

# Planting forests for our future

John Lockhart, of environmental planning and forestry consultancy Lockhart Garratt, looks into the action being taken to address the issue of declining forests.

**T**HE last 12 months have been a turning point for forestry, with the planting of two major new forests in the north of England. In March, the first of more than 660,000 trees were planted to mark the beginning of what will soon be the largest new forest planted in England for 30 years, at Doddington North Moor, an 875-acre site in Northumberland. In addition, the planting of Jack's Wood, a 170-hectare site on the Lowther Estate, south of Penrith, will involve the planting of more than 210,000 trees, a substantial proportion of which will be productive conifers.



productive forests, many of which were planted in the '50s and '60s and are now coming to productive maturity. In and around our base in the Midlands, the productive replanting undertaken by the Forestry Commission has been tiny, with many areas left to regenerate naturally with no focus on the delivery of a viable timber crop to generate future income.

More worryingly, this policy seems to extend to the more productive commercial forest areas and, as shown in the graph (Fig. 1), unless radical changes are made to replanting and new planting rates, we will soon see a massive undersupply, with impacts for businesses across the sector from nurseries through the contract chain to the final processors.

However, it is clear that the government is keen to address this issue and as an industry we need to work together to help make the changes required.

In its recently published 25-Year Environment Plan the government sets out a focus on natural capital. It acknowledges that woodland can deliver benefits, to a greater level than virtually any other habitat type through:

- carbon sequestration,
- air purification,
- noise regulation,
- water flow and flood prevention,
- water quality,
- pollination,
- timber production,
- accessible nature,
- biodiversity, and
- landscape.

As a result, the government has made specific commitments, in particular the new Northern Forest with £5.7 million of funding due to be announced this autumn to support the development of a belt of woodland around the M62. There is also an aspiration for new, larger-scale woodland creation to increase the supply of English-grown

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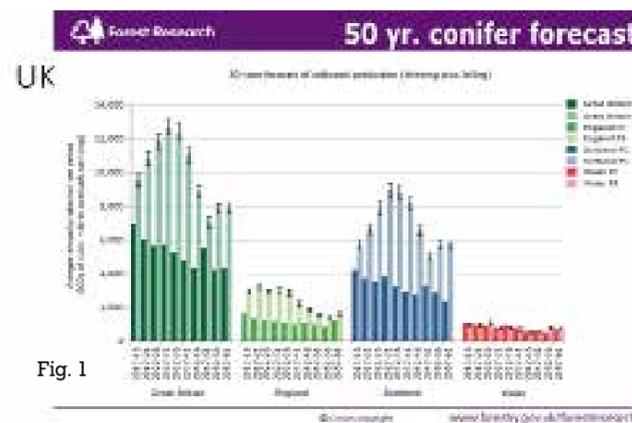


Fig. 1

timber from sustainable and productive woodlands and forestry that meet the highest standards of design and management.

They further allude to the aspiration of the creation of carbon reporting that would drive a demand for Domestic Carbon Offsets, working through the mechanism of the well-respected Woodland Carbon Code.

## THE BREXIT EFFECT

AS part of Brexit considerations, and in tandem with the aspiration for woodland creation, proposals include the largest shake-up of agriculture and wider land management. Following the 25-Year Environment Plan the government published 'Health and Harmony' – their command paper on the future of farming and rural land management. The key focus appears to be a move away from production-focused subsidies in favour of 'public payments for public goods'. As a result, landowners and farmers are re-evaluating the long-term suitability of their land for agriculture against other uses.

Historically, it would be fair to say that, certainly in the lowlands, woodlands and forestry would not have got a look in. Many would agree that, as an industry, we have not covered ourselves in glory with the excesses of poorly designed and implemented upland monocultures and the appalling excesses of the planting in the Flow Country. We have been poor at promoting and delivering the high-quality silvicultural management necessary to ensure a better condition of our forest estate than is the case currently.

However, we are now seeing a fundamental shift. On the back of increased and sustained demand and favourable exchange rates, timber prices are massively higher than they have been for many years. Timber is back in vogue as a sustainable construction material, with plans afoot for new timber skyscrapers in London in the near future. In addition, the ability of woodlands to deliver real 'public goods', in the form of carbon sequestration, water and air quality, biodiversity and other natural capital assets, offers opportunities for real and sustainable returns.

## A RANGE OF OPPORTUNITY

WOODLAND and forestry should be considered a vital part of an integrated land use mix. As well as transforming and shaping some of our most valued landscapes, well-designed and -planned woodlands can enhance shooting and other recreational and diversified land uses such as sensitive development in the form of holiday lodges, glamping etc. Development also offers opportunities; we have recently helped deliver a new productive 40 ha woodland ahead of planning to provide a unique setting for the proposed new Tresham Garden Village at Deenthorpe Airfield.

It feels as though we are on the edge of a unique and sustainable opportunity. As a small industry, we must work together and find solutions to the challenges and frustrations, many of which are outside our control. Many of us have experienced an overly cautious approach from stakeholder groups, particularly around biodiversity and archaeology. Government has a key role to play in developing a balanced approach to risks against the well-understood and long-term benefits. Excellent examples of how this can work are found in the National Forest, where new woodland and associated habitats have completely transformed a historically despoiled landscape, with all parties working collectively to a common goal.

## STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

THE Forestry Commission and Defra are also seeking to work with the sector to meet, and ideally exceed, current planting targets. In response to the challenges of some recent larger-scale schemes, they have set up a woodland-creation hub, recruiting a large-scale woodland-creation team to provide tailored support to these flagship projects. In conjunction with the ICF they also ran an excellent series of workshops in the summer. It's still early days, but there seems to be a genuine desire to work with the sector to succeed.

In addition, the Woodland Creation Planning grant, and funding available through both their independently administered Woodland Carbon Fund and the wider Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship, means that there is a meaningful package of potential support for those considering woodland as an alternative land use. The recent HS2 Woodland Fund, which offered attractive funding rates for smaller planting and restoration schemes, attracted keen interest and was quickly oversubscribed. Clearly there is an interest, with the right incentives and approach.

Ultimately the devil is in the detail, and it is important to secure good and timely advice. The success of any woodland project and the delivery of its objectives will depend on good design and species choice, and careful planning and management, with an open mind and compromise needed from both landowners and other stakeholders.

At a recent RICS/ICF event in Oxford, 'Creating Value from Woodlands', a mixed audience of foresters, surveyors and land managers heard real examples of how woodlands can deliver real value, through more productive use of marginal land, delivery of natural capital and production of high-quality timber.

The door is open and we now need to work together to demonstrate how forestry and woodland can sit side by side with other land uses, and take its rightful place in a productive and sustainable part of a rural property portfolio.

