
1 Summary of Proposals

1.1 Vision

The management of Scotland's National Forests and Lands (NFL) by Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) is guided by the FLS Corporate Plan (2019), the FLS National Spatial Overview (2016) and the Scottish Forestry Strategy (2019) in compliance with the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) and UK Forestry Standard (UKFS).

In April 2019, following publication of climate change projections by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Scottish Government declared a climate emergency. A month later, the Highland Council declared a climate and ecological emergency as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published the Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services which drew the clear conclusion that biodiversity on earth is threatened by human activities.

In direct response to these declarations, the West Sutherland Land Management Plan (LMP) lays out our vision for delivering local economic, social and ecological objectives for the area (i.e. sustainable land management) but particularly through prioritisation of extensive land use change to deliver landscape-scale habitat restoration - supporting these new national and regional policies.

This is a strategic indicative plan and, in accordance with UKFS, states the objectives of sustainable forest management and how these will be achieved with reference to relevant guidance, appropriate best practice and then (spatially) identifying these management aspirations.

Finally the Plan provides a means of communicating our proposals to neighbouring communities and stakeholders – as a transparent and agreed statement of intent against which implementation can be checked and monitored.

10-year Vision

FLS submit this Land Management Plan (LMP) to seek approval for a ten year period of operations, divided into two five year phases. Over this first decade we will begin land management restructuring on a landscape scale. Our vision is that by the end of the first decade much of the diseased and windblown forest of non-native conifers will have been removed. The first steps to restore over 1400 Ha of blanket bog will have been completed, with trees removed and hydrology altered. Bog vegetation will be in the initial phases of recovery and over 450 Ha of native riparian woodland will be establishing itself on the banks of the burns, rivers and lochs. Natural regeneration in the Einig Caledonian Forest Reserve will be turning to established woodland of pine, birch, aspen and rowan. We will see the establishment of the next rotation of smaller scale, mixed species productive coupes of conifers. Black grouse populations will be recovering and water quality will be improving.

50-year Vision

As the forest moves into the last quarter of the 21st Century our vision for West Sutherland is of a structurally diverse forest within wide landscapes of restored habitats. The rotations of productive conifers will be maturing with some felled a little early and some being retained longer to provide age diversity. Sphagnum mosses will have colonised the peatland restoration sites and the bogs will be functioning at near natural levels. Over 750 Ha of riparian woodland will be well established along the watercourses providing shade and nutrients for the freshwater habitats. The drainage patterns of the mid-20th Century will be completely gone and the forest will be better adapted to the wetter and windier climate. This network of riparian habitat, combined with wider areas of young birch forests will provide a permanent forest structure within which coupes of productive woodland can flourish. The forest road network will be complete and the landscape around the wildland areas will look much less stark. The well-established monitoring programmes will be informing the next generation of Foresters and Ecologists about the impacts of our land management changes. The impact of climate on species choices will be perhaps more evident and so flexibility will be an important aspect of forest planning. Planning for wildfire may be a more important aspect of land management and fully functioning blanket bog will play an important role in that.

300-year Vision

This LMP focuses on the next decade, with plans for the next 25 years laid out in broad terms. However, in drafting the plan we can look much further into the future in human terms and consider what we'd like to think the forest and all the surrounding habitats will look like. It's almost certain that the climate will be radically changed. Summers will be hotter and drier with increased drought, temperature extremes and heat waves. Autumns and winters will be milder and wetter with more intense storms and flooding but much less frost and snowfall. Sea level rises may have affected transport links perhaps changing the emphasis to more local timber utilisation needs. The range of tree species available to the Forester of 2320 will be very different and the systems of silviculture will need to be adapted to a world of more extreme weather events. But the Scots pine, oak and aspen clones regenerating today may still be present as the grand old trees of a much wider forest. Natural treelines and native bog woodland habitats will have developed and successive generations of natural riparian woodlands will have developed a field layer of vegetation that will have a positive impact on flood events. Perhaps the forests will be used more for seasonal food production and local energy needs and so the structures we put in place today may help facilitate that.

Whatever the difficulties of forecasting what the medium and long term future may hold in terms of climate and ecology, the vision for this LMP area is to create robust and resilient ecosystems that can be managed to provide benefits for current and future generations and retain enough flexibility to cope with the challenges of new pathogens, extreme weather and give those who follow some better choices.

1.2 Background (see **Map 1 – Location & Viewpoints**)

This plan is a full revision of management proposals for an area previously covered by two separate Forest Design Plans (FDPs):

- Benmore FDP (2010 – 2020): 5400.61 ha
- Caplich, Craggan, Einig & Loubcroy FDP (2007 – extended to 2020): 1283.22 ha

The West Sutherland LMP covers a total area of 6684 hectares of which 2877 Ha are currently afforested. At 3807 Ha there are significant areas of open hill, archaeological features (scheduled and unscheduled) and an extensive network of sensitive watercourses. Greater detail on land use breakdown can be found in **section 7**.

The Plan area is located in a now remote region of west Sutherland characterised by its dramatic natural landscape, open and expansive vistas and world-renowned geological interest. The area is particularly popular with hill walkers, mountaineers, cyclists, hunters and anglers. The increasingly popular North Coast 500 tourist route passes within two miles of the LMP area, bringing increasing numbers of visitors.

The forests covered by West Sutherland LMP lie along the iconic River Oykel which is internationally renowned for its game fishing and designated as a Natura Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its importance for freshwater pearl mussels, European otter and Atlantic salmon populations.

Enhancing these aquatic habitats and rugged landscapes, conserving globally significant protected species and habitats and providing informal recreation are all important management objectives. In addition maintaining timber production and restoring the significant areas of blanket bogs and limestone-derived open habitats are key management objectives.

The legal status of the land is purchased freehold.

1.3 Strategic Objectives

There are a number of key strategic drivers guiding our proposals for the West Sutherland LMP:

- The Scottish Government’s Peatland Strategy calls for the restoration of blanket bog at a landscape scale, setting ambitious targets for climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation.
- The Scottish Government’s Scottish Forestry Strategy (2019) sets key objectives of making Scotland’s forests more productive and more resilient. The need to redress the environmental impacts of inappropriate 20th century afforestation is also acknowledged.
- The Scottish Government’s Environment Strategy for Scotland (2020) states that the natural environment is central to our identity as a nation and our greatest national asset and details specific outcomes for wild Atlantic salmon, peatlands, native woodland and productive forests.

FLS’ National Spatial Overview for Sutherland describes the character and overarching strategic direction as follows:

- Gently undulating landform, low hills, extensive areas of peat and lochan
- Can be exposed and windy; predicted to become drier, especially in Caithness; short growing season; soils can be fertile, although there are extensive peat moorlands and blanket bog;
- NFL land use includes establishing second rotation conifer crops on low hills and more elevated moorland areas; crops are variable due to deep peat, although poor quality lodgepole pine largely now removed; some open ground; extensive bog and restored peatland; low percentage of broadleaf; wind farms and utility networks; agriculture
- Extensive areas of highly designated wetland
- Timber markets are relatively distant, although some access by sea

Most significant contributions to Corporate Priorities, Aims and Objectives

- **Ecosystem services and additional public benefits** – restoration of peatland and blanket bog habitats likely to significantly increase carbon sequestration and improve water quality; improving water quality in river systems; sustainable timber production
- **Other national commitments** – Partnership working with others on continuous management of adjacent extensive conservation sites and projects; improving water quality to support conservation of freshwater pearl mussel
- **Contribution to financial sustainability** – wind energy; small round wood timber crops; biomass

Focus of effort and investment challenges

- **Continue to work with others to maximise peatland restoration at a landscape scale.** Peatland is a high priority habitat that is also highly successful at sequestering carbon. Programming conservation and restoration work with other agencies and partners maximises benefits of contiguous and cooperative management of high quality habitat. This will optimise the benefits of large scale interconnecting peatland and peatland edge woodland habitats, and continue to develop expertise in this area
- **Accommodate the increasing number of overhead power lines proposed to cross the NF&L,** alongside continued wind farm development. Challenges include planning roads and efficient felling patterns within a more fragmented forest area, ensuring on going ‘resilience’ of infrastructure and timescales involved with construction
- **Shape the future forest area.** The woodland here is moving towards second rotation, and the forest area has been reduced by wind farm development and peatland restoration. There is an opportunity to identify where woodland can thrive and expand, and what species choice, spatial pattern and timber products are most appropriate to deal with exposure and maintain timber productivity
- **Continue to develop an efficient roading programme.** Road stone is scarce and expensive. The future forest area should include establishing an efficient and pragmatic road network that reflects the future timber outputs.