

Title: P-05-945 Climate Emergency and a National Forest for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 10 Mawrth 2020
Petitions Committee | 10 March 2020

Petition Number: P-05-945

Petition title: The Climate Emergency and a National Forest for Wales

Text of petition: We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to urgently increase tree cover to help address this climate emergency & the well documented collapse of nature.

The Welsh Government's 'State of Natural Resources Report' said no ecosystems in Wales are resilient.

We need more trees in urban & rural areas to address high levels of air pollution, lessen heatwaves & floods, increase wildlife & create a carbon store above & below ground.

Rivers, hedgerows & verges can provide quality habitat connectivity, these criss-cross Wales from mountains to coast. Many have biodiversity rich ancient woods, meadows & marshes alongside them, but their range & quality has massively declined in the last 50 years.

Our rivers are healthiest when bordered by wide strips of lightly grazed broadleaf woodland river banks. Trees provide some dappled shade keeping rivers cool & protecting them from pollutants, reducing unsustainable soil loss, whilst helping to keep farmers on the land.

To help nature recover we need to recreate more wildlife friendly landscapes by creating more & healthier interconnecting habitats.

Placed & funded correctly, a new national forest can deliver many solutions for all future generations, a more 'resilient Wales'.



We call for a comprehensive strategy to deliver:

- an increase of 5000 hectares per year in tree cover in urban areas, on farms, & in the uplands
- tree cover that is at least 50% native broadleaf trees, best for biodiversity, & public well-being
- sustainable management of existing trees, forests, woodland & hedges, to protect them from damage & provide a mixed mosaic of habitat for wildlife & people
- new funding for farmers for 'Hedges & Edges' & traditional woodland pasture-agroforestry
- funding for community tree nurseries, for people to be involved in finding sites, planting, & growing trees right across Wales
- a truly national & innovative 'National Forest for Wales'

1. Background

1.1. Woodlands in Wales

Spatial extent

There were 309,000 hectares (ha) of woodland in Wales as of March 2019, representing 14.9% of the total land area. The EU average for woodland area is 37%. There are a further 92,700 ha of tree cover outside of woodlands (as of January 2016), found predominantly in agricultural landscapes, urban areas and transport corridors. This means that approximately 19.4% of Welsh land area is covered by woodlands and trees.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) reported that the mean urban tree canopy cover in Wales was 16.3% in 2013 (PDF, 1.35MB). This is a fall from 17% in 2009. Public open space accounts for 53% of urban tree cover despite covering just 22% of urban land and high density housing areas, often places of high deprivation, contain just 1% of urban tree cover. The report also shows that 72% of Welsh towns lost tree cover between 2009 and 2013, and 7,000 large trees were removed from towns and cities between 2006 and 2013.

Planting and restocking

In 1905, there were only 88,000 ha of woodland in Wales, but by 1965 this had grown to 201,000 ha, and by 1998 there were 299,000 ha of woodland cover.

The average planting rate for the last decade (2009-2019) was 430 ha per year. The average restocking (replacing felled trees) rate for the last decade was 1,920 ha per year.

The Climate Change Strategy for Wales (2010) set a target of planting 100,000 ha of new woodland between 2010 and 2030 at a rate of 5,000 ha per year. In the Woodland for Wales: action plan (2016), the Welsh Government said that only 3,203 ha of new

woodland had been planted between 2010 and 2015. The Welsh Government revised its planting target in 2018, see section on current policy below.

1.2. Ecosystem services

An ecosystem service is an outcome of a natural system that has benefits for people. The Welsh Government categorises these services in its [Woodlands for Wales strategy](#) as:

- provisioning services – e.g. timber production;
- regulating services – e.g. carbon sequestration and improving air quality;
- cultural services – e.g. recreation and health benefits; and
- supporting services – e.g. increasing biodiversity.

[Forest Research valued Welsh woodland resources](#) in the four specific areas of timber extraction, carbon sequestration, recreation and air quality. They found that the total annual value of services provided by Welsh woodlands in 2015 was £606m. The breakdown between the four different services is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Annual value of services provided by Welsh woodlands in 2015. Source: Forest Research.

Ecosystem service	Timber extraction	Carbon sequestration	Recreation	Air quality	Total
Value (£m)	28.3	108	85	385	606.3

Commercial forestry sector

The latest [Woodland for Wales Indicators](#) showed that the Gross Value Added (GVA) of the forestry sector in Wales was £665m in 2017. £50m of this total was from logging, £250m from the manufacture of wood products, and £365m from the manufacture of paper.

[Between 10,300 and 11,000 people were employed in the forestry sector in 2017](#), with 9,000 of these as employees and 2,000 self-employed. There were 805 individual business units in the sector. These figures do not include businesses that are supported by woodlands, such as recreation.

Carbon storage and air quality

The amount of carbon sequestered (taken in and stored) by Welsh woodlands is [estimated to be 1.84 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent \(CO₂e\) each year](#). The Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) sector as a whole is a net sink of carbon, and [reduced Welsh emissions by 770,000 tonnes CO₂e in 2016](#).

Among the [air pollutants that have the highest impact on human health are small, particulate matter less than 10 µm in size \(PM₁₀\)](#). In 2015 it was estimated that [Welsh woodlands removed 16,211 tonnes of PM₁₀](#) from the air. Using air quality damage cost guidance, this removal of PM₁₀ in 2015 was valued at £385 million.

Recreation

In a 2019 survey conducted by Forest Research, 77% of Welsh respondents said they had visited woodlands for recreation in the last 12 months, with walking being the most popular activity. The number of active community woodland groups has increased from 76 in 2016 to 95 in 2019. The area of land leased, owned or managed by community groups has increased from 1,706 ha in 2016 to 5,623 ha in 2019.

Biodiversity

The State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) states that upland oak woodland is among the most extensive of all habitats of principal importance in Wales. Of the 542 species of principal importance, the Forestry Commission Wales found that 210 species rely wholly or partly on woodland habitats.

In the SoNaRR, NRW assessed ecosystem resilience semi-natural broadleaf woodlands were found to be moderately resilient, and resilience was moderate to high for planted woodlands (native and non-native mixes).

2. Welsh Government action

Welsh Government strategy

The Welsh Government published its updated Woodlands for Wales strategy in June 2018, setting out its vision for woodlands over the next 50 years.

The four key areas for delivery in the strategy are:

- Responding to climate change
- Woodlands for people
- A competitive and integrated forest sector
- Environmental quality

The strategy sets out an ambition to plant at least 2,000 ha of new woodland annually from 2020 to 2030. This target was recommended by the UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) for Wales to meet its statutory requirements under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 of an 80% emissions reduction from the baseline by 2050.

The Welsh Government's low carbon delivery plan (2019) reiterates its ambition is to meet the 2,000 ha per year tree planting target, but to increase this to 4,000 ha per year "as rapidly as possible".

National Forest

The First Minister, Mark Drakeford, included the idea of a National Forest in his leadership manifesto. The proposal is reflected in 'Policy 9' of the draft National Development Framework, which states:

“The Welsh Government is committed to developing a national forest, and will identify appropriate delivery sites and mechanisms to achieve this aim. Action to safeguard proposed locations for the national forest will be supported.”

The vision for the National Forest was put forward by the First Minister on 12 July 2019 to the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister:

“... I am very, very committed to the idea of developing a national forest for Wales, both because in a climate emergency context, it's an obligation on us to do more, and I also think it's just such a great thing to have for Wales. We have this fantastic coastal path, which is a tremendous draw to people in Wales, and a national forest, which is not just picking a new area and putting it there, but trying to link up the forests we have in Wales already so that you could walk continuously from one part of Wales to the other, almost, never leaving the national forest, is my vision of it. I want it to be somewhere where people want to go, where there'll be opportunities for leisure like mountain biking—lots of things we can do.

It's a 20-year project, and the latest advice that I've been looking at is to look at the map and see where existing forests are already to be found and then how we can create corridors between them, so that, in the end, over a 20-year period, there will be this continuous forest, and looking to see where the first opportunities are to begin that.”

Minister's letter

The Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths (hereafter, the Minister) wrote to the Chair of the Petitions Committee in relation to this petition on 11 February 2020. In the letter, the Minister emphasised that the Welsh Government's approach is outlined in the Woodlands for Wales strategy.

In relation to the National Forest, the Minister states that:

“The Welsh Government is investing £4.5m to begin establishing a National Forest in Wales. The National Forest will contribute to increasing woodland creation in Wales, alongside other measures such as the Glastir Woodland Creation scheme. The National Forest will also unlock other opportunities, such as helping local communities better connect with the natural environment and tourism.”

The Minister added that reversing the decline in biodiversity was a priority and that the Welsh Government want to encourage community engagement in woodlands, providing funding towards 'Llais y Goedwig', a community woodlands, grassroots network.

3. National Assembly for Wales action

Branching Out: Committee inquiry report

The Assembly's Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee (CCERA) published a report in July 2017 following its inquiry into woodland policy.

It highlighted the severe lack of woodland creation in Wales in recent years, mainly due to regulatory, bureaucratic, financial and cultural barriers. It also stated that a lack of funding for woodland management was thought to be affecting the environmental quality of native woodlands.

The report made 13 recommendations to the Welsh Government, aimed at enhancing the environmental, economic and social contribution of Welsh woodlands.

The Minister responded formally to the report in September 2017. She accepted 12 of the 13 recommendations, albeit nine only in principle, and rejected just one.

One of the accepted recommendations urged the Welsh Government to review its Woodlands for Wales strategy; the updated document was published in June 2018 (see above).

The one rejected recommendation called for the Welsh Government to ensure a minimum of 20% tree canopy cover in urban areas. The Minister said that a single target was unlikely to help deliver the Committee's goals and would prejudice the local decision making process envisaged under the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* and *Environment (Wales) Act 2016*.

Plenary and committee questions

The concept of a national forest has been raised in a number of Assembly committee meetings and in Plenary in recent months.

During the Assembly's CCERA committee draft budget 2020-21 scrutiny session, the Minister was asked whether the £4.5m capital allocated was enough to meet the Welsh Government's tree planting targets. In response she said:

"No. I think we'll need additional funding [...] The private sector, I think, will play a big part; I don't think we can just do it from Government alone. You've heard me say many times that we're not planting enough trees and we need to ensure that we plant more, and we will."

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.