



## Should we sell our National forests?

The Forestry Commission (FC) was set up in 1919, straight after World War I (WWI) to ensure that Britain had a strategic supply of timber in case there was ever another World war. Since the middle ages, the amount of forest had been falling and Britain was forced to rely on imports to supply the timber it needed in WWI.

### Why was timber so important in WWI?

Wood was vital on the Western Front where it was used for boarding to get men and machinery through the mud, for shoring up trenches and making crates. It was also vital for making mine props that enabled coal mining. The coal was burned in the iron and steel industries, to manufacture planes, tanks, guns and ammunition.

The FC is the government department responsible for **protecting and expanding Britain's forests and woodland**.

In December 2010 the Government announced that it intended to sell, on 150-year leases, 40,000ha of state-owned forests currently managed by FC England (In total, the FC own 258,000ha of land, 202,000ha of which is forest).

In January 2011, Caroline Spelman Secretary of State for the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) said that there was "now no reason for the Government to be in the business of timber production and forest management" The Government believe that private companies could grow timber just as well, if not better than the state-controlled FC. The Government also does not like the dual role that the FC plays; the FC not only owns forests it is also responsible for regulating the activities of all private forest owners. Many private owners believe this is unfair. For example, the FC grows and sells timber to make a profit. At the same time it is responsible for issuing 2,500 felling licences annually and oversees 20,000 management plans of private owners.

### Question 1 Is this a conflict of interest?

Answers at the end of the Factsheet

The proposal was to sell some forests to private owners, including local groups and to lease the really important heritage forests such as the Forest of Dean to charities. The Government announced a 12-week Public Consultation period. This allowed anybody to tell the Government what they thought of the "mixed model" proposal (Mixed refers to the proposal for a mix of owners).

**Table 1 Who owns UK forests (2010)?**

Owner	England	Wales	Scotland	NI	Total (%)
FC (FS in NI)	199	105	443	61	809 (28.4)
Other	931	179	900	27	2,037 (71.6)
Total	1,130	284	1,343	88	2,846 (100.0)

Source: [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk) Accessed Jan 31 2011

The Government's argument

#### The Government argue that:

- Private companies already own more than twice as much forest as the EC/FS
- The percentage owned by the FC has been falling every year for the last 5 years.

- Private companies that buy FC forests will have to allow public access – footpath access will be allowed in perpetuity
- Local groups will be given first opportunity to buy forests
- Heritage forests e.g. the Forest of Dean and the New Forest will be leased to charities so the public will still be able to use them for recreation

### The Public's response

The proposal to sell off state forests to private owners caused outrage. An online petition against the sale gathered 460,000 signatures in a matter of weeks and organisations such as the National Trust condemned the proposals. In February, the Government announced a u-turn!

Many people believe that the role of the FC has evolved since 1919 and it has gradually changed its emphasis from maximising timber production to achieving a balance between production, maintaining biodiversity, maintaining landscapes and actively encouraging recreational activities such as walking and mountain biking.

Why would a private company bother about these things when their sole aim is to grow as much wood as possible in order to maximise their profits?

Managing a forest for maximum wood production and managing one where you try to get a balance of "products" (wood, biodiversity, open areas for recreation etc) are quite different things (Table 2).

Table 2 What is a forest for?

Characteristic	Managing a forest for	
	Maximum wood production	A range of "products"
Tree species	A monoculture of: exotic conifers for timber/ pulp for making paper; Fast - growing willow for biomass	A mix of native species
Planting density	High to make use of every bit of land and inhibit branches	Lower to allow ground flora and visitor access. Open areas would be left unplanted to increase visual interest and habitat diversity
Rotation length (how long between planting and felling)	As short as possible in order to get the money back you paid buying and planting the trees	Longer: Might vary in different parts of the forest so that the whole thing didn't disappear suddenly
Dead trees or invasive species	Eradicate	Dead trees might be left if not dangerous as they provide important habitat
Walking routes/cycle paths/ interpretation facilities/ Rangers	???? We're trying to make money here!	Native invaders e.g. Birch might be left alone Yes, and FC Cabin holidays are making money, as are mountain bike hire shops and cafes on FC sites

So the sale of FC forests could potentially harm wildlife, the landscape and recreational opportunities. The Consultation Proposal allows for the sale of forests in National Parks and AONBs and those that are or contain SSSIs and even ancient woodlands, so long as they only make up 10% or less of a particular forest.

Many people fear that local groups will not be able to raise the money needed to buy their local forests. The National Trust could be swamped by requests to buy forests. Many also believe that new owners will not, in fact, allow public access, claiming, for example, that is dangerous or that walkers or riders are causing damage. Multipurpose management seems very unlikely – it is difficult, time-consuming, reduces wood production and profits. In any case, what happens when the present government lose power? The private forests could not be bought back for 150 years.

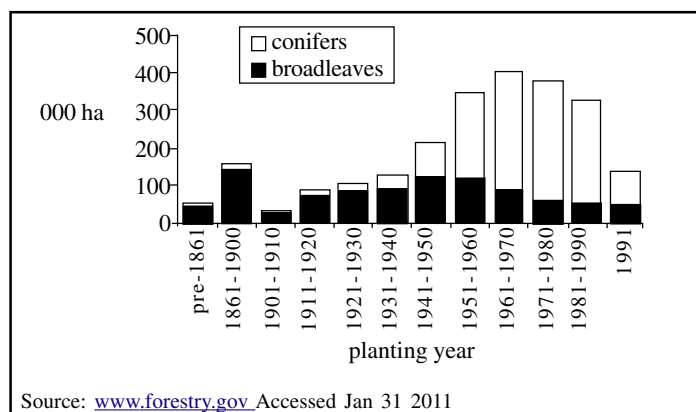
Another concern is that large, wealthy biomass companies could buy large areas of forest and convert them to biomass farms growing willow or even Miscanthus. Such monocultures would have little wildlife, aesthetic or recreational appeal and would be regularly felled. The Government currently offer large subsidies for new biomass plants as they try to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels.

The Labour Party have argued that the money raised by selling the forests is a drop in the ocean. Ed Miliband argued that the FC forests cost each taxpayer just 30p per year. He wrote “ What sort of cheapskate nation are we now that we cannot agree to spend 30p a year for every person in this country to preserve its ancient oaks, ash and beech?”The cost of selling them may even exceed the revenues raised.

**How the Forestry Commission evolved**

1919 - late 1970s: The FC covered vast areas of moorland in Scotland and northern England with exotic conifers such as Sitka spruce (Fig 1). The plantations were huge monocultures that destroyed the previous habitat, offered few new ones, supported little wildlife and were planted in straight lines that didn't fit in with the undulating upland landscape

Fig 1. The rise and fall of conifers in GB



1980s- now: As the environmental and aesthetic effects were understood and cheap imports of pulp could be had from Scandinavia, the FC started felling spruce and replanting with native species. Over the last 20 years, the FC has increasingly turned its attention towards multipurpose forest management.

**Case Study: Ennerdale**

Ennerdale in Cumbria is a dramatic wild valley with mountains, lakes, open fells, farmland, fast-flowing rivers and scattered native woodland

The FC planted thousands of hectares of Sitka spruce across Ennerdale. This infuriated Alfred Wainwright, who published a series of famous walking guides to the whole of the Lakes. In his 1966 book *The Western Fells* he wrote

“ Afforestation in Ennerdale has cloaked the lower slopes....in a dark and funereal shroud of foreign trees, an intrusion that nobody who knew Ennerdale of old can ever forgive, the former charm of the valley having been destroyed..”

**Questions 2** Why did the FC plant foreign trees like Sitka spruce?  
**Question 3** What did Wainwright mean by “a dark and funereal shroud”?

Answers at the end of the Factsheet

*It took a long time for the FC to realise that covering some of the country's best landscapes with monocultures of exotic conifers might not be in the nation's best interest. Today, Ennerdale is managed in a partnership between the FC, the National Trust (NT) and United Utilities. Much of the spruce has been felled and replaced with ash, birch hazel and beech. Red squirrels, pine martens and a wide range of bird species thrive. The marsh fritillary, high on Europe's list of protected butterfly species, has been reintroduced.*

*The aim is not merely to recreate the Ennerdale that the FC planted, but the Ennerdale that would have existed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century before the forests were felled for sheep farming. The Partnership are carrying out trials to introduce Galloway cattle to investigate whether they may be useful in trampling bracken and encouraging seed germination by pushing them further into the soil.*

**More info:** <http://www.wildennerdale.co.uk/>

**The wider objectives of the FC**

The FC works with other government agencies to achieve a wide diversity of aims including forest protection, adapting to climate change, reducing soil erosion and alleviating flooding. These are not aims shared by private, profit-seeking companies....

**Summary Activity**

List all the reasons that we need forests and woodlands in the UK  
Create a table like this:

Reasons we need forests	Importance to FC	Importance to Private owner
Construction timber		
Paper manufacture		
Etc		
Etc		
etc		

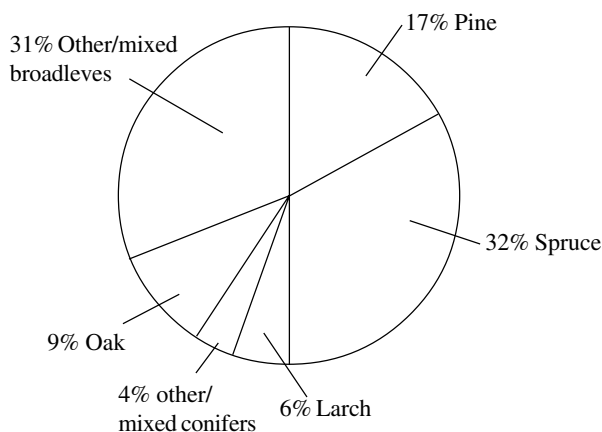
Fill in the values where 0 = absolutely not important and 10 is Vitally important

Suggest ways by which the Government could raise the importance of some functions to private owners

**Answers to Questions**

1. Yes and No! Yes. The FC wants to maximise its returns from selling timber and pulp. The price it gets is partly determined by the volume reaching market at any particular time. It is also responsible for giving or denying felling licences to private owners. It also sets strict management guidelines about species mix, planting densities, pest control, planting near streams and rivers etc that reduce the profitability of private forests. But, it could be argued that the answer is No. The FC would argue that it very often optimises rather than maximises revenues because it manages so many forests (but certainly not all) for multiple objectives e.g. allowing timber production, recreation and conservation to occur in one forest. Annually, the FC makes a financial loss because it doesn't use all of its land to grow trees, because it grows slow-growing deciduous trees and because it spends money on providing and maintaining biodiversity and recreational opportunities.
2. Sitka spruce is native to the west coast of N. America. It is the largest of all spruces, is fast-growing and can tolerate wet, windy and cold conditions – ideal then for the Lake District and Scotland! It produces timber that is straight grained and strong, enabling it to be used for construction or paper manufacture.

Spruces are still the most common tree species in GB (Fig. 2)



Source: [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk) Accessed Jan 31 2011

3. Spruces are dark foliaged, evergreen trees. They were planted very close together to prevent branching (= knots = weaknesses) and so that the canopies prevented light reaching the forest floor. This prevented grasses and other vegetation growing that would have competed with the trees for soil nutrients and water.

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