

Some proposals for reforming the Scottish Forestry Grants scheme for native woodland

Description



Good overall outcome from mixed pinewood regeneration and planting in Glen Lyon. Photo credit Victor Clements

The risk to Nick's proposal to suspend the Scottish Forestry Grants system for a year ([see here](#)) is that you destroy the woodland creation capacity we currently have, including tree nurseries, and in a way that we never get it back again. No-one will ever trust the Scottish Government again and they won't invest in any longer term equipment or training. Sawmills would take the message that they are not wanted, and stop investing.

Most farms/ estates would only commit to reductions in deer densities if funding for that could be guaranteed for the longer term, potentially 20 years or more. One year means nothing. Agency staff have been trying to re- design a better grant scheme, integrating deer management, since 2020 or so,

and are still miles away from that, with little chance of success.

The Forestry Grant Scheme does not need to be closed down to review it, that can be done in parallel. If people are lobbying MSPs, then a proper FGS review in 2025/26 is an easier ask, with a fixed deadline, and then make the NEXT year's funding dependent upon that being delivered. That would apply the necessary pressure. You don't need to destroy everything to achieve constructive change. There are, however, enough examples of poor practice around at the moment (some of which you and Calum Campbell and others have highlighted) to bring the whole process in to disrepute for everyone. So, something has to change.

ScotGov are reluctant to put in the budget required to give the planting area they say they need, and targets are not being hit. Carbon credits inflate land prices (which is detrimental to everyone, as farmers have just found out to their cost), but they have also inflated the cost/ ha to establish trees, because everyone thinks the industry is awash with money, and so they can charge more. That works against smaller and medium sized holdings who would like to plant or regenerate trees, but who don't want to get involved in selling their carbon, which effectively means selling your soil to a third party. The overall effect will be to drive woodland creation down. It is also the case that woodland created by regeneration attracts only a small proportion of the grants that planting does, so people plant.

What I would do is this:

(1) make carbon trading illegal in this country. It is making a few people a lot of money, but it is not increasing the outputs being sought. It is in fact working against them.

(2) Remove the 10 hectare cap on lower density woodlands. Commercial conifer plantations need 2500+ trees/ ha, but native woodlands do not. Lower density woodlands cost less to establish, and they can be more easily planted by hand and lower impact methods, and have greater flexibility. The cost/ ha is much lower, so you get more hectares for your money. Mixed woodland/ open space is more in keeping with the Scottish landscape than even aged plantations of native species, is more stable to wind, more sensitive to carbon rich areas, easier to control deer in, better for a range of plant/ insect/ animal communities.

(3) Increase the regeneration grants so that they equate fully to low density planting.

(4) Don't be too prescriptive in terms of planting patterns or species choice.

(5) Recognize that because you are allowing more open space, it becomes more difficult to verify what has been planted or regenerated, but experienced Scottish Forestry staff will have an instinct for whether a scheme is working or not. Empower them to make decisions about marginal situations. (This requires a different working culture, and needs to accept that they might sometimes make mistakes).

(6) Don't be too prescriptive about fences vs no fences. In my experience, landowners will do what they need to do on the deer front to make woodland expansion work if they are persuaded that this is a good idea. The real cost of fencing/ no fencing is actually very similar when taken over 10 years or so, but the balance is now tilting towards no fencing because (a) Fencing is becoming more expensive, and (b) Fences are simply not now lasting long enough to see many woodlands established. However, it is very important not to take an ideological approach to this, because you risk smaller farmers and landowners not planting at all. Let them do their own risk- assessment.

(7) Allow private money to "top up" the overall woodland creation pot administered by SF, so that they can then genuinely say that they created x ha of trees in Scotland, perhaps restricted to the low density native model only. That will allow for private funding, but remove the double claiming that we see at the moment. SF can verify what they have achieved, but important not to create an entitlement that can be traded. That is where the real damage occurs.

Finally, I would say that in the Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme (SFGS) of 2003-6, we had a good example of how the Scottish woodland sector, including community woodlands, could design an effective and flexible scheme for our own requirements in a relatively short space of time, and was probably the best grant scheme we had in my time. The main barrier to doing this at the moment however is the requirement to keep us 100% aligned with EU schemes in case we ever want to go back again. We have to accept that we have left the EU, and that gives us the opportunity to be as flexible as we want to be. If we stay aligned, our hands are tied, and that is a big part of the problem too.

[Ed. note. This post originated as two comments on recent parkswatch post but I thought what Victor is saying was so important it should be published as a post and, with his permission have done so with some minor edits so it all fits together]

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