

3.0 Background Description

3.1 Physical site factors

3.1.1 Geology Soils and landform

East Sutherland LMP area is situated on an underlying solid geology of Moray Firth red sandstones and conglomerates. The drift geology is a mix of glacial till derived diamictons and some localised alluvium near significant watercourses. The majority of the plan area is moderately fertile but this is inhibited by podzolisation and peat formation over a significant amount of area.

The implications of the underlying lithology on the establishment of second rotation crops are referred to further in section 3.3.2 Site Capability. The soils in this plan area are dominated by surface water gleys, podzolic ironpans, peats, podzolic and brown earths. Rocky outcrops and screes are also present – most notably in Achormlarie. Typical brown earths are found in Rogart and in Skelbo.

The silvicultural prescriptions and assumptions made in this plan are largely specific to soil types referred to in the Forestry Commission soils classification system described in The Identification of Soils for Forest Management (Kennedy, 2002). Soils present in this plan area fall mainly into the following categories:

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| • | Brown earths | FC Group 1 |
| • | Podzols | FC Group 3 |
| • | Ironpan soils | FC Group 4 |
| • | Peaty surface water gleys | FC Group 6 |
| • | Surface water gleys | FC Group 7 |
| • | Molinia bogs (Flushed blanket bogs) | FC Group 9 |
| • | Unflushed blanket bogs | FC Group 11 |
| • | Rankers/skeletal soils | FC Group 13 |

Detailed, reliable soil maps are currently being prepared to assist the Operations team in delivering the proposals detailed in this plan. James Hutton Institute soils data to 250k scale is available, but does not offer sufficient detail to predict the soils type for each coupe. The extent and nature of the soils can be identified where open ground exists, however as Pyatt & Brown 1982 state;

“Due to profound changes in the vegetation which take place after afforestation, which in many places involves it’s complete suppression by

the tree canopy, it is implicit that identification of site types cannot be...precise in the established forest”.

The implication for this plan is that exact species boundaries will only be defined once clearfell has allowed Forest Management staff to accurately identify soil types on a coupe by coupe basis. The correct prescription can then be matched appropriately to site type, ensuring best silvicultural practice.

3.1.2 Water

Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) is implementing the Water Framework Directive (WFD) in Scotland which is a legal framework for the protection, improvement and sustainable use of all water bodies in the environment across Europe. All water bodies across Scotland have been assessed for ecological and chemical status and catchment plans have been drawn up to ensure water bodies are brought up to an acceptable level. NHFD lies entirely within the Scotland River Basin Management Plan Area. The two aims of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) are to improve water bodies to good ecological status/potential by 2015 (or later if this is not feasible) and to prevent any deterioration in ecological status/potential. These objectives apply to baseline and non-baseline water bodies. Under WFD, as well as reaching good ecological status/potential, designated protected areas must meet the standards for which they are designated and have the same objective of no deterioration. Operations carried out on the National Forest Estate in North Highland Forest District adhere to the best practice detailed in the Forest and Water Guidelines (FCS, 2011), the Water Environment (Controlled Activities)(Scotland) Regulations (CAR) and the General Binding Rules published by SEPA to support the required ecological protection and improvement.

North Highland Forest District are aware that it is therefore important that the new proposed planting and forest restructuring, felling etc, including the proposed road construction, does not lead to any deterioration of the water bodies or water dependant areas within the forest plan area and any of the neighbouring water bodies. Appropriate establishment of riparian woodland to maintain buffer strips between commercial conifer plantations and water bodies is a key aim of this plan.

All waterbodies within the East Sutherland LMP area that have a potential to be affected by forest operations currently have good or better ecological status.

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All waterbodies noted on the SEPA RBMP website and minor watercourses identified by NHFD as significant are detailed in **Map 2 – Key Features Forests and Water**. The specific measures proposed to improve the status of the water bodies noted above is contained in the **Analysis & Concept Table** of this plan. Detail of the proposed riparian woodland that will provide a buffer on all identified watercourses (minimum 30 metres from each bank) is included in the **LMP Proposals** section of this plan and in **Section 6.4 – Management Prescriptions** and **Section 6.5 – Native Woodland Prescriptions (NVC)**.

The watercourses in this plan area have suffered from inappropriate forestry practices in the past leading to pressure from plantations edges too close to watercourses, intensive cultivation and poorly implemented drainage. NHFD acknowledge that appropriate controls on forest operations are vital to improve the current position. River Evelix (SAC) was discussed during recent SEPA and FCS River Basin Management liaison meeting, where the water quality and the importance of local freshwater pearl mussel population were agreed to be of particular interest and importance within this LMP area. NHFD agreed that water monitoring should be undertaken on River Evelix tributaries in Achormlarie, to assess what impact forest operations might have (no major operations in that block until now, due to the age of the crop).

During the LMP consultation SEPA has highlighted presence of Groundwater Dependant Terrestrial Ecosystems (GWDTE) within the lower River Fleet area. To protect these GWDTEs, 250m or 100m buffers need to be adopted for any operations involving excavations. However, the distance from the Rogart forest boundaries (c. 1400m) means that forest operations within that block are very unlikely to have direct impact on the GWDTEs. Any potential indirect impact will be mitigated by strictly adhering to Forest and Water guidance.

It is recognised that invasive non-native species (INNS) can have impacts on the condition of areas protected under the Habitats Directive for species or habitats important at a European scale and those nationally important for biodiversity. They are recognised as a significant risk to the water environment in the River Basin Management Plan for the Scotland River Basin district and in the North Highland area management plan.

Given the possibility of contamination from riparian INNS from upstream populations, any control efforts will always be undertaken with this in mind, and it is proposed that links will continue to be made with existing projects such as the biosecurity plans which are being produced by the Rivers and Fisheries Trusts Scotland. Invasive plants have not been recorded on the National Forest Estate within the plan area to date, however routine survey work will continue throughout the plan period and any occurrence dealt with complying fully with best practice guidance. Work programmes are currently being delivered to reduce rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) and will continue during the coming plan period. American mink (*Neovison vison*) will continue to be the target of rigorous control.

Water crossings for proposed roads infrastructure will be planned and delivered in accordance with best practice and within the structure of the Controlled Activities Regulations (CAR). It is acknowledged that the storage of oil will be carried out in accordance with the Water Environment (Oil Storage) (Scotland) Regulations 2006.

As a minimum, The Water Environment (Diffuse Pollution) (Scotland) Regulations 2008 General Binding Rules will be followed. These rules cover the storage and application of fertiliser, cultivation of land, discharge of site water, construction of roads and use of pesticides. These are considered operational planning issues and as such mitigation and method are not detailed in this Land Management Plan, however a robust system of recorded work planning and pre-commencement planning is in place and is available for view as required by stakeholders. Following site meetings with SEPA staff and agreement on consultation protocols reached in 2013, SEPA will nominate coupes which they feel are 'sensitive' during the standstill review of the draft plan, prior to its submission to Highlands and Islands Conservancy. The workplans for these coupes will be annotated with a consultation request and during site planning, operations staff will contact SEPA staff and accommodate any specific operational requirements agreed for that coupe.

NHFD will contact SEPA prior to commencing engineering works in, or in the vicinity of, inland surface waters to determine the level of authorisation required. Site specific mitigation for engineering works is not a matter for this plan, however Forestry Civil Engineering will adhere to all planning protocols that apply at the time of construction.

However as a minimum, no land shall be cultivated within 2 metres of any surface water or wetland or 5 metres of any spring that supplies water for human consumption to encourage settlement of silt as the drainage waters flow over the open ground into watercourses.

Surface water drains will not discharge directly into the water environment and, where applicable, NHFD seek to address existing drains of this type to avoid siltation problems during and after forestry operations.

Across NHFD there is a high proportion of fragile soil (peats and glacial deposits) and combined with steep ground limitations this can present a risk to adjacent watercourses. Specific mitigation relating to steep ground working and/or soil conservation is identified at site planning level and proposals are then taken forward in line with UKFS guidelines, UKWAS requirements and industry best practice.

Where opportunities exist to deliver environmental improvement by the alteration or removal of inappropriately designed or redundant structures, for example, the upgrading of a culvert to allow fish passage or removal of a redundant weir, this will be undertaken by the Environment team. They will carry out consultation with the relevant stakeholders and will register the operation on the SEPA website. Opportunities for morphological and ecological improvements may also be considered. For example measures could include the re-meandering of artificially straightened watercourses. It is often the case that opportunities for wetland and peatland habitat restoration are only revealed after felling, when landform is clear and hydrology can be accurately

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assessed. Therefore site level proposals of this nature are agreed at work plan stage with the Open Habitat Ecologist and the FD Environment team.

Forestry has a significant role in mitigating the effects of climate change. Building resilience against extreme weather events underpins all our proposals but is particularly relevant in relation to protecting overhead powerline networks, public roads infrastructure and water courses. Previous cultivation and drainage operations across the National Forest Estate are inappropriate for current climate predictions and this will be addressed by the adoption of less intensive techniques in future.

Arisings from felling and thinning operations (lop and top) are not considered as waste in terms of this plan, because the material will be incorporated in the brash mat to aid machine traction and flotation thus protecting fragile soils. Additionally material will be retained on site to achieve deadwood objectives. Other branches and material left after harvesting contribute to the functional ecology of the woodland and are an important feature of nutrient recycling that will increase biodiversity and may assist future productive woodland establishment. Where the felling to recycle of non-native species occurs, the arisings have subsequent use including protecting vulnerable native tree regeneration from grazing mammals and again, contributing to the functional ecology of the woodland.

Where specific operations produce waste material not detailed above, the FD Environment or CRT staff will liaise directly with SEPA to establish the level of permission/licensing required on a site by site basis.



Skelbo Burn, Skelbo. Photo A.Baranska, NHFD

3.1.3 Climate

Understanding that climate is a key factor in determining the correct choice of species is fundamental to interpreting the prescriptions given in this plan. Although prescriptions for native woodland – both riparian and across the wider forest are based on the National Vegetation Classification it's important to acknowledge that limitations on accuracy are created because NVC based prescriptions in guideline documents don't account for climate variances. In all circumstances the local Operations Forester will make a judgement on any potential effect of climate on the recommended woodland type and if appropriate adjust it to reflect site conditions.

When choosing the correct productive species for a site the climate guidance contained in Pyatt, Ray and Fletcher's Ecological Site Classification (2001) will be an essential determining factor for species or woodland type choice. The ESC uses measures of warmth, wetness, continentality and windiness to make species recommendations based on national statistics (calculated from Met Office data for the recording period 1961 – 1991). Local site factors including soil and vegetation are then combined with the national figures.

The detailed species proposals for restocking are made on a coupe by coupe basis, following a site visit by Planning, Environment and Operations staff, who use site assessment, climate data, soil nutrient regime and soil moisture regime datasets. Unfortunately due to only partial coverage of detailed soils maps, SNR and SMR cannot be visualised as a map for this plan.

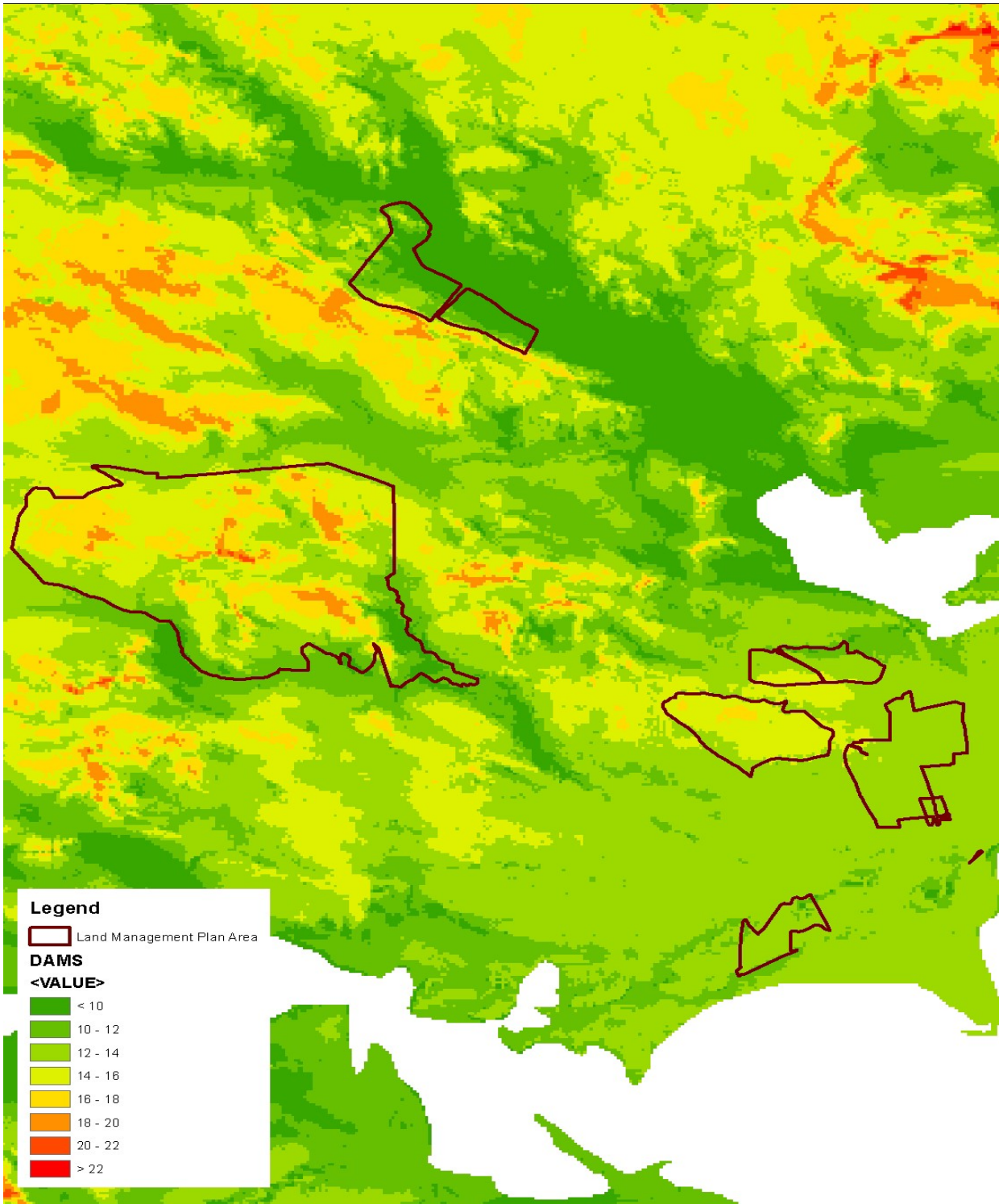
Windiness is assessed using the Detailed Aspect Method of Scoring (DAMS) developed by Quine and White (1993, 1994) which analysed tatter flag data to produce models that would predict the speed and frequency of strong winds.

The climate for this plan area in common with much of the northern Highlands is predominantly 'cool-moist' moving to 'cool-wet' higher up the hill. There are very localised areas where the climate is 'warm-moist' due to shelter. As a result the forests in this plan area benefit from a potential growing season and local climate suitable for commercial forestry and the establishment of a good variety of native woodland types.

DAMS scores of between 8 and 14 which are very suitable for commercial forestry are common throughout. The majority of the plan area is suitable for commercial forestry and there are areas acceptable for adopting low – impact silvicultural systems (LISS) and longer rotations (with DAMS scores between 8 and 12).

The areas with high DAMS scores (18 – 22) are restricted to open hilltops of Achormlarie, where no commercial planting will take place.

The map below shows the DAMS scores across the FDP area



DAMS scores across the LMP area.

3.2 Biodiversity and Heritage Features

Designated Sites

Sites designated for conservation reasons within this plan area are as follows:

- Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SPA
- River Evelix SAC
- Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet SPA
- Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet RAMSAR
- Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SSSI

Forestry Commission Scotland manages these sites under a system of Designated Site Plans. These DSPs have been reviewed as part of this Land Management Plan and the operations associated with them carry the approval of Scottish Natural Heritage. All DSPs are appended as supporting documents to this plan and carry full details of the sites noted above. The designated habitats and species within the plan area make these forests a very important area for biodiversity and future proposals will reflect the status of the East Sutherland forests as a conservation site of European importance.

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Cultural Heritage

The Highland Historic Environment Record has been consulted during the preparation of this plan. Following *FES Historic Environment Planning Guidance*, this Land Management Plan describes and considers the historic environment relevant to the plan area.

Appendix V – Archaeology Record section of this plan includes details of all relevant scheduled monuments. Important historic environment features are surveyed, recorded, mapped and monitored to ensure and demonstrate Forestry Commission Scotland compliance with the UK Forestry Standard and UKWAS.

In general, all significant archaeological sites are protected and managed following *Forestry & Archaeology Guidelines* (FC 2011), the FCS policy document *Scotland's Woodlands and the Historic Environment* (FCS 2008) and the supporting *FES Historic Environment Planning Guidelines* (available from the FCS Archaeologist). North Highland Forest District has Monument Management Plan (MMP), highlighting the main archaeological features, their condition and management proposals (please see MMP in Supporting documents). Management coupes, access roads and fence lines are surveyed by Forest District staff prior to any work being undertaken in order to ensure that upstanding historic environment features can be marked and avoided. At restocking, work prescriptions remove relevant historic environment features from ground disturbing operations and replanting. Opportunities to enhance the setting of important sites are considered on a case-by-case basis (such as the views to and from a designated site).

Any recent archaeological surveys that have been undertaken on behalf of FCS have been incorporated into our spatial GIS database - and any new archaeological surveys required (in unimproved upland areas for example, or areas within which the archaeological record is unusually rich) will be undertaken to the standards laid out in *FES Historic Environment Planning Guidelines*. This will ensure that undiscovered historic environment features are mapped and recorded prior to forestry establishment and management operations - and will ensure the continued comprehensive protection of the known archaeological resource.

All scheduled monuments on the NFE in North Highland Forest District are inspected on a five yearly cycle with Historic Scotland, prior to preparation of a dedicated management plan for each site. These plans give detailed prescriptions for the management of each individual monument. There are no scheduled monuments within this FDP area.

It is common when planning forest operations to discover new sites of archaeological interest. All sites are subject to rigorous pre-operations planning and inspection and staff will refer to the guidance of Ritchie and Wordsworth (2010) when completing pre-operations surveys.

Advice will be sought from the FCS archaeologist on the significance of new sites and Highland Council and Historic Scotland consulted as appropriate.



Carn an Fheidh - Scheduled Ancient Monument, Harriets.
Photo A.Baranska NHFD

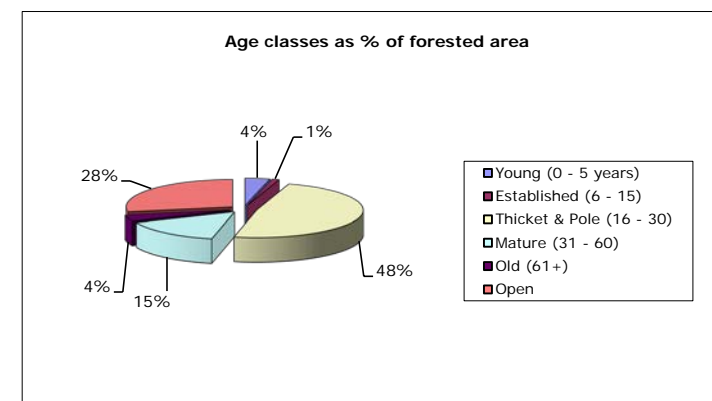
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3.3 The existing forest

3.3.1 Age structure, species and yield class

Age Structure

The age structure of the forests within the East Sutherland LMP area is reasonably wide, however there is scope to provide much greater diversity within the five main age class structures. The 'Thicket & Pole' age class (16 -30 years) is over represented (mainly due to the large area of young, even age crop in Achormlarie), while the old (61 years and over) and the young (0 - 5 years) have relatively small shares, with the established age class (6 – 15 years) being under represented, mainly due to the timing of felling, in many areas dictated by the windthrow clearance, and the 5 year fallow adopted across the District.

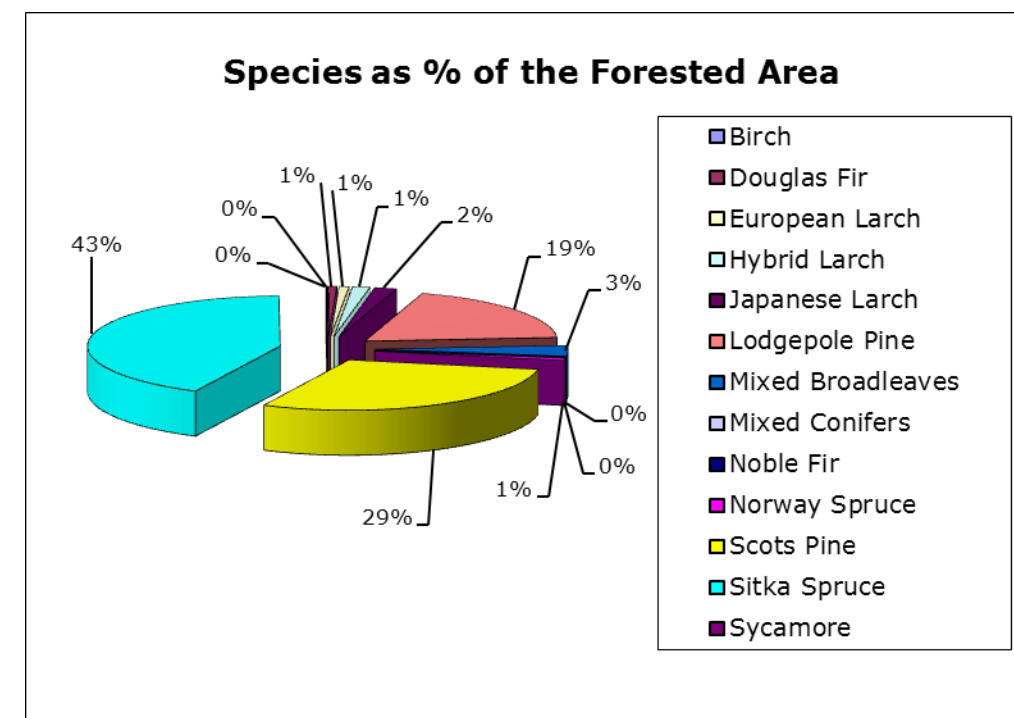


Larger scale felling coupes will occur in Achormlarie (phase 2), where the size and shape of coupes is dictated by the landform. LISS programmes will continue to be implemented and this will allow full age class distribution across much larger areas of the forest. The prescribing of

permanent native woodland and riparian woodland zones will also influence age class where veteran trees will develop over coming decades.

Species

The chart below illustrates the species range across the LMP area. Sitka spruce predominates (43% of the area), due to soils types and past management objectives. Scots pine is the second most common species (29%), concentrated mainly in LISS areas in Dornoch Blocks. Lodgepole pine covers significant area (19%), both as a pure crop, and in mixture with Sitka spruce and more rarely with Scots pine.



Firs and larches have been planted only where localised improvements in soils and climate were previously identified, however the species diversity does not truly reflect the site conditions and a much wider range of species could be reasonably expected to thrive in the more sheltered areas.

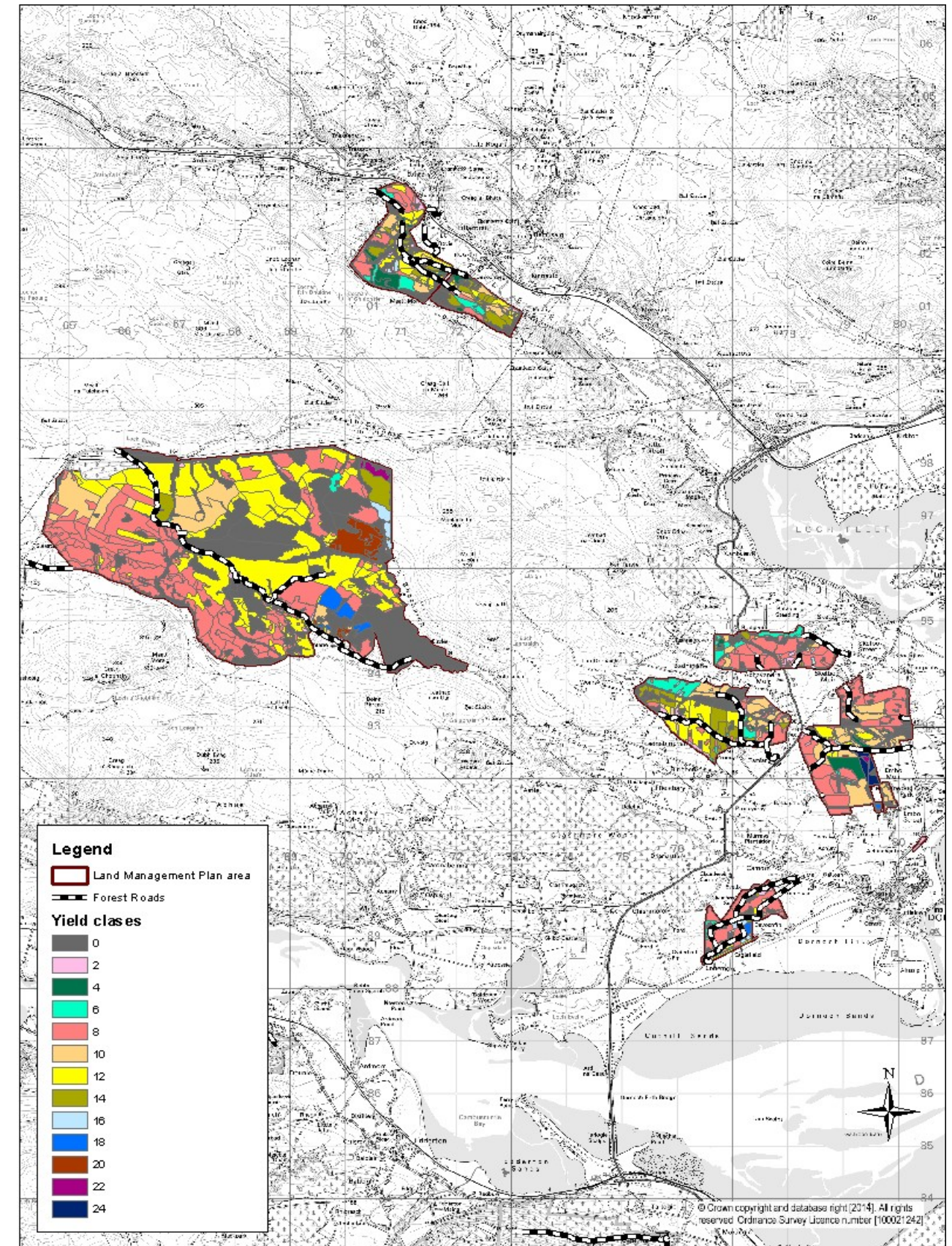
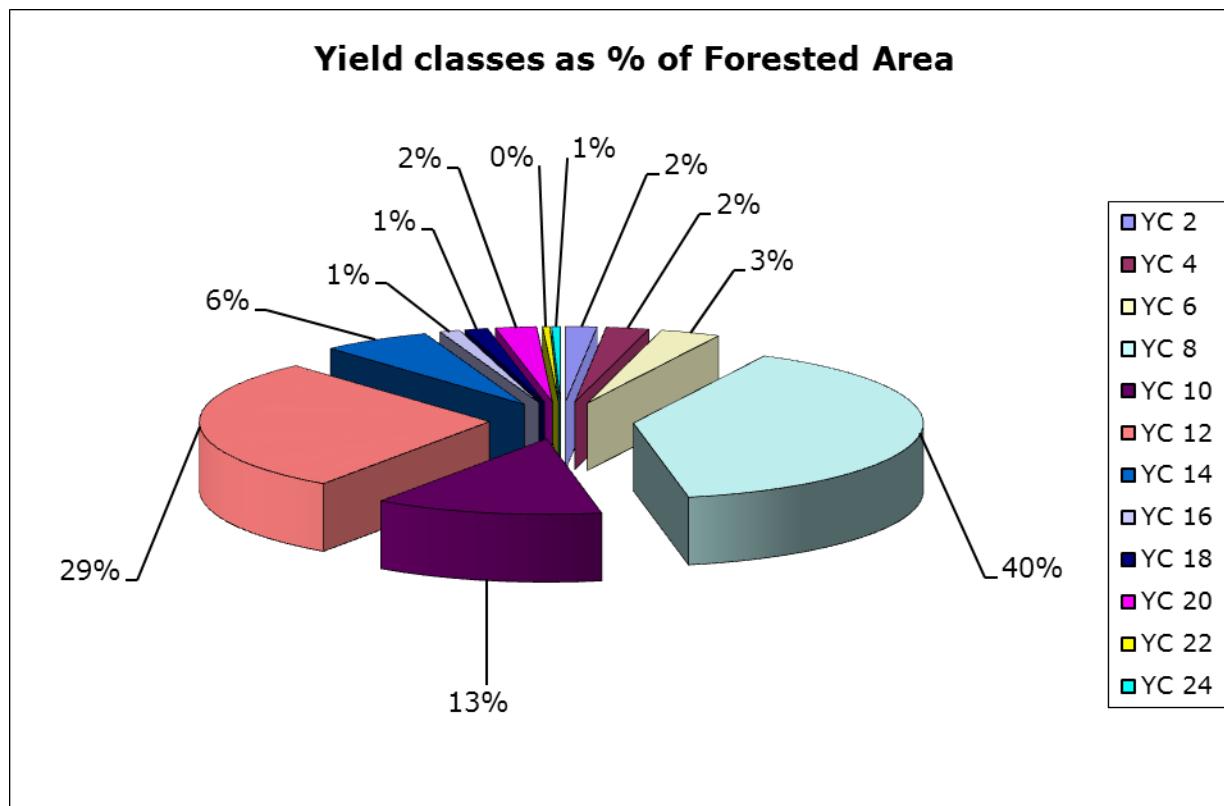
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The broadleaf element (just over 3%) is under represented, and there is considerable scope for extension of this area, particularly in relation to the establishment of riparian native woodland intended to buffer watercourses and create habitat links.

Yield Class

Yield classes found in the LMP area are typical for the species and site types encountered – approximately 63% of the forest area lies in the 8 – 14 range. It is anticipated that the yield class can be improved during the coming rotations by improved use of silviculture techniques and more appropriate site selection for species. The continued reliance on pure crops across much of the forest is probably impacting on yield. The areas of LP where yield class falls between 6 and 8 are largely found on the upland slopes where soils are wet, exposure is relatively high and nutrient levels are challenging. These sites have undergone analysis to assess suitability for productive forestry and this has informed the future habitat proposals.

It is acknowledged that lower yield classes, particularly in SP and broadleaf crops, can lead to higher quality timber and it is important that silvicultural treatments are designed that will achieve this.



Yield Class distribution across the LMP area.

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3.3.2 Site Capability

The James Hutton Institute led the development of the Land Capability for Forestry classification - a series of maps with accompanying handbooks at 1:250 000 scale, published in 1988. The classification and guidelines (Towers and Futton, 1989) allows planning to be undertaken based on an assessment of the factors influencing tree growth, notably climate, soils and topography. Silvicultural practices are also considered and developments in this area since 1989 mean that some local interpretation of the Classification is required. The Land Classification for Forestry is based on an assessment of the degree of limitation imposed by the following factors (in relation to productive forestry and not including establishment or enhancement of native woodlands):

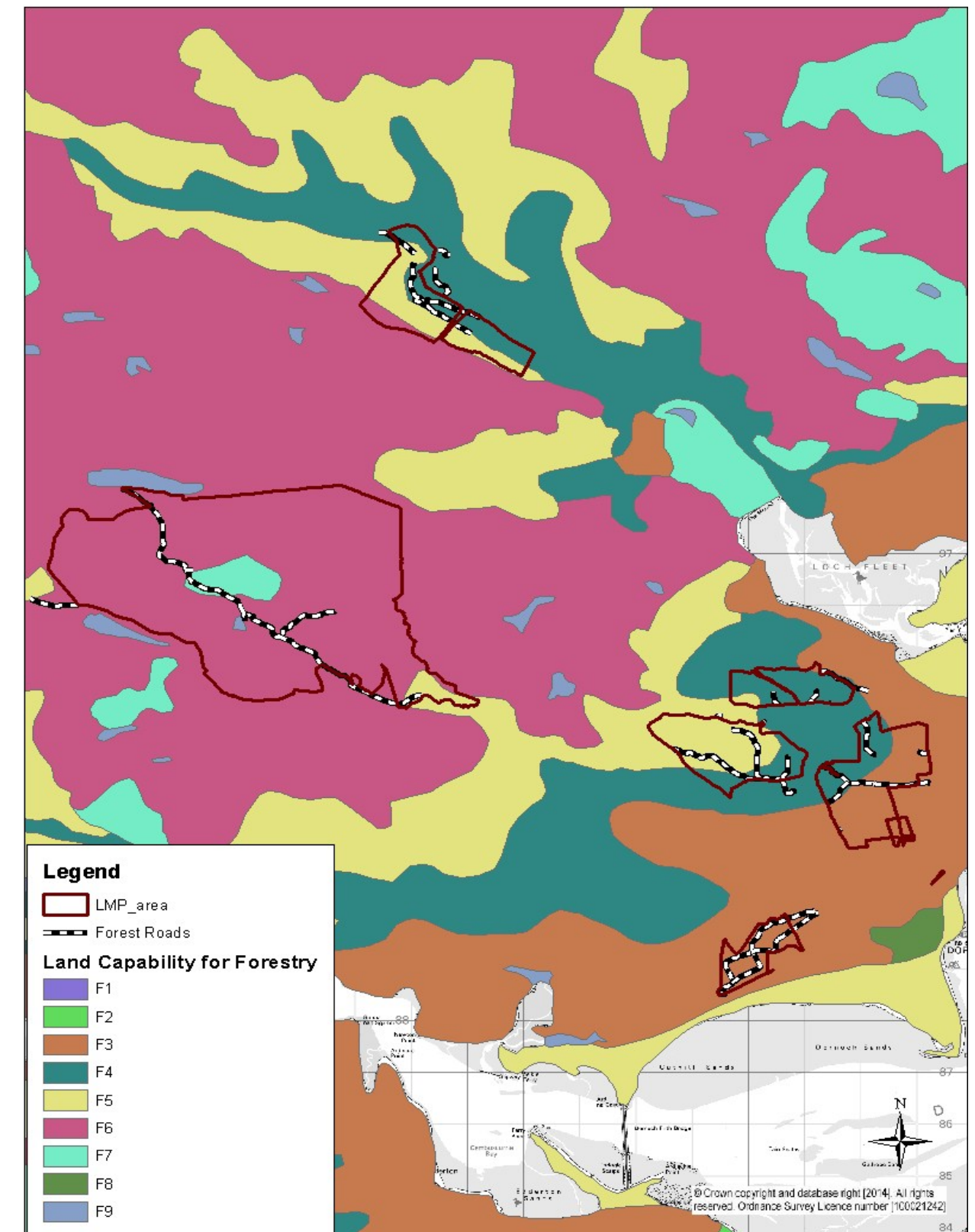
- Climate – accumulated temperature and exposure
- Windthrow – the risk of wind damage based on climate data
- Nutrients – assessing base geology and volume of organic/mineral soils
- Topography – giving an indication of the likely limitations on forest operations
- Droughtiness – assessing soil moisture and relating it to tree growth potential
- Wetness – water table movements and the effect on rooting depths
- Soil – relating to basic soil types and assessing effects of any modification

The Land Classification uses the descriptions in the table below:

Class	Description
F1	Land with excellent flexibility for the growth and management of tree crops
F2	Land with very good flexibility for the growth and management of tree crops
F3	Land with good flexibility for the growth and management of tree crops
F4	Land with moderate flexibility for the growth and management of tree crops
F5	Land with limited flexibility for the growth and management of tree crops
F6	Land with very limited flexibility for the growth and management of tree crops
F7	Land unsuitable for the producing tree crops

The Land Capability for Forestry guidance suggests that the majority of the plan area should be capable of growing a range of conifers and a restricted range of broadleaves, with classifications in the range F3 to F6. A map showing the distribution of classifications is shown opposite. The capability of the forests within this plan area to sustain productive forestry is dictated to a large extent by the local climate and equally

significantly by geology, soils and the consequent nutrient availability. Site capability is assessed on a coupe by coupe basis to ensure that the correct species and establishment techniques are matched to the site.



Land Capability for Forestry classification across LMP area.

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3.3.3 Access

The forest road network generally provides good access to the LMP Forests in Rogart and Dornoch Blocks. Achormlarie has poorly developed network, as there was no harvesting up to date. Further roading is proposed to facilitate harvesting of coupes at there, particularly where long extraction distances would lead to unacceptable levels of soil damage and siltation.

Roads currently used for forest management access will need to be upgraded to Cat 1A to take timber traffic once harvesting starts. The following planned roads are currently noted:

- Harriets Spur 710 metres NH 7668 9361
- Duchess/Countess road 525 metres NH 7861 9168
- Rogart northern spur 300 metres NC 7102 0258
- Rogart western spur 321 metres NC 7108 0193
- Achormlarie north road 4401 metres NH 6711 9669
- Achormlarie western road 2007 metres NH 6566 9766
- Achormlarie south road 3744 metres NH 6735 9631
- Achormlarie eastern spur 996 metres NH 6964 9590

FD Operations staff will contact HC TECS prior to relevant coupes being harvested to ensure that operational restrictions are accommodated in the harvesting contract requirements and that wear and tear on relevant public roads can be minimised.

3.3.4 Low Impact Silvicultural Systems (LISS) Potential

With DAMS scores tending toward suitable values and a reasonable proportion of mineral soils, there is good scope for LISS in Dornoch Blocks. The main reasons why LISS is a suitable management approach across these forests are:

- Improvement of crop resilience and resistance to disease and climatic events.
- Improvement of landscape quality in relation to Dornoch Firth NSA.
- General improvement of landscape on important tourist routes.

As mentioned above, the three main areas of activity have been at Skelbo, Camore and Duchess/Countess in Dornoch Blocks. Further areas are to be managed by LISS systems - in northern part of

Fourpenny and additional area in Duchess/Countess plantation. Thinning and group felling have taken place, but the regeneration has been sparse generally, with very little Scots pine seedlings appearing. Scarifying and supplementary planting will need to be considered to ensure that sufficient regeneration of desired species is achieved.



Abundant broadleaf regeneration in Skelbo.
Photo A.Baranska, NHFD

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3.4 Landscape and Land Use

3.4.1 Landscape character and value

A site landscape appraisal has been undertaken by FD staff to assess the likely impact of future management and identify current constraints and opportunities to enhance the landscape. The FCS Landscape Architect visited the site with NHFD planning staff on 18th of August and 10th of November 2014 and advice was received on the design of prominent coupes.

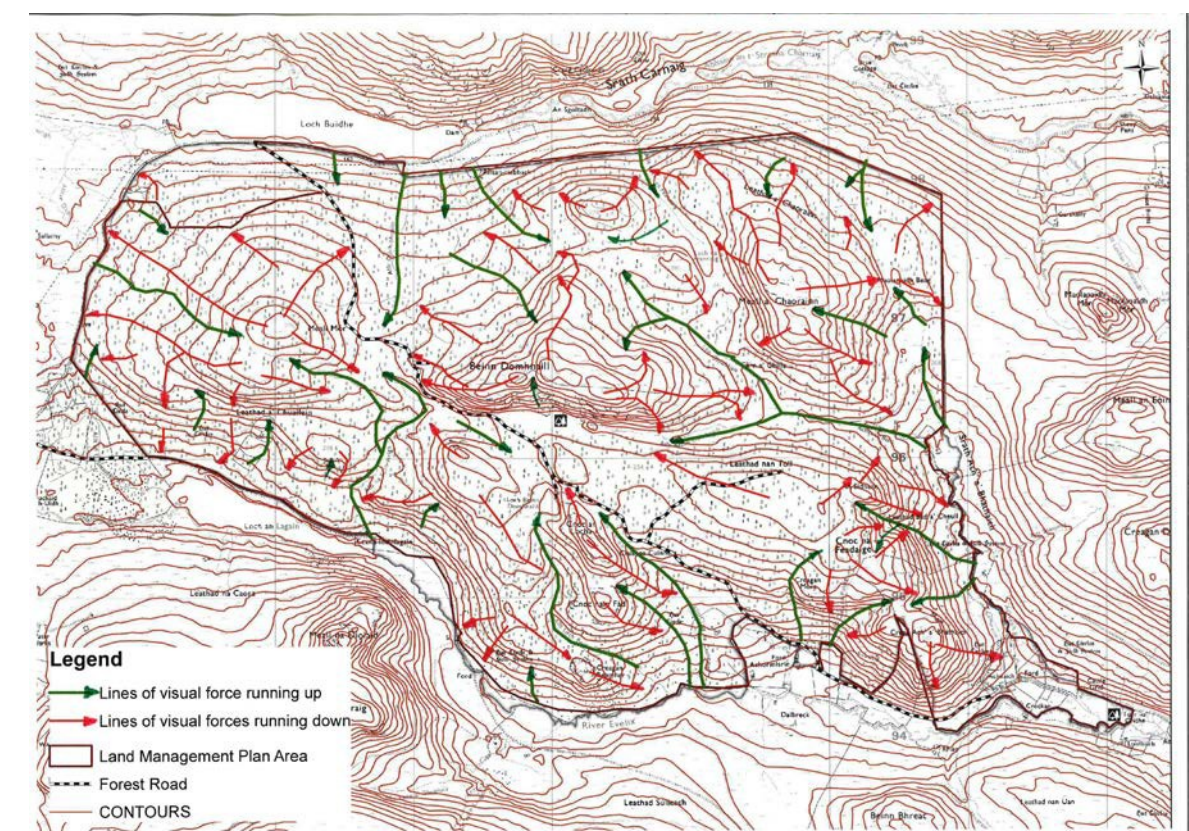
The forests included in the East Sutherland Land Management Plan area lie within three distinct landscape character zones – according to the Scottish Natural Heritage Caithness and Sutherland Landscape Character Assessment (C. Stanton, 1998) – of small farms and crofts (Dornoch Blocks); moorland slopes and hills (Achormlarie); and straths (Rogart).

The small farms and crofts landscape character around Dornoch Blocks represents the traditional form of land use, and is dominated by human activity and occupation, with integration of people, settlements, land and sea. The extent of visibility tends to be limited, because of the typically sloping landform and screening effect of woodland, buildings and barriers. It results in semi-enclosed landscape, with fairly intimate, small spaces and close-up views. Woodlands may potentially subdivide areas and obstruct views however, if extensive in scale, they may also unify an area. The visual impact might be reduced by restructuring / designing woodlands to make them appear to sit within the landform. Given the strong field patterns that predominate along the forest's lower margins, ownership boundaries inevitably mean improvements can be difficult to achieve and a distinct forest edge is not out of place. The composition of that edge – with diverse species – is key to improving the overall landscape.

Moorland slopes and hills landscape of Achormlarie comprises sloping open moorland, which rises to form broad hills with convex slopes, limiting distant visibility and views of the hilltops from their base. The landscape is overwhelmingly open, with a feeling of almost unlimited space. The hills have massive proportions, appear to be of the same height and are spaced far apart. The sloping landform creates plateaux, shelves and basins, which tend to be badly drained and may contain patches of peat, lochs or *dubh lochans*. Even-aged Achormlarie block will be gradually restructured, allowing for more diverse and resilient age and species structure.

The coupe structure proposed for Achormlarie is designed to relate to the vast scale of the landscape and local variations of landform and ground cover. Coupes are large, with a simple bold layout to reflect the shape and proportion of the hills.

In order to achieve a more coherent landscape design, shapes should respond to the gentle curves and smoothness of the slopes, identified by the landform analysis (shown by red and green arrows). When aligned to natural barriers and responding to the natural lie of the land the forest looks to be in harmony with its surroundings.



Landform analysis - Achormlarie

Rogart forest sits on a north facing slope of Strath Fleet, with River Fleet as a central visual focus and dominant views along and between the opposite slopes of the Strath. Abandoned croft house indicates intensive land management in the past. Rogart forest was planted as a wall-to-wall conifer block, with rectangular boundaries and divided by a sheep pass. Since 2005 extensive areas were felled, and the linear boundary along the sheep pass was restructured to sit better within the landscape. The forest forms a

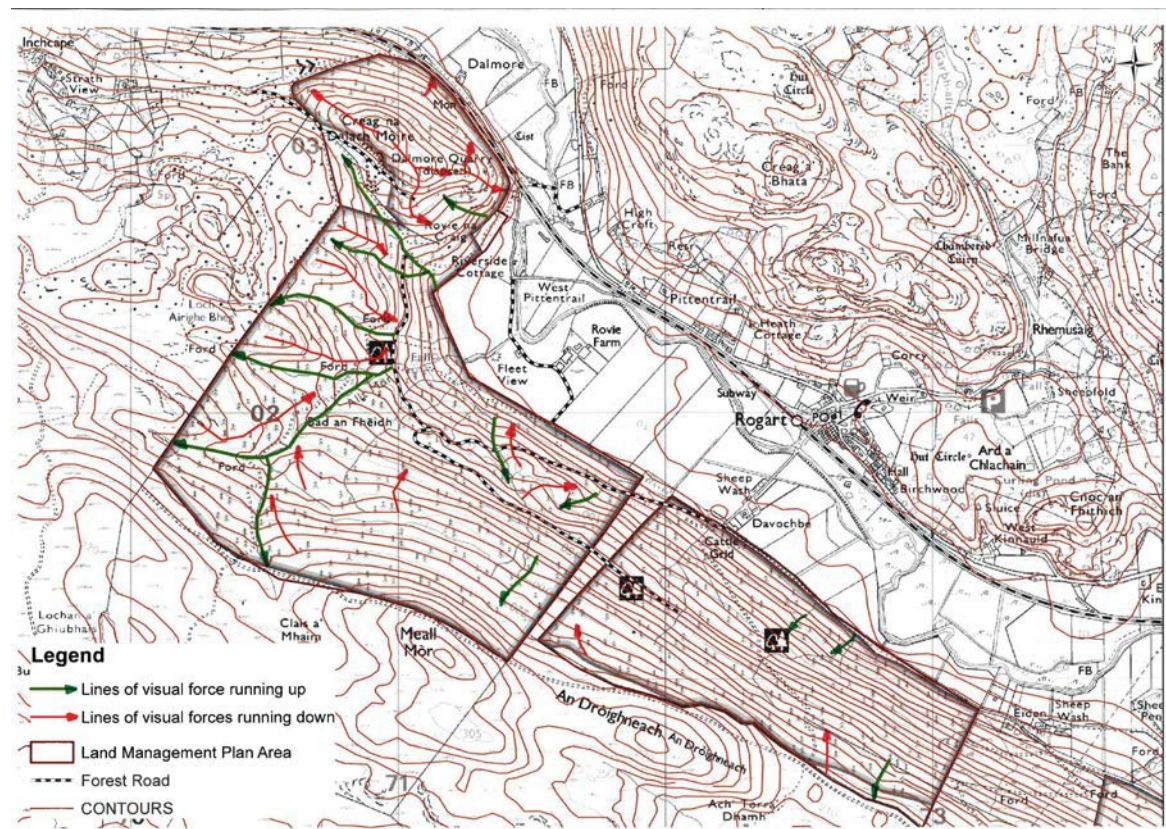
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major view for inhabitants of Rogart village and those who travel along A839.



Creag na Dallach Moire, seen from A839.
Photo A.Baranska, NHFD

Creag na Dallach Moire forms a visual focus point, and a landform analysis has been carried out to ensure that forest seems to be in harmony with its surroundings.



Landform analysis - Rogart

Panorama landscape photographs taken from the most significant viewpoints are contained within the supporting documents at the end of the plan and visualisations have also been produced to support these proposals.

3.4.2 Visibility

The landscape sensitivity varies across of the LMP area, with Rogart forest forming focal view for Rogart village and highly visible from A839 public road to Lairg; Achormlarie being quite remote and visible from minor public road from Bonar Bridge to The Mound (A9); and Dornoch Block situated within Dornoch Firth National Scenic Area (Camore) and along A9 (major route north), but offering mainly intimate, close-up views.



Skelbo (left) and Balvraid forest (right) seen from A9 (travelling south). Photo A.Baranska, NHFD

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3.4.3 Neighbouring Land Use

The following land uses are noted across the landscape adjacent to the LMP area:

- Productive forestry
- Conservation including native woodland establishment
- Tourism including outdoor pursuits, fieldsports and angling
- Arable and livestock agriculture

3.5 Social factors

3.5.1 Recreation and Access

Recreation across this area has a high profile. Tourists are passing through on the way to the far north and the Northern Isles. In addition many visitors come to enjoy the challenging hill walking available in East Caithness and Sutherland.

The National Forest Estate plays it's part by seeking to provide an appropriate backdrop, but also provides access facilities in the form of car parks, interpretation and forest trails of varying grades. In addition the wider road network provides excellent opportunities for longer walks, cycling and horse riding. Formal facilities in this LMP area are located at:

- Skelbo forest trails and carpark
- Camore forest trails and carpark

The Planning and Environment Committee of Highland Council agreed to adopt the Highland Council Core Paths Plan on 21st September 2011, formalising the network that had been proposed following a three year consultation period. Under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, Highland Council, as the Access Authority that operates across NHFD, has a statutory requirement to produce a Core Path Plan to cover its area.

The Core Paths aim to satisfy the basic needs of local people and visitors for general access and recreation and provide links to the wider path network throughout the Highland Council area. These Core Paths comprise a mixture of existing paths with some new paths and are close to where people live. They range from tracks worn into natural ground (desire lines) to high-specification constructed paths. NHFD are committed to ensuring that operations do not interfere with access across the Core Path Network and aim to enhance the forest in close proximity to paths to enhance the user's visit.

The Core Paths cater for all types of users - walkers, cyclists, horse riders, people with disabilities, etc. and are a key part of outdoor access provision.

This LMP area includes the following core paths:

• SU09.16 Skelbo Forest Walks	NH78109412	2.8km
• SU09.14 Tinkers Drive	NH80249258	2.1km
• SU09.01 Camore Woods	NH76608852	5.8km
• SU20.01 Meall Mor Fire Track	NC70440320	5.7km
• SU20.02 Eiden – Creag A'Bhlair	NC73330080	1.2km
• SU20.10 Torboll - Eiden	NC73410072	3.4km

Surveys are ongoing to identify access points that do not meet current Scottish Outdoor Access Code standards and this will continue during the next plan period.

The forests within the LMP area are regularly used by recreation and education staff to deliver events and programmes of work with local groups and visitors.

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3.5.2 Community

The LMP area falls within the East Sutherland and Edderton Ward and North West and Central Sutherland Ward of the Highland Council Region and is represented by the following Community Councils:

- Dornoch CC
- Rogart CC
- Creich CC

NHFD included the community councils in the consultation process and the replies, where received, are contained in **Appendix III – Consultation Record External**.

In addition representatives of Rogart, Community Councils are in the process of preparing an agreement with the District regarding the maintenance and promotion of the footpaths created in Rogart Forest. Embo Trust has submitted an application under NFLS to take over the management of part of the Fourpenny plantation (Dornoch Blocks) and is awaiting the decision.

3.6 Statutory requirements and key external policies

This Land Management Plan has been drafted to ensure that planning and operations functions will comply with the complex raft of legislation and policies that protect and enhance the Scottish Environment. **Appendices I & II** contain further information on many of the guiding documents.