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## **ECONOMIC REVIEW OF FORESTRY POLICY**

The Government's Economic Review of Forestry Policy in England is of considerable interest to many members of Wildlife and Countryside Link and whilst we appreciate there is no formal public consultation element to the review we would like to offer some observations and views from Link's perspective.

We surmise that the Review will clearly have to look in some detail at the future of Forest Enterprise and the funding arrangements for the Forestry Commission.

### **Forest Enterprise**

We have some concerns that the Treasury will see the opportunity for resurrecting the proposals of the early 1990s examined in the Forestry Review in 1993 for a major rationalisation of the public forest sector. The public outcry at the time over the potential loss of millions of acres of publicly accessible woodland took many by surprise. We feel that a similar reaction would occur today particularly given the heightened public interest in access to the countryside created by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which of course does not include a right of access to forests. Link members would also be concerned to see the disposal of large areas of forests on biodiversity grounds now that FE has achieved UKWAS certification and has begun to undertake major programmes of work to restore planted ancient woodland sites and to further the conservation of habitats and species identified as priorities under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan Process. This is particularly important as government is able to lead by example in delivering biodiversity gains directly on state land. Any large-scale disposals would jeopardise such progress. The Government also has the responsibility, under s.74 of the CROW Act, to conserve biological diversity in accordance with the Convention and this would apply to all BAP woodland, which will soon include a HAP for lowland mixed broadleaves. If disposals are seen as a strategic way forward to resolving the Commission's funding problems, we believe it is unlikely that prospective purchasers would be happy to accept covenants or binding agreements over future conservation management and access of sufficient rigour since this would be seen as too limiting and too restrictive.

### **Forestry Commission**

While we acknowledge that the Forestry Commission has been able to negotiate a series of settlements with the Treasury which has allowed it to continue to fund public benefits generated by woodland even in the face of falling timber prices, we remain concerned that the FC's grant-



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aid programme to support the provision of public benefits remains constricted by the performance of the timber markets. We hope that a strong case will be put to the Treasury to de-couple the provision of grants from timber prices. Grants deliver a wide range of public benefits, such as biodiversity, protection of the historic and cultural heritage, public access, landscape conservation, and opportunities to enhance quality of life through forestry's role in health, flood control and air pollution, and we hope that the Treasury will recognise more fully that such grants provide excellent value for money in terms of delivering other Government priorities.

Yours sincerely

Nick Collinson  
Chair of Link's Woodland Sub-Group

On behalf of the following organisations:

Bat Conservation Trust  
Buglife the Invertebrate Conservation Trust  
Butterfly Conservation  
Plantlife  
Ramblers' Association  
The Wildlife Trusts  
The Woodland Trust



