

## Written evidence from the the Forest Policy Group

The Forest Policy Group welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the RACCE Committee on the Final Report of the Land Reform Review Group (LRRG).

### Forest Policy Group

The Forest Policy Group (FPG) supports the development of sustainable forestry in Scotland by producing well researched and authoritative policy guidance. Its membership is drawn from woodland management organisations, forestry and land use professionals and timber processors and users. The group subscribe to a view of forestry in which:

- environmental and social issues are treated as core parts of forestry on an equal footing with industrial timber interests; and
- diversity is actively fostered – diversity of tree species and woodland types, woodland ownership, management approaches, timber production and processing, and wider economic opportunities.

The group has produced position papers on a range of topics, including Forest Ownership by Andy Wightman<sup>1</sup>, and two papers submitted to the LRRG:

- Forestry Reform<sup>2</sup>
- A New Licensing System for Wild Deer Management<sup>3</sup>

### Our response to the LRRG Report

The LRRG are to be congratulated for producing a far sighted and balanced report. The FPG commends much of what LRRG proposes and we are hopeful that the Scottish Parliament will act on many of the LRRG recommendations.

### Part Three – Public Land Ownership

#### SECTION 13 – NATIONAL FOREST ESTATE

We endorse much of what is discussed in this section however the recommendation<sup>4</sup> is somewhat vague and does not reflect the detail in the section. We have three comments that we feel the RACCE could consider:

- How to provide the flexibility to lease National Forest Land (NFL)
- The creation of starter forests<sup>5</sup>
- Diversification of forest ownership through NFL disposals

The FPG agrees that Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) should be fully devolved<sup>6</sup> and that a new Forestry (Scotland) Act is required. A new forestry act would provide

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.forestpolicygroup.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00432842.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00432840.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 23

<sup>5</sup> Paragraph 20

<sup>6</sup> Paragraph 8

an opportunity to effect a cultural shift in respect of the ownership and management of Scotland's forest estate, giving more flexibility to civil servants to work constructively with local communities and more broadly defined community organisations, and to foster more local accountability.

The flexibility to lease NFL is restricted by the existing definition of a community organization<sup>7</sup> and therefore constrained in respect of geography and legal structure. Woodlot leasing on state land, through the Scottish Woodlots Association<sup>8</sup>, could be achieved by the Scottish Parliament passing an amendment to the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 that broadens the Forestry Commission's existing leasing option to communities such that it includes appropriately constituted community of interest bodies such as Industrial & Provident Societies.

The creation of starter forests would allow Forestry Commission Scotland to provide opportunities for rural employment. Mention is made of starter farms<sup>9</sup> in the section dealing with land acquisition; starter forests, which can be forests, established by Forest Enterprise Scotland, and available for lease/purchase to community groups (more broadly defined) or individuals, are an excellent way to provide affordable / simple access to the National Forest Estate for small scale management.

We fully endorse the recommendation<sup>10</sup> that the Scottish Government should diversify forest ownership in Scotland, through the NFL programme of acquisitions and disposals. This should include the sale of forest land in 'lots' – such that a large forest is subdivided into lots and sold in potentially more affordable blocks. This will allow local businesses and individuals the ability to acquire forest land<sup>11</sup> and give them access to a previously unattainable timber resource.

## **Part Eight – Common Property Resources**

### **SECTION 32 - WILD DEER**

FPG fully supports the Review Group's views on wild deer<sup>12</sup>, and strongly welcome the proposals outlined in paragraph 22. We would like to emphasise the scale of the deer problem; numbers of red deer in Scotland have tripled in Scotland since World War II. The costs of managing deer to minimize damage are considerable and most are borne by the taxpayer through Government funding for culling and fencing, rather than by the sporting estates. We suggest that a sporting licensing system and or the application of sporting rates are fair methods of exercising control over deer numbers and recovering public costs.

---

<sup>7</sup> This links to Section 15 – Local Communities and the definition of community body constitutional structures.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.scottishwoodlotassociation.co.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> Paragraph 20

<sup>10</sup> Paragraph 21

<sup>11</sup> This would address points made in Part Six – Land Ownership and Use, SECTION 24 – PATTERN OF RURAL LAND OWNERSHIP.

<sup>12</sup> Paragraph 32: FPG fully supports this recommendation

**We deal with the question of forest ownership through two sections in the LRRG report:-**

**Part Four – Local Community Land Ownership & Part Six – Land Ownership and Use**

**SECTION 17 – LOCAL COMMUNITY LAND RIGHTS & SECTION 24 – PATTERN OF RURAL LAND OWNERSHIP**

We support proposals which include a proactive right to buy, where in the public interest<sup>13</sup>, and we welcome the recognition that woodlands and forests are particularly suited to small scale and community ownership<sup>14</sup>. Andy Wightman's, Forest Ownership in Scotland (Scoping Report) prepared for the FPG concluded with five key points which we believe are pertinent to the LRRG discourse on who owns Scotland's forests;

- ownership is a significant issue – we believe there should be a greater diversity of ownership;
- there is no policy identifying desirable objectives in the pattern of ownership to be encouraged;
- informed debate is inhibited by the lack of information – we believe that complete land registration is essential for informed debate;
- there are opportunities for diversifying ownership, inspired by European examples; and
- further investigation of these issues would be highly desirable.

**Lastly we would like to draw a number of threads together under the heading of Rural Development Forestry. This draws on SECTION 16 – LAND AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT from Part Four – Local Community Land Ownership; SECTION 18 -COMMUNITY ACQUISITION COSTS, also from Part Four; SECTION 24 – PATTERN OF RURAL LAND OWNERSHIP from Part Six – land Ownership and Use and SECTION 25 – LAND TAXATION, PAYMENTS & MARKETS, also from Part Six.**

We contend that forestry needs to deliver more benefits to local communities, communities where the forests grow, rather than is the case currently where benefit mostly accrues to; large private forestry companies, large landowners many of whom are not based in the UK, and urban or peri-urban communities around the mills and factories that receive the bulk of Scotland's timber. In order for more benefits to flow from forests to rural communities a change is required, the most obvious being the pattern of forest tenure; we therefore support the recommendation to set up a working group that will produce a strategy for achieving increased levels of community ownership<sup>15</sup>. We further endorse the sentiment that small scale forest management and ownership will increase rural employment and development and provide opportunities for the development of small businesses.

---

<sup>13</sup> SECTION 17, Paragraph 27

<sup>14</sup> SECTION 24, Paragraph 15

<sup>15</sup> Part Four – Local Community Ownership, SECTION 16 – LAND AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Beyond, changes in ownership, changes to the current fiscal regime, appears to be the next most useful tool for achieving equitable rural development forestry. A review of non-domestic rates, the introduction of sporting rates, consideration of Land Value Taxation, clarification of the linkages between public costs and public benefits, and changes to the current fiscal regime to encourage an increase in land ownership<sup>16</sup>; these are all welcome recommendations by the LRRG and FPG endorses them.

In conclusion, we hope that our submission contributes positively to the RACCE consideration of the LRRG report and we are happy to give further written and oral evidence.

---

<sup>16</sup> Part Six – Land Ownership and Use, SECTION 23 – RURAL LAND USE