

POSITION STATEMENT BY WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE LINK ON THE FORESTRY COMMISSION'S WOODFUEL STRATEGY FOR ENGLAND

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together voluntary organisations in the UK concerned with the conservation, enjoyment and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production practices and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic environment and biodiversity. Taken together our members have the support of over 8.3 million people in the UK and manage over 690,000 hectares of land, including woodland.

This statement is supported by the following 13 organisations:



Introduction and Background

The Forestry Commission, through “A Woodfuel Strategy for England”, suggested that an additional two million green tonnes (2mt) of wood each year could be harvested as a biomass fuel by 2020. The focus is on community users and small businesses using wood from currently less intensively managed woodlands for local heat generation in modern, efficient boilers as a low carbon renewable energy resource.

Link supports the England Woodfuel Strategy and its aim of bringing an additional two million tonnes a year of woodfuel into the energy economy of England by 2020, but urges Government to ensure that it is delivered in a sustainable way which provides benefits for our threatened woodland wildlife by:

- Enhancing the management of traditional woodland
- Protecting and enhancing woodland wildlife habitat
- Protecting and enhancing the aesthetic appeal and character of our woodlands
- Extending public access and enjoyment of woodlands under management

Detailed comments

We fully support the Government in its intention to bring an additional two million tonnes of woodfuel each year onto the England low carbon energy market by 2020. The “Woodfuel Target” could play a key role in contributing to a new low carbon economy and in addressing the urgent need for positive management of many woods and forests across the country. The potential for woodfuel to underpin a new market for products from our woodland presents a unique opportunity for the UK to restore healthy woodland ecosystems based upon sustainable management. However, we urge Government to give this English target the full support it needs in implementation, through investment in infrastructure and delivery mechanisms that address biodiversity and landscape issues. A resurgence of woodland management will also help add character and diversity to woodland, and bring them within the influence and experience of wider rural communities. Woodland will become more relevant to a broader section of the population, thereby improving people’s quality of life and understanding of sustainability.

There is strong evidence from studies of plants, insects and birds that some of our best loved woodland wildlife is in crisis:

- The area of broadleaved woodland in the UK has increased by nearly 5% since 1990, but plant species richness has decreased over the same period by 9%¹
- The proportion of high forest within our broadleaved woodland has increased from 51% in 1947 to 97% in 2002²
- Species richness of all plants in the woodland ground flora declined by 19% between 1990 and 2007, and ancient woodland indicator species declined by 34% in the same period³

¹ Countryside Survey, 2007

² Hopkins, J.J. & Kirby, K.J. (2007) *Ecological change in British broadleaved woodland since 1947. Ibis*, 149: 29-40

- Populations of woodland specialist butterflies have declined by 74% since 1990⁴
- Populations of woodland specialist birds have declined 32% since 1970⁵

The decline in management of our broadleaved woodlands has led to an increasing proportion of high forest areas and a lack of structural complexity and diversity that is crucial for these species. With evidence-based targeting, appropriate safeguards in place and the provision of appropriate management support and guidance, viable and successful woodfuel sector could see major gains for the wildlife associated with ancient and native woodland and for the management of historic heaths and commons.

Harvesting work within the woodlands themselves will need to be undertaken sensitively, and the valuable plant communities, age structure and features of importance to woodland specialist species recognised and safeguarded. There would also need to be survey stage prior to harvesting which could identify what these features are. But with care, thought and good planning these woods can and should play a role in achieving a transition towards a low carbon energy production in the UK. Many established woods and forests are particularly well suited to make an immediate contribution, through both the provision of woodfuel, timber and other products to displace carbon intensive building materials and other products. Targeted creation of new woods could, in the long term, deliver a range of 'ecosystem services' enabling better adaptation of both humans and wildlife to climate change, but we believe sustainable and positive management of established woodland has a important role to play, delivering direct benefits for wildlife, landscape character, and our cultural heritage in many woods.

Undertaken in line with the recommendations made in Link's 2007 policy paper "*Bioenergy in the UK*", the management of England's native woodlands is seen as one of the land use options best suited to providing a multiplicity of products, especially woodfuel, needed to address the challenge of climate change. We support the intention to achieve this target through local use of biomass heating in efficient boilers, at a comparatively small scale and at a local level, with the associated reduction in fuel use for production and transport that will ensue. We also recognise that with woodfuel playing its part at an appropriate level across the country the pressure on agricultural land to produce other more intensively grown or non native biomass and biofuel products may also be lessened to a degree.

To meet this ambitious target, we call for a delivery plan that includes:

- 1) Capital investment and support for all stages of woodfuel infrastructure and the supply chain; to accelerate uptake and build a functioning and secure market;
- 2) Mechanisms that link woodfuel markets with the delivery of biodiversity targets by increasing management in our existing woodland resource, and research that identifies where woodfuel can best address biodiversity needs and for enhancing landscape character and historic features; and where more intensive management would be less or undesirable.

³ Defra Woodland Plant Diversity Indicator 2009

⁴ Defra Woodland Butterflies Indicator 2009

⁵ Defra Woodland Birds Indicator Defra 2009

3) A consideration of how to regulate⁶ the harvesting of woodfuel in a way that guarantees sustainability and maintains the value of our woodlands, particularly for small-woodland owners for whom the costs of certification are prohibitive⁷;

4) A programme of awareness raising and facilitation to re-establish a cultural understanding of woodland management in a modern context and bring more woods into productive and sustainable management by engaging with woodland owners, entrepreneurs and communities.

Given properly regulated and certified forestry practices, there is no reason to believe that woodland conservation need be in conflict with attaining this ambitious target for an increase in woodfuel production. Indeed the careful management of native woodland may bestow many conservation benefits for woodland birds, butterflies and plants and is very much in keeping with the history of much of our ancient woodland as places that provide fuel and raw materials for local use. A strategy should be implemented such that woodfuel delivers a maximum benefit for declining woodland wildlife associated with coppicing and open habitats and avoids damaging the rare and fragile wildlife associated with dead wood rich and mature woodland. As with all forestry activities, we advocate effective woodland management planning, which identifies and responds to site specific conservation features and characteristics, as the best way to secure conservation benefits. The delivery of targets for Biodiversity Action Plan species and habitats will provide the confirmation that our woodland has become more ecologically sustainable.

Recent presentations by Butterfly Conservation, Plantlife, the BTO and others on the positive benefits for wildlife presented by the growth in the demand for woodfuel can be found at <http://fcnotes/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/INFD-7QEH94>

Link endorses both the aims of the Government adoption of this target in its response to the growing threat from climate change, and will support the Forestry Commission in its endeavour to bring this material onto the energy market over the coming 11 years. We will support and encourage all whose aim will be to see the benefits for wildlife landscape, cultural heritage and rural economies and communities presented by this opportunity fully realised while avoiding the pitfalls that might lead to a loss of value and meaning in woods managed for woodfuel.

Wildlife and Countryside Link
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⁶ Forestry Commission and Defra should ensure that all woodland is appropriately located, designed and managed to enhance, not harm biodiversity. All woodfuel sources, including short rotation coppice and forestry, should be planted, managed and felled in accordance with the UK Forestry Standard and its associated guidelines.

⁷ We are supportive of the biodiversity content of the voluntary UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) and its associated 'chain of custody' and product labelling under the Forest Stewardship Council. More work is needed to increase access to UKWAS certification, including 'group schemes' for owners of small and/or low intensity managed woodlands.

This position statement is supported by:

- Badger Trust
- Bat Conservation Trust
- Buglife – the Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Friends of the Earth England
- The Grasslands Trust
- Hawk and Owl Trust
- The Mammal Society
- Plantlife International
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust