**EFRA Committee Inquiry: Timber and Deforestation**

**Evidence from the Institute of Chartered Foresters, September 2022**

**About the Institute**

The Institute of Chartered Foresters is the Royal Chartered body for tree professionals in the UK. Its membership covers the full range of tree professionals, and this range of expertise is one of its greatest strengths. It has 2,000 members who practise forestry, arboriculture and other related disciplines in the private and third sectors, central and local government, research institutions, universities and colleges throughout the UK. The Institute regulates standards of entry to the profession. It provides support to members, guidance to professionals in other sectors, information to the general public, and educational advice and training to students and tree professionals seeking to develop their careers.

Our diverse membership is one of our greatest strengths, and we have members working across the spectrum of forestry interests. This response has been informed by our members, but also by our mission to be a balanced, impartial and collaborative voice, representing professional forestry and upholding its values of high standards, evidence-based decision making and social and environmental responsibility.

**Response – selected questions**

**Growing the UK timber industry**

*Does the UK Government have an adequate understanding of the future demand for timber, including what tree species should be grown?*

No.

As the professional body for forestry we are keenly aware of the skyrocketing demand for sustainable timber and wood products, the urgent need to decarbonise across industries, the implications for domestic production and the risk of offshoring our demand overseas. It is crucial that we rapidly increase substitution of steel and concrete in construction[[1]](#footnote-2), supply the use of wood products in thousands of essential products from packaging to clothing, and explore the increasing opportunities for innovative uses of timber and wood products. Forestry offers opportunities and contributions towards a genuinely circular economy whereby this natural material can be turned into thousands of essential products, potentially locking up carbon for centuries, and then reused or recycled at the end of its life.

Regarding species, we would caution against the unhelpful dichotomy between ‘native’ and ‘exotic’ species often propagated in discourse around trees. We need all kinds of trees, for all kinds of purposes. Species choice is determined by the land holding capabilities, an owner’s objectives and the opportunities for economic, environmental and social benefits accorded by the site, shaped in part by available funding and incentives. Balancing these three outcomes is the basis of a professional approach to forestry and is enshrined in the UK Forestry Standard, the backbone of sustainable modern forestry.

Too often, outdated practices and ill-informed opinions influence decision making. There is a wealth of research to draw on and in order to update best practice continuously and better inform decision making we must commit sufficient ongoing funding to further research and knowledge exchange. We need sound, evidence-based policy making. It is possible to grow a strong and resilient forestry sector that delivers on our ambitions for net zero, nature recovery and green economy, but only with strong political leadership to promote and implement the necessary enabling conditions.

*Does the UK government, working with the devolved administrations, have an effective, joined-up plan with appropriate incentives to increase the production and use of sustainable, domestically grown timber in the UK to reduce its reliance on imports?*

No.

To achieve our goals for the environment as well as reduce reliance on imports, we need commercially viable sustainable forestry to flourish in the UK. We must find ways to make forestry financially attractive for the landowner, whether the outputs are ecosystem services, timber, renewable energy, improved farming, green infrastructure or any combination of these. If we create a strong marketplace for these, success will follow[[2]](#footnote-3).

We need to secure better integration between agriculture and forestry. This includes improving policy coherence between the two sectors and grant schemes that promote wider-scale integrated action. Again, this needs political leadership and sound evidence base, but it also needs the right messaging. As the UK goes through fundamental agricultural transition, politicians, civil servants and the sector need to be much more vocal and explicit in promoting the benefits of timber and wood-based products and production, its role in enriching the circular economy and the opportunities the forestry and its whole value chain presents to businesses and communities, whether for primarily environmental, social or economic outcomes. We are not advocating taking high-yield agricultural land out of food production, rather enhancing the yields of agriculture and allowing marginal land to be better utilised in *tree* production, for associated commercial and environmental benefits. This means having a more strategic approach to balancing competing land uses, considering the benefits and costs of those different uses, across the value chain. Public interest in trees is high, but public and political understanding does not match the challenge we face.

*Are there sustainable sources of biomass for UK energy generation either from imported or domestically grown wood for pellet or woodchip? And how can future demand be met from sustainable sources?*

Only 41% of existing woodland is currently under active management[[3]](#footnote-4). Many objections to biomass for energy production are linked to the use of good quality wood, but 59% of existing woodlands are an untapped resource for biomass feedstocks from silvicultural thinnings and other sustainable forestry practices. This would increase both the economic viability and value of these woodlands while also enhancing the biodiversity associated with sustainable forest management and the overall resilience of our treescapes.

*How well is the UK Government managing its plans for the domestic timber industry in tandem with meeting its woodland creation targets and related climate change, biodiversity and other environmental goals?*

There is always a balance of objectives to be struck but we need it all and more, with UKFS to guide the sector in modern, sustainable forestry practices that deliver environmental, social and economic benefits. There is a perception amongst the forestry sector that the government is not managing its plans in a balanced way. There is a lot of misinformation among the public and media, perpetuated by polarised debate among civil servants and professionals, about the value of different types of woodland, as if it is a zero-sum game. Government needs to publicly recognise and promote timber production as one of the pillars of sustainably managed woodlands and fully acknowledge and raise awareness of the link between wood production and environmental recovery[[4]](#footnote-5). We have serious concerns about the lack of ministerial interest in this aspect of forestry, a lack of strong leadership to improve this and the impact this has on policy decisions.

*How effectively is the UK strengthening the resilience of its tree stock to ensure it is resilient to the future impacts of climate change, as well as to pests and diseases?*

We know we need to plan for a future climate and that means using a wider palette of species sourced from different origins to those in the past. GB biosecurity is a good example of successful cross-UK working but the pest and disease challenges we face are only escalating as climate change progresses. Again, we need more woods under active management following sustainability principles as per the UK Forestry Standard to mitigate threats and increase resilience. In addition, we need ongoing research to advise owners and managers as to current and future best practice for the benefit of both the environment and the sustainability of the locally-grown forest products value chain and its contribution towards a climate smart circular economy within the UK and further afield.

We know from our members that nurseries responsible for providing new stock need long-term planning. Trees ready for planting can take between two and seven years to grow. To accommodate preferred species choice, climate resilient stock and shortages in domestic supply, they often need to buy in stock from outside the UK, but this is currently extremely difficult to source due to import regulations. Short-term procurement also has implications for quality.

**The effectiveness of UK efforts to reduce global deforestation**

*In what ways and to what extent are UK value chains (in the form of public procurement, goods, services, or the private sector) contributing to global deforestation?*

In terms of climate change mitigation, reducing deforestation is a much more effective measure – at least in the short/medium term – than efforts to promote afforestation. The UK Government has been taking a lot of action to address this, for example the Environment Act 2021 and its role in securing the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use at the UNFCCC COP26. However, as the Global Resource Initiative Task Force Finance Report[[5]](#footnote-6) makes clear, there is still a lot to be done. The Declaration itself is simply an expression of political will. The UK Government, working with international partners, must take action to ensure that the aspirations of the Glasgow Declaration are realised, and it does not join the long list of unsuccessful ambitions for halting deforestation.

*What role can sustainable certification and Government Buying Standards (GBS), have in tackling deforestation? How can the UK Government support the private sector to reduce its contribution to furthering deforestation?*

Public and private procurement policies are vital for sending a strong message about excluding wood-based imports from deforestation. Certification *per se* will not stop deforestation; it focuses on the sustainable forest management of forests covered by certification and not those outside this. The UK Government’s Timber Procurement Policy[[6]](#footnote-7) details the evidence needed to show that timber is legal and sustainable. However, this policy needs to be well understood and further strengthened to incentivise procurement of legal and sustainable timber in the public sector.

Certification is only one tool; it is also important to ensure the UK approach is aligned to the EU Deforestation Directive. Compatibility with its databases and registration system could help harmonise approaches between the UK and the EU to ensure effective exclusion of timber and wood-based products from deforestation. By combining an approach as proposed by the EU in addition to certification, one can start limiting the supply of materials from deforestation.

Stopping the flow of products from deforestation is only one part of the overall solution. Another vitally important part must be supporting governments, communities and other stakeholders with the incentives, governance and capacity building to prevent deforestation occurring in the first place as this will then ensure the flow or future potential flow of products from deforestation into the UK market.

**Conclusion**

We welcome the opportunity to support the Committee’s inquiry with this brief evidence on a critically important topic and hope to see stronger political leadership to drive forward this agenda. We look forward to further discussion at sessions in the autumn where we would be pleased to field senior staff or members to assist the inquiry.

1. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/sixth-carbon-budget/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.charteredforesters.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ICF-Response-to-England-Tree-Strategy-Consultation.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://rfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/woodland-management-missed-opportunities.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://www.charteredforesters.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ICF-Response-to-Defra-Environmental-Targets-June-2022.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-resource-initiative-taskforce> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/timber-procurementpolicy-tpp-prove-legality-and-sustainablity> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)