

## Abrdn's legacy at Far Ralia as paid for by Scottish Forestry - another environmental liability in the Cairngorms National Park

### Description



Approaching the boundary of Far Ralia, from near Luibleathain on the Ralia Estate, after crossing the Milton Burn. Note the natural regeneration before the deer fence

In December abrdn told the Scotsman that they had made mistakes with their carbon offsetting tree planting scheme at Far Ralia, the land they had bought for Â£6.5m in 2021 and are now trying to sell. While admitting these mistakes included *â??basic things around designing woodlands and certain processesâ??* they did not explain what they had got wrong or the implications for Scottish Forestry's grant system ([see here](#)). This post addresses some of those omissions following a visit to part of the estate last Saturday.

Rather than follow the access track ([see here](#)), I decided to look at the planting towards the north end of the landholding opposite the bothy at Luibleathain, only to find access barred by a basic mistake which should never have been allowed to happen:



New stock fence running alongside former deer fence and gate

A stock fence had not only been erected along the line of the existing deer fence but also across the gate making it impossible to open! There was nothing wrong that I could see with the deer fence apart from sagging wires where I and others had been forced to climb over it. But that had not stopped Scottish Forestry paying out a grant for over 5km of new stock fence while allowing the deer fence to remain alongside a significant part of it.

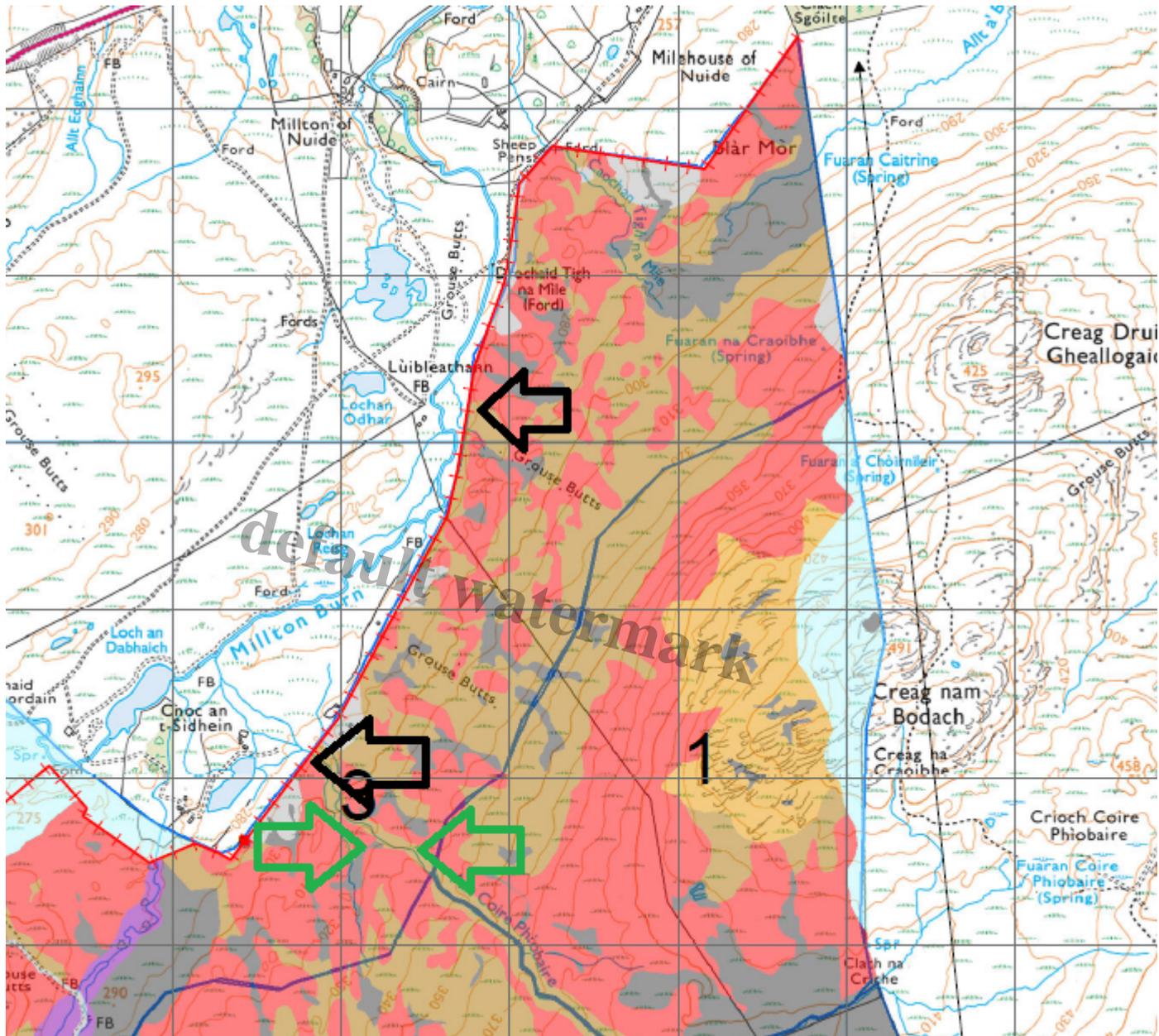
According to Scottish Forestry's contract with abrdn, obtained by a Freedom of Information Request, the metal droppers on the stock fence were supposed to be "reflective", to make the stock fence more visible to birds. I struggled to see any reflection and the droppers are spaced too far apart to deter birds from trying to fly between them. While the four droppers by the gate and its posts serve no apparent purpose, the wires on the upper part of the deer fence above the top of the stock fence remain almost invisible.

The evidence shows neither abrdn nor Scottish Forestry have made any real attempt to reduce the carnage caused by birds flying into fences ([see here](#)).



Close up of few stock fence with older deer fence behind

The explanation for this stupidity has nothing to do with promoting public access, protecting nature or reducing carbon emissions â?? the wire in the deer fence could and should have been recycled â?? but that land managers generally will only do things Scottish Forestry will pay for through its grants system.



The northern part of Far Ralia, the area where I walked. The dashed red line shows the stock fence and the red blob a gate in the stock fence. The pink-red shading marks areas to be planted with Scots Pine, the tan with birch and the grey deep peat, not to be planted. I have added two black arrows to show the location of two former gates in the deer fence and the two green arrows to show the woodland along the Allt Coire Phiobaire.

In the area just above the two fences, there was extensive natural regeneration of native trees among which Akre Trees, abrdn's agents ([see here](#)), had planted further trees in plastic vole guards:



Birch and willow in foreground with plastic guards scattered across the slope behind

The reason for this is again explained in abrdnâ??s contract with Scottish Forestry:

*â??The extent of natural regeneration within the proposal is at a maximum that can establish within the 5 year period as per the FGS New Natural Regeneration Establishment guidance.â??*

Part of the problem is that Scottish Forestry only pays grants for natural regeneration if it achieves similar levels of tree density to what it requires to pay for tree planting. In the case of tree planting this results in even-aged woodland that end up looking like plantations and is of very little ecological worth while in the case of natural regeneration this results in ungrazed thickets (such as the birch in the south west corner of Far Ralia, the small area which is allocated for natural regeneration).

The other part of the problem is the Woodland Carbon Code which calculates the carbon-offsetting value of any new woodland by the number of trees planted. In other words under the current system almost ALL the money lies in planting as much ground as possible. And it was money, rather than any real concern about nature, that drove abrdnâ??s initial decision to buy Far Ralia as an â??investmentâ??

- before it decided it was not such a good idea after all.



Browsed rowan in foreground with further naturally regenerating trees behind. Most of the planted trees are still too small to protrude above the heather but mounding visible on the hillock on the far right

The naturally regenerated trees which preceded the planting were still being browsed (to give them some credit it appears Aberdeen has been trying to reduce deer density still further) but the density of red deer has clearly been low enough to enable even palatable species like rowan to rise above the heather.



Planted rowan, its leaves turning autumnal as a result of the drought.

There should never be any justification for Scottish Forestry to award grants to plant rowan, a species which is being constantly dispersed by birds and readily colonises new areas. What Scottish Forestry should be doing is requiring land managers to reduce deer numbers so far more naturally regenerated rowan survives.

But so what, if this helps meeting the Scottish Government's tree planting targets and high tree densities? At Far Ralia rowan makes up 2-5% of the "new" woodland.



Skittled vole guard with tree, still alive, inside. If you look closely you can see how the former top end of the tree tube is jagged and is breaking up releasing whatever "plastic" was used in its fabrication into the environment

A significant number of the plastic vole guards had been blown or knocked over by animals killing the trees inside. I could have filled several rucksacks full. Even if as few as 5% of the 556,500 vole guards, funded by the Scottish Forestry grants systems, are already redundant that means there are over 25,000 tubes littering this small area of countryside.

Aberdeen's Woodland Grant application claimed the vole guards would be made from "biodegradable material" which includes everything from cardboard to plastic. The problem with "bio-plastics" is the jury is out whether such materials actually biodegrade, even in soils rich in fungi and micro-organisms, while even if they do the particles that remain could still have adverse impacts for a range of life. There is no evidence which I am aware of about what happens to such plastic tubes in peaty soils and Aberdeen appears to have no plans to remove them. In my view ALL "biodegradable" plastic tree tubes should be treated as a significant environmental liability unless proven otherwise.

Meantime I have put the remains of one broken tube I retrieved from the site into my compost heap to see what happens in an environment far more favourable than Far Ralia for breaking down "bio-plastic"!



A large area of hinged mounding – the bothy at Luibleathain is visible top left, to the left of the line of alder which mark the Milton Burn

Inverted mounding is where a digger turns the soil over on itself, whereas in hinge mounding the soil is deposited next to the hole the digger has created. Scottish Forestry/abrdn's contract states:

*Ground preparation will be invert mounding across the area. Invert mounding has been chosen silviculturally, as it is felt that with the mainly podzolic soils across the area invert mounding will aid in mixing soil horizons and aid in breaking shallow iron pans within microsites. Within wetter areas of shallow peat or gleyed soils invert mounding will also aid in creating localised drainage to aid in tree establishment. Invert Mounding will also help to minimise the visual impact of the ground preparation (non linear) and give a site that is more easily accessible for future management. In heavily greyed areas, hinge mounding will be used to avoid waterlogging.*

This gives the impression that inverted mounding, which is slightly less damaging than hinge mounding, would be the main method that the ground across Far Ralia would be prepared for planting trees. In fact, a large proportion of the total area appears to have been hinge mounded creating rows of trees, just like a sitka plantation.



A view of the hinge mounding close up showing how mineral soils have now been heaped across the peaty surface. The holes present a major hazard to walkers, which will only get worse if the trees become established, the light is shut out and people are forced between the mounds.

The hinge mounding has indeed resulted in “mixing soil horizons”, as claimed in the contract, and created “localised drainage”. In fact it has completely destroyed the soil structure and the “biodiversity intactness” of the site and throws further doubts on the Natural History Museum’s extraordinary claims that it would improve from under 52% to over 94% by planting trees ([see here](#)).

Above this area where mineral soils had been brought to the surface, there was an area of boggy ground where the Ayr/Scottish Forestry contract stated hinge mounding should take place:

*“Where it is deemed too wet to invert mound, hinge mounding will be used. Hinge mounding only be used where it is silvicultural felt it is the best option, especially in wetter areas, where the invert mound hole could fill with excessive water.”*



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This claim was nonsense, since inverted mounding should leave no hole, but was nevertheless accepted by Scottish Forestry and embodied in their contract with abrdn. To me it looked like most of the peat in this area was over 50cms deep but unfortunately I had left my measuring tape at home. If so, it should have been marked as "deep peat" on the map above and excluded from any planting.

What was indisputable, however, that many of these deep holes in the peat were filled with water which was evaporating into the atmosphere in the heat (it was over 25°C) instead of being retained under the vegetation. The exposed peaty surface of the hole will also slowly be oxidising releasing the CO<sub>2</sub> that had been stored under the vegetation into the atmosphere.

As for the mounds, when touched the peat, the best store of carbon we have, crumbled into dust. In other areas peat exposed by scraping or inverted mounding was also drying out, with consequences both for the newly planted trees and for carbon emissions:



An oak, planted on peat, shedding its leaves in response to desiccation

I was quite surprised therefore that, unlike BrewDog's Dead Forest a few miles north and west at Kinrara ([see here](#)), most of Aberdeen's trees on the lower to middle ground appeared to have so far survived the periods of very dry weather this year. Perhaps that is because so many of the trees had been planted on boggy ground – my walk did not take me to the higher areas.

There were signs, however, that some of the trees Aberdeen had had planted are now dying through lack of water even in areas where inverted mounding had been used:



Scots Pine on inverted mound

Much will probably depend on how much rain falls in the next few weeks. Even better established trees with larger root systems were suffering (see rowan above):

By contrast with the planted trees, I did not spot a single example of a naturally regenerated tree which appeared to be dying through lack of water.

For all the talk of planting the right tree in the right place, in practice very little attention is given to this with the pressure on the underpaid planting workforce to stick trees in anywhere:



Planted Oak and bog myrtle – the wrong species in the wrong place

This oak, while looking healthy enough, has probably only survived because it's been planted on wet heath, hence the bog myrtle, a habitat where it would not normally be found. On returning home I checked my copy of the JNCC guide to British Upland Vegetation which classifies vegetation communities according to the species which grow together. Nowhere could I find any mention of oak and bog myrtle being associated together naturally. Perhaps abrdn has created a new national vegetation community?



After wandering across the site I descended by the Allt Coire Phiobaire, which was flanked by a number of old trees and plenty of regenerating alder and birch, none of which had been marked on the Scottish Forestry grant application maps. As well as all the existing trees on the land at Far Ralia, the background to the photo shows there are multiple seed sources within a few miles. A basic understanding of ecology will tell you thousands and thousands of seeds will have been carried around and onto the site by birds, mammals and the wind for years.

All abrdn needed to do, therefore, if they wanted to increase the number of trees on their land was to reduce deer numbers and wait. Trees would then have established themselves on suitable ground through natural regeneration and failed to do so on the wetter peatier areas. This would have been the nature friendly way to conserve nature and lock up carbon. Instead, abrdn chased the money offered by the Scottish Forestry grants system and have been responsible for yet another environmentally disastrous tree planting scheme in what is supposed to be a National Park.



At another gate, not marked on the map, the line of duplicate deer fencing and stock fencing ended and was continued (on the left side of the gate in the foreground) as stock fencing. Note the extensive natural regeneration along the burn and the flood channels below.

Just above this gate I saw two young curlew circling over the moor. As a result of representations from birding interests, abrdn moved the stock fence up the hillside, away from the best areas for waders along the Milton burn. They also avoided using rabbit netting along the stock fence to allow wader chicks to pass through it. A small mercy. However, assuming abrdn or the future owners meet the requirements of the Forestry Grants system for tree density, most of the moor will be no more. The population of birds like curlew will then inevitably decline. Instead of humans playing god with what species are found where, we would be far better leaving it to nature.

The Abdrn Property Income Trust (APIT)'s latest annual report ([see here](#)) confirms that all its assets except Far Ralia were sold off to Goldentree on 24th November 2024. The annual report states APIT's AGM has been delayed to 10.00am on Monday 11 August 2025 because *the timing of*

*the sale of Far Ralia is uncertain so the Board have decided to defer the AGM from the usual June date?• It also explains there is considerable uncertainty about its value:*

*â??As a natural capital investment (in an emerging market), where a proportion of the value is attributed to the value of potential carbon offsets offered by the tree planting, there isnâ??t a large number of potential investors. That said, we have had interest to date from a variety of potential buyers and anticipate completing a sale during the course of the yearâ??;*

and:

*â??As at 31 December 2024 the sole property Far Ralia, was valued at Â£10.0m and the Company held cash of Â£36.6mâ??•*

That represents a significant decrease in abrdnâ??s original asking price of Â£12.5m but Â£10m is still far too high a price for an area of land that Scottish Forestryâ??s Grant system has turned into an environmental liability rather than an asset. Some of the Â£36.6m in cash that is still being held by APIT, rather than being distributed to shareholders, has possibly been retained to meet those liabilities.

The best thing that could now happen to Far Ralia now would be if abrdn donated it to the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) who could then use it as an example of how to restore the damage being caused by native woodland planting scheme. All the CNPA would need to do is get some peatland restoration specialists back on site, flip the hinged mounds back into the holes that have created, keep deer density at 2 per square km or less as Wildland Ltd is doing over the hill in Glen Tromie, take down the deer fencesâ??!â?!. and then wait. That, rather than tree planting, would be the best way to restore nature and reduce carbon emissions on a former sporting estate, where the land had been overgrazed and burned as part of an attempt to produce more deer and grouse for shooting purposes.

## Category

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## Author

nickkempe