.

That is undermining the ability to have a proper conversation, which is leading to two outcomes in particular. One is that people who wish to become engaged are not doing so because they are intimidated by those very loud voices. Also, as David Robertson said—this is really worrying to me—there are examples of forestry staff saying that people are becoming so angry and worked up that they are crossing a red line and becoming aggressive and bullying in their behaviour. I have spoken to two or three people in the forestry sector who have said, "I don't want to carry on doing this. If I can't find another job within the organisation, I want to leave, because I'm just trying to do my job really well—I do want to do this well—but I'm being pilloried. I'm seeing this stuff in the media. I'm being accused of X and Y, and this has been said about what we're doing, which is not true. Then I'm going into community engagement meetings and I'm being barracked by dozens of people."

I have heard examples—I could go on and on—of somebody having gone along to a meeting and, suddenly, dozens of local people have been whipped up to come to ambush that. That is the kind of thing that we are seeing, which does not allow the community as a whole to have proper engagement, and it certainly does not provide for good dialogue and discussion.

Going forward, we need to have real clarity about the process, scope of engagement and

where that takes place. In the past, there has been a tendency to take quite an informal approach, with individual discussions to deal with things. However, if we are getting to a point at which there is the degree of aggression, anger and frustration that we have seen, we perhaps need to get back to having a more formal process, which might take some of the heat out of things.

As I said, the issue involves only a small number of applications, but there is a danger that it might arise in relation to others, and it does not do anyone any good.

The Convener: Sarah Madden, you wanted to come in.

Sarah Madden: Did I have a point? *[Laughter.]* Oh, yes, I did—sorry. I just wanted to highlight the Scottish Land Commission’s work on community engagement. I worked with it in a previous role, and one of David Robertson’s colleagues was involved in an event at which it got professionals around a table to engage in continuing professional development for land agents, forest agents and landowners in general. I have engaged with the commission quite a lot and I think that its work should feature a little bit more in these discussions, because I see some value in it.

Brendan Callaghan: I will pick up on Sarah Madden’s point. The current application and assessment process procedures for woodland creation were published in 2018, so they are not that old. However, with the incremental levels of woodland creation and the growing community interest in the area, we are seeing an increase in conflict and problems for a variety of reasons.

We are in the process of refreshing that guidance, and one of the main references is the protocols that were produced by the Scottish Land Commission on community engagement. There are a couple of things in there that could be really helpful and that we are planning to bring in later this year, including clearer periods for that early engagement. For example, community councils in rural areas might meet only once every eight weeks rather than every month, so you need to give a bit of notice that provides time for people to have a discussion at one of those meetings and time to feed back.

We are planning to adopt a 12-week period in our procedures, so that people are not bounced into things, which just winds people up. As David Robertson and others have said, often, the process of developing and finalising the design for a woodland creation scheme takes two to three years, by the time that you factor in seasonal surveys and the lead-in time. Therefore, we are comfortable that that 12-week period can be accommodated.

There needs to be feedback to communities, which is something that has not always happened. At the moment, after people have provided some input to the process, they then wait in the background for something to appear on the public register and do not know whether their concerns have been addressed. We will build in feedback, and the Scottish Land Commission guidance clearly says that there should be feedback within six weeks of community engagement taking place.

The final thing that we want to do better is to improve transparency and make more of our documents and information about the stage that proposals have reached available on our public register. We have been slightly frustrated in that regard because of information technology issues, and have been waiting for our IT capacity to improve. However, again, work on that will begin in the middle of this year.

A lot of the frustration for communities comes from the fact that they do not know what is going on and, when they contact their elected representatives about a development, it turns out that there is not very much to know. It would help if our website were more transparent about who is working on which projects, whom to contact, whether there is a finalised application and when people can comment on it. I just want to make clear to you that that is happening this year and our changed approach will, we hope, address a lot of the issues, particularly in association with the professional investment that the Confederation of Forest Industries and companies are making.

Professor Wall: You will be pleased to see that some agreement is emerging around the table on this issue, convener. Stuart Goodall has said that it is best to have a more formal approach, and two people have mentioned the Scottish Land Commission’s guidance. That guidance was published in 2022, and one of the recommendations in my report is that it should be mandatory for planters.

Tree planting is a speculative commercial job and, if you are doing speculative commercial work anywhere else in Scotland—in a city, a town, a village and so on—you apply for a planning application, you publish that, you have public consultation and you have to make public benefit contributions if there is some damage, and so on. To request that people making major changes to the environment and to a community—which is the case, particularly with regard to the bigger schemes—go through a formal consultation process, as they would if they were investing their money anywhere else in Scotland, is not unreasonable.

11:00

The Scottish Land Commission worked hard, in consultation with other bodies and communities, to produce the guidance, and it includes pre-application discussions so that people can open up the issues and clear the air or at least ensure that everyone knows from the beginning what the issues are and can tackle them.

I know that the industry will feel that it is a bit of a bind to have formal requirements, but they really are a protection. Lots of different companies and organisations are tree planting, and they are not all saints or sinners—there is a mixture. There should be well-established, good-quality and compulsory requirements for applicants, just as there would be anywhere else.

David Robertson: I agree to an extent. It is important that that is applied at a relevant scale. We quite often build websites for the applications that we carry out and signpost people towards those websites, because, as Brendan Callaghan suggested, the public register, which at the moment sits at the back of the regulator's tech system, will simply say something like, "Conifers: 155 ha," without giving any depth or detail about what is happening in the scheme. The register entry is titled with the predominating model for the application. It is great to hear Brendan say that that will be changed this year.

I really do not think that we can overestimate the impact that community engagement is having on individual members of staff. Those people are extremely passionate about what they do and feel that they are doing the right thing. They came into the industry because they want to plant trees and do something that they feel is good, but they are being abused and pilloried by people in an uncontrolled way that is becoming quite dangerous at some points. I stress again that something in that process has to change to bring back some control.

The Convener: I am conscious of the time, and we have a few questions left. I will turn very briefly to Stuart Goodall.

Stuart Goodall: I promise to be brief. I absolutely agree with the last point. We are looking at appropriate behaviours. We all know what those are, but we are setting them out and saying what is appropriate when the industry deals with communities or when communities deal with industry or with Scottish Forestry. We are defining that and then telling people what they can do if they experience inappropriate behaviour. That is really important. I absolutely agree with the point about engagement with the Scottish Land Commission. We consulted the Scottish Land Commission and Scottish Forestry about that good practice guide.

We try to do the best job that we can, and I think that we have done a good job. It is not just our work; it is the work of communities. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and we must now be given the opportunity to make that happen. It will not suddenly be all light and roses tomorrow, but we want people to work with us and to give us a chance to make it work, review it and improve it. The intent to do that well and properly is there, but it will take time to bed that in and see how it is operating.

The Convener: We move to our final theme of environmental outcomes and a question from Beatrice Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart: I will kick off the environment theme by looking at policy. Is forestry and woodland policy well enough aligned with other policy areas, such as agriculture and food, that fall under the committee's remit? David Robertson talked about the falling number of farmers who engage in tree planting schemes, and I would be interested in hearing your views about how the various policies align.

Sarah Madden: Woodland Trust Scotland and the Soil Association have, in the past few years, done quite a bit of work in partnership, looking at the role of trees on farms. Our latest report, which I can summarise as being about farm tree payment options, was launched at the Royal Highland Show last year—I think that a few of you were there—and it looked at the shortcomings and shortfalls in the support available to help farmers and crofters to integrate trees into their businesses and farming systems. Given that 80 per cent of our land cover in Scotland is agricultural, there is a lot of potential in that respect, if it is done right.

Someone will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that the report also found that, in 2023, there were only around eight applications for the main agroforestry option under the forestry grant scheme. As a result, it identified a real need to make more financial support available for a wider range of tree-planting options for farmers and crofters. There are lower-density options such as enhanced hedgerows, single in-field trees and riparian options, which we parcelled into the category of small enclosures, for which funding is not widely available at the moment. We have found that having those options available and embedded in the agricultural subsidy scheme, rather than the separate FGS scheme, makes them far more accessible to farmers, who are already embedded in that scheme.

So, there is a lot of work to be done, but there is also a lot of potential to use the agricultural scheme to make tree planting and the integration of trees into farming systems available to farmers. It is not about giving up farmland to large woodlands or forestry or anything like that. It is

about enabling farmers to plant trees in ways that benefit their business in a productivity sense, making their land more resilient to climate change, improving water quality, and providing amenity benefit and potentially additional crops, too. There are a number of benefits not just for nature but for farming businesses, and the agricultural subsidy scheme is where that is at.

Dr Mitchell: A key thing that we need to think about is linking our forestry to the Scottish biodiversity strategy and its delivery plan, and to the upcoming natural environment bill. One of the key linkages between those things is the management of our deer population. Only 33 per cent of our protected ancient woodlands are in favourable condition, and we can do an awful lot to improve the biodiversity of our woodland and the management of its condition if we manage our deer population.

We need to think about how our forestry strategy links with open habitats, which provide a lot of biodiversity benefits as well as carbon storage. We must not lose those benefits from our open habitats while we are thinking about the expansion of our woodlands.

The Scottish biodiversity strategy has some very clear targets for invasive non-native species, but there is a disconnect in that non-native conifers are not considered invasive species when we are thinking about the polluter-pays principle. There are lots of examples of Sitka spruce spreading out into our valuable native habitats and then having to be removed at taxpayers' expense, and we need to revisit how we manage the potential spread of non-native conifers into other valuable habitats.

Stuart Goodall said something about different woodlands delivering not just one benefit but multiple benefits. I totally agree that forests will deliver not just one benefit but a variety of benefits; however, with different types of woodland, the balance will fall in different directions. Although there are some examples of conifer plantations delivering good biodiversity benefits, unfortunately that is not true for the majority of them.

Different things influence the biodiversity that is supported, particularly the tree species that we plant and the structure that we use. Work by the James Hutton Institute shows that around 500 species across the UK utilise Sitka spruce trees, compared with about 1,500 species that utilise our native Scots pine trees, or over 2,000 species that are supported by our oak trees. We need to think about the tree species that we are planting.

We need to think about the structure of our forests, too. Unfortunately, at the moment, many of our forests are quite even-aged. The structure

of our forests is quite important, and, if we could change that structure and perhaps move towards a continuous-cover forestry approach, in which there is a diversity of age in forests, that would help to improve support for biodiversity.

That was quite a range of things, but I do think that forestry needs to be linked to the upcoming natural environment bill. Finally, I would say that we need appropriate monitoring of the targets in that bill.

The Convener: So, we have the natural environment bill, the climate change plan and biodiversity plans, and the UK forestry standard is a major factor, too. Are you comfortable that they all link up and that there is appropriate co-design by industry and partners to ensure that the legislation recognises the desired outcomes of forestry?

Dr Mitchell: No, I am not. There are examples of things not always linking up, whereby we end up with conflicting benefits. For example, there was a recent news report about one side of a valley being paid with taxpayers' money to remove commercial or non-native tree species while another area, which was fairly close to it, was being paid with taxpayers' money to plant commercial non-native conifers. We need a more joined-up approach to understand the impacts across different policy areas.

Stuart Goodall: There are quite a few points to make in response to your question. We are struggling with the evidence. On the earlier comment about the relative carbon sequestration of different tree species with regard to biodiversity, I have to say that the research that we have seen does not agree with that. When we look at the work of Forest Research, both north and south of the border, we see that it does not match what Ruth Mitchell has said. I am not saying that she is wrong; all that I am asking is how people who are looking at the forestry standard can deliver multipurpose benefits when we are being told two very different things. That does not help us. Somehow the research community has got to sort that out, because we will end up with someone saying, "I'm following what so-and-so says, and it's great stuff," and somebody else saying, "No, it's not—you're doing rubbish!" Both things cannot be right, so there is a fundamental problem there.

I agree with what Ruth Mitchell has said about this not being only about individual trees. Putting aside how much an individual tree can host—as I have said, the figures that came out recently are very different to those that were mentioned—I think that this is all about the woodland, the different species, the structure and the open space. In a productive forest, so much biodiversity value is based on the age of the forest and on access points. There are different types of

biodiversity within each forest, and it is important to consider that.

We also have to consider where we are going, and one of the biggest problems with our constantly looking back at the UK forestry standard is that we are not measuring change and letting the changes that we make play through. The standard was introduced in 1997, so we are 27 years into it. In that time, we have changed it three or four times, and we are constantly saying, “It is not doing as much as it could be, because this or that bit of evidence says so.” If an even-aged forest is not delivering, the conclusion is that the UK forestry standard is not delivering either; however, that forest has probably not been felled, harvested and then restocked to the UK forestry standard.

Some tree species are on 40 to 120-year cycles and, if we keep making changes, we are not giving ourselves the opportunity to see whether the policies are actually delivering what we think they are. Every area of policy shows that if we do not measure these things, changes that we make will have unintended consequences. Therefore, what I would say is this: give us a chance to work this thing through and introduce forests with different age structures, because that will have different benefits.

We should be wary of unintended consequences. When I worked for the Forestry Commission and was involved in UK forestry, the UK forestry standard was brought in for certification and assurance. At that time, there was pressure from environmental organisations to make the area being felled at any one time—the coupe—as small as possible, on the basis that the smaller it is, the greater the benefit. Within 18 months, I had somebody coming back to me to say, “Can we change that? We have bird species that benefit from having larger areas on a rotational basis, so can we move to that?” It was not that people were being mischievous or doing the wrong thing at the time; they genuinely believed what they were saying, but they had not looked at the evidence, and they had not then monitored and understood what was happening.

11:15

In my view, the UK forestry standard is miles above what any other sector is doing, yet we are looking at it every five years and asking how we can make changes to it without reviewing evidence or letting it play through. There is a need to look at biodiversity, which is a challenge, as 80 per cent of our land is agricultural. We are trying to get everything out of a small part of our land use and our biodiversity—and, indeed, squeeze out a little bit more every five years.

We are not trying to avoid any of that. We are saying that there should be an evidence base, that we should feed that in and let things play out over time, and that—for goodness’ sake—other sectors should be given the same scrutiny as ours. If we truly believe in addressing biodiversity and climate change, why is the same scrutiny not being given to other parts of Scotland’s land management?

The Convener: This is the moment at which we need to find more time, but we are now running out of time. I have Andy Rockall, Ian Wall and Graeme Prest still to come in, and then we need to move on to the last questions.

Andy Rockall: I will be quick.

The issue goes beyond forestry and agriculture as policy areas. The 2020 Scottish Parliament information centre briefing on forestry and woodlands has five pages of policy connections in one of its appendices, listing policy areas and organisations that need to be considered. Achieving policy coherence across that lot is challenging. It presents a challenge for communities to understand where they fit, as it does—I am sure—for the other organisations in the room today.

Implicit in Sarah Madden’s answer is, I would argue, a need to break down silos between those policy areas to achieve the goal that we wish to achieve. We are talking about the balance between social, economic and environmental benefits. What is the goal that we wish to achieve and how do we achieve it? Which policy areas need to be ignored and which need to be considered, and how do we reconcile the different agendas?

Professor Wall: You are right, convener—there is not enough time.

The discussion on the UK forestry standard is really interesting, because it is not a standard—with very few exceptions, it is a set of aspirations, guidelines, hopes and things like that. A good example is exotic species. There is an exemption for Sitka, because we are told that it is well known and all the rest of it, and that the UK forestry standard handles it, but, actually, the UK forestry standard does not. There is an issue around joining these things together properly.

I have two points to make on the environment more generally. This might sound a bit odd in this committee, but it is about urban trees. That takes us back to the point about having the right tree in the right place. A dozen or 20 trees in an avenue in an urban situation will have enormous benefit. Another 12 or 20 in any forest is neither here nor there, but, in an urban location, those trees can reduce the temperature, reduce the air pollution and bring joy and pleasure—things like that.

We need to plant in our cities, towns and villages—in existing urban environments. That is quite easy to do, and the UK Government has produced a knockout book of technical detail—which excites me, although it may not be for the committee—on how to do it. It is complicated, with the services and buildings that are involved, but it is easily done. It is a bit more expensive, so one recommendation in our report was that Scottish Forestry should give money to local authorities to plant. That may be only 20 trees—the numbers are neither here nor there—but the impact on society is enormous. Unfortunately, however, Scottish Forestry does not think that it has the powers to do that. The proposed natural environment bill could fix the problem so that Scottish Forestry could work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and local authorities. That would be really valuable.

My last point on the environment in general concerns the way in which environmental impact is currently handled. When an application is made for a large scheme—I am talking about large schemes here, not the small schemes in communities—there is, first of all, a consultation between Scottish Forestry and the applicant. If that deals satisfactorily with what Scottish Forestry or the applicant thinks the environmental issues are, it goes through fairly quickly and an environmental impact assessment does not have to be undertaken. That really upsets people, because people read that EIAs will be carried out and take it for granted that that will be the case. However, the number of EIAs carried out in the past 10 years has been vanishingly small.

One of our recommendations was that EIAs should be mandatory for large schemes but not for every scheme. That should definitely go in the natural environment bill. If we want to protect the environment, the first thing to do is have a detailed environmental impact analysis. There are two advantages to that. One is that it increases the scientific knowledge of Scotland, because those analyses are then published. You start to pull together all sorts of knowledge and get a much better understanding. It also ensures good-quality engagement with the community.

I used to be a private property developer, so I understand about community objection, commercial speculation and things like that. I have done it—I did it for decades. Communities will be upset, but there is a process that you can follow. The more formal the process is, the more people feel that they have had a good shot. If they see that there has been an EIA and that some changes were made because there are argus butterflies, for example, and if they see that there have been public meetings and proper feedback and so on, they will still be angry but they will

accept that the process was reasonable. That could not be more important.

One thing that Government should do is legislate for good public engagement processes across all aspects of society, whether commercial, community or whatever. There is an opportunity for the committee and the bill to do that.

Graeme Prest: I will try to be concise, because time is marching on. I will pick up some of Dr Mitchell's points. If you look at the more established new plantation forests—the commercial forests that were planted 30, 40 or 50 years ago—you can see how much they evolve. I get around many forests, and they change a lot through good deer management and regeneration, and diversity increases through felling and restocking. That gets forgotten because forestry is seen as a static thing—you do a scheme, you plant something and that is it. Well, no, because as we see from examples from the past few decades, the new schemes keep changing. Those forests will not stand still. That is a really important point.

On the biodiversity value of productive forests, Forest Research did some work last year to look at what research has been done on the more productive commercial forests. The first thing to say is that it is fairly limited, because people tend not to do research on those. The main theme that it identified was that more research would be useful. The research on birds and mammals, to pick up Stuart Goodall's point, was pretty good, but was less good on plants and bryophytes, so the knowledge is not great.

In my own time, I am a very keen birder and ornithologist, and I go in these forests and see all sorts of interesting things, but I know that a lot of people do not. There are many knowledge gaps around what is in these new forests, which are now significant in this country. We should not underplay their biodiversity value.

My final point is on pulling together policy areas in a practical sense. What I have seen over the years is that that works best when there are landscape-scale partnerships of neighbours working together, because that increases the scale. I have been involved in two such partnerships over the years: Cairngorms Connect, which involves the private sector, non-governmental organisations and us on a very big scale, and the Great Trossachs Forest. You can see the benefits of working together at that big scale. In terms of how you apply policy and bring policies together, there is evidence that having more such landscape-scale partnerships of neighbours is a good way forward.

The Convener: The final question is from Tim Eagle. Some of it has been covered already, but I am sure that you will have something to add, Tim.

Tim Eagle: Pretty much all of it has been covered, because it was much the same as your question about what we need to build into wider legislation that is coming in or legislation that we already have. Unless anybody has any final points, that has been covered.

Emma Harper: I have a brief supplementary question about biodiversity. Recently, I have been engaging with a local farmer who is worried about the loss of curlew and lapwing, which are ground-nesting birds. Forestry gets blamed for encroaching on the open spaces that are needed for waders, and there is predator impact from foxes, badgers, crows and the rest of the corbie population. I am also aware that there is a habitat management programme with farmers in the Clyde valley that is working well and improving bird numbers. What work is being done or should be done on conservation for those types of birds?

Graeme Prest: You asked me that because I am a birder.

Emma Harper: I am looking directly at you because you just said that you are a birder.

The Convener: That is appropriate, because rather than everybody feeling the need to chip in, we can just have people who have a specific point to make. Graeme can come in, on his hobby, and then Sarah Madden.

Graeme Prest: There was some smiling when you mentioned this topic, Ms Harper.

There has been a lot of research. Basically, wader populations across the northern hemisphere are in decline. It is a wider picture of decline. The British Trust for Ornithology has done a lot of research, particularly on curlew.

The reason why the populations are declining is quite complex, as usual. Predator impacts are certainly one aspect. However, there is still a lot of research and understanding to come. The situation is not clear cut. We would like to have a nice, simple answer—I would, too—but it is not like that. It is much more complex and there is a lot more to understand about why certain species are in decline. It is never about one thing; a combination of factors is causing decline. The curlew is one of my favourite birds, so I recognise that.

It goes back to the point that I made about landscape-scale partnerships. If you are considering wading birds, there has to be sufficient scale. We are working with neighbours to have areas that are of sufficient scale and good habitat, which is really important. It is about the whole picture. What is the agricultural system? What is

the predator control situation? What is the whole landscape? We need to recognise that there are some big pressures on some species beyond climate change impacts.

Sarah Madden: There can be a tension between protecting an individual species—perhaps by a site of special scientific interest, for example—and ecosystem recovery that has a much wider and longer-term biodiversity benefit. I do not have the solution to that. I know of a couple of live examples, and NatureScot is doing some work on that as well. It is not always as black and white as a one-species approach. We are all starting to think about that issue in a wider ecosystem-recovery frame of mind.

Brendan Callaghan: It is a live tension. Despite the declining numbers, wading birds are widespread in a range of habitats across Scotland. It is a major consideration when anybody looks to plant trees. The process involves establishing early whether wading birds are present through speaking to NatureScot or the RSPB. There is a biodiversity database of where wading birds are, where the hotspots are and where there are schemes in the vicinity.

We would expect somebody to get empirical data—to go and do observations. Then we would work with NatureScot if the site is designated or the RSPB if it is a wider area and would have to take tough judgments. In some places, because of wider considerations, if the population is small and there are other available territories, some impacts on curlew might be acceptable but, in other areas, where it is a key population, the presence of curlew will limit the opportunities for woodland creation. That is one of the uncertainties that can crop up.

There is existing guidance and an existing approach, but the Working for Waders partnerships and NatureScot are actively considering whether some new guidance and a revised approach might be appropriate, and we are inputting to that.

Dr Mitchell: As others have said, there is a tension. There is evidence that predators coming out from forestry will have an impact on open-ground breeding birds up to about 1km away. However, as Graeme Prest said, that might not be the only factor driving their population decline. That is why we need to think about joining up our policies and linking through to our agri-environment farming supports and what is going on in our farmland. Some of those birds have been pushed out of other habitats that they would have nested in, such as some farmland habitats. Again, I call for joining up across policies.

The Convener: There is a request for another supplementary question from Ariane Burgess. It

will have to be a very precise question and preferably directed to a witness.

Ariane Burgess: Seed rain—the seeding of non-native trees on to adjoining land—is an issue, and I would love to understand how we take responsibility for that. I will go to Stuart Goodall.

11:30

Stuart Goodall: I think that the issue that you refer to has also been mentioned by Ruth Mitchell.

I was talking to a counterpart in New Zealand, where a lot of the forestry is made up of non-native species, and they face a similar challenge. They are doing research—I will get the terminology right—on adapting trees through some modification so that they cannot reseed.

We are just starting to think about whether that is a potential solution. I know that that gets us into the area of saying, “A tree is a tree, this is what they do, and it is very normal,” but we need trees for certain purposes. If the trees are compromising something else, is there some way in which we could modify them? That could be looked at, but I don’t want to head in that direction and have people say, “That is dreadful and appalling. You can’t go down that route, because we should not be playing with trees and their characteristics.” However, modification is a possible solution, even just to have such trees on the leading edge of a forest, where you might be getting that spread. We are very happy to look at that as a solution.

Brendan Callaghan: It is fair to say that, historically, the sector and Scottish Forestry as a regulator have not had enough focus on this. The peak of the problem was probably 30 or 40 years ago, when we had mature conifer forests next to open ground and raining seed on it. Since then, we have been cutting down those forests and have been thinking a bit more carefully about where they are planted.

We have had guidance for more than 10 years on how to mitigate the problem, but I do not think that we have necessarily had enough focus on it. Through the forest planning process, when any forest is felled and replanted, that is something that we need to be thinking about—and that is in the UKFS. We need to have a bit more focus on the issue. In that regard, it is broadly helpful that it has been raised by the RSE and others in recent years.

With new forests and forests next to important habitats, the issue is at the forefront and is an important consideration, but it is more problematic for existing forests. That raises a question. If there is a sensitive habitat and an existing forest, and someone wants to plant a second rotation of trees that risks raining seed on to a habitat, how are we

going to address that and who will take responsibility? We will have to start pushing a bit harder on that.

That is not going to deal with all the situations that have been spoken about today, because there are some historic forests where it is quite difficult to unravel how we solve that. There may well be cases in which public sector funding is the only way to do that.

Seed rain is on our list, and it is an area where we need to strengthen the forest planning process. There are already situations where, if a forest is next to a special protection area, it might have been allowable to have that forest in the first rotation but, in the second rotation, the SPA is the overriding concern, which affects what we can do. There might be solutions—not all species rain seed in the same way, so we could have other species as buffers.

Ironically, we have probably made the situation worse through changing farming practice and so reducing numbers of animals that might have browsed out trees in the past. Also, the more deer control we do, the more those species are going to express themselves.

We have acknowledged that we need to look at the issue more strongly, and we are going to build that into our processes. We are going to revise our forest planning procedures, probably later this year, which will be an opportunity for stakeholders to have a look at that and advise us whether we are getting it right.

The Convener: David Robertson has promised that he has a very small contribution. On that basis, I will allow him the final word.

David Robertson: Excellent. Thank you. To be honest, Brendan Callaghan has covered it to a great extent. Changes in agricultural practice have a big impact on how much regeneration there is in those areas. As areas of adjacent agricultural land have been destocked in the past 30 years because of changes in agricultural practice, we are seeing more seed that would generally be grazed out by livestock establishing and colonising those sites. That is the main point.

Finally, the focus is mainly on Sitka spruce. We have to understand that Sitka spruce is the bedrock of our industry and it is likely to be the bedrock of our industry for a very long time, because it is ultimately what consumers want. At the policy conference in London last year, Paul Brannen, who is the author of a fantastic book called “Timber!”, which I urge you all to read and which is about how we can use more in the UK, said that Sitka is not the problem but the answer. Sitka is a climate champion; it is not a problem tree. We can use it to our best advantage to maximise carbon sequestration between now and

2050. We should not forget that as we strive to achieve that in Scotland.

Professor Wall: Half of the trees in Scotland are Sitka, so we have obviously overfulfilled the plan.

The Convener: On that note, I thank you for your contributions today. They have been hugely helpful and will help to inform the way forward in our budget discussions with the cabinet secretary next week.

We have a short agenda item 3, so I ask the witnesses to remain in their seats until we cover that.

Subordinate Legislation

Conservation of Salmon (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 (SSI 2024/368)

11:36

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of a negative instrument. Members will be aware that Jackie Baillie lodged a motion to annul the instrument yesterday afternoon. That being the case, and to give us time to allow for that, I propose that we defer the item and consider it at our next meeting. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you.

11:37

Meeting continued in private until 12:11.

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