

Submitted to Future Grant Support for Forestry
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Ministerial Foreword - Forestry in Scotland is a sector that we can be justly proud of.

1 - Introduction and Rationale for Providing Grant Support for Forestry

1. Do you agree that grant support for forestry should continue to be improved and developed as a discrete scheme within the overall package of land support?

Yes

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

2. Are there any changes that would allow for better complementarity between the forestry and agriculture funding options?

Not Answered

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

2 - Forests Delivering for Scotland's Climate Change Plan

3. How can the support package for forestry evolve to help tackle the climate emergency, to achieve net zero, and to ensure that our woodlands and forests are resilient to the future climate?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

4. Private investment through natural capital and carbon schemes can make a valuable contribution to climate change. Do you agree that the grant support mechanism should have more flexibility to maximise the opportunities to blend private and public finance to support woodland creation,

Not Answered

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

5. How could the current funding package be improved to stimulate woodland expansion and better management across a wide range of woodland types, including native and productive woodlands?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

6. Do you agree that it should be a requirement of grant support that woodlands are managed to ensure that they become more resilient to the impacts of climate change and pests and disease?

Not Answered

How can the grant scheme support this?:

3 - Integrating Woodlands on Farms and Crofts

7. Which of the following measures would help reduce the barriers for crofters and farmers wanting to include woodland as part of their farming business? Please select all that apply.

Are there others not listed above?:

8. Establishing small woodlands can have higher costs. What specific mechanisms would better support small scale woodlands and woodland ownership?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

4 - Forests Delivering for People and Communities

9. How can forestry grants better support an increase in easily accessible, sustainably managed woodlands in urban and peri-urban areas?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

10. How can grant support for forestry better enable rural communities to realise greater benefits from woodland to support community wealth building?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

11. How can the forest regulatory and grant processes evolve to provide greater opportunities for communities to be involved in the development of forestry proposals?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

12. How can the forestry regulatory and grant processes evolve to ensure that there is greater transparency about proposals and the decisions that have been made on them?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

13. Forestry grants have been used to stimulate rural forestry businesses by providing support with capital costs. Do you agree that this has been an effective measure to stimulate rural business?

Not Answered

a. How could this approach be used to support further forestry businesses?:

b. How could this approach be used to support further skills development?:

14. How could the FGS processes and rules be developed to encourage more companies and organisations to provide training positions within the forestry sector?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

5 - Forests Delivering for Biodiversity and the Environment

15. The primary purpose of FGS is to encourage forestry expansion and sustainable forest management, of which a key benefit is the realisation of environmental benefits. How can future grant support better help to address biodiversity loss in Scotland including the regeneration and expansion of native woodlands?

Please explain your answer in the text box.:

The latest national survey, carried out in the winter of 2021/22, estimated that only 542 capercaillie remain in Scotland. This estimate is derived from walked transects across the capercaillie range. 542 birds is the lowest recorded level since the start of the national survey in 1992 – 1994 and 51% lower than the 2015/16 estimate. 85% of the population remains in the Cairngorms National Park.

There are several fundamental issues facing capercaillie, not least available habitat, predator management and human disturbance. Capercaillie are a specialist species only able to survive in a narrow range of environmental conditions. They require extensive areas of at least 100 hectares of Scots pine dominated woodland. Although adult capercaillie feed on conifer needles for much of the year, blaeberry rich and boggy field layers in the forest are also an important food source, and a varied forest structure is key to helping food plants grow in the understory and for providing capercaillie with an essential mix of open areas to feed and dense areas for cover.

Limited habitat, which is also fragmented, can cause capercaillie populations to become isolated. This can compromise their genetic health. Less habitat means capercaillie may also be more prone to the impacts of predation and human disturbance.

In 2018, the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project carried out habitat assessments on 15 landholdings across the Cairngorms National Park. The assessments identified multiple opportunities to improve habitat for capercaillie. The project reviewed the Forestry Grant Scheme, as the primary scheme that provides funding for positive habitat management for capercaillie. Several opportunities identified through the habitat assessments were not fundable through the scheme and when the project consulted landowners and managers, several barriers were identified to accessing the scheme. In response, the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project has funded over £500,000 of habitat work to improve over 10,000 hectares of habitat for capercaillie since 2019. None of this work was fundable or viable through the Forestry Grant Scheme.

16. Herbivore browsing and damage can have a significant impact on biodiversity loss and restrict regeneration. How could forestry grant support mechanisms evolve to ensure effective management of deer populations at:

Landscape scale?:

High deer numbers can negatively impact capercaillie by preventing the expansion of forests and overgrazing of key plant species in the field layer, such as blaeberry. Funding for deer control is therefore essential for capercaillie conservation. However, current funding through FGS is of limited benefit as capercaillie often use plantations that include a mix of native Scots pine with other conifers. The option of managing deer within native woodland is therefore not viable for many capercaillie forests. A more flexible approach is advised to allow deer to be controlled within capercaillie forests that include some non-native tree species.

Small scale mixed land use?:

If you wish to make any other relevant comments, please do so in the text box below.

Please add your comments here.:

1. Accessibility

The requirement of an approved forest plan is a barrier for smaller landowners accessing the current Forestry Grant Scheme. This requirement should be reviewed to determine whether it is necessary for all capital items in future, e.g., small scale work that stands to benefit capercaillie such as ditch blocking.

2. Thinning

Capercaillie can benefit from variable density thinning (Kortland, 2006), as this provides an essential, varied structure for the birds. This type of thinning often takes more time to implement, leading to additional costs. The method of variable density thinning should be promoted in future schemes and funding should be reflective of costs.

3. Predator control

Predation has been identified as a key threat to capercaillie populations in Scotland (Baines et al, 2016). A report by the NatureScot Scientific Advisory Committee, published in February 2022, also advised that poor breeding success in the UK capercaillie population is the primary cause of recent decline and the main factors driving poor productivity are a high loss of nests and young chicks due to increased levels of predation and human disturbance.

The requirement for predator control for capercaillie to be undertaken within 1.5km of a lek or breeding area is overly restrictive. Evidence demonstrates that capercaillie can disperse up to 16km from lek sites (Fletcher & Baines, 2022). This means birds will continue to be vulnerable to predation outwith the 1.5km buffer.

Targeting predators whilst on open farmland can also be more efficient, and controlling a larger area around a lek can help to reduce predator pressure, particularly during breeding season. The project has funded this approach and achieved no predation of capercaillie eggs or chicks by foxes from May to August for three consecutive years over 2,900ha of core capercaillie habitat. It is therefore recommended that future funding for predator control is not restricted just to forests, but a more flexible approach is taken which includes funding for predator control on open ground and beyond 1.5km of a lek.

4. Fence marking and removal

Research demonstrates that collision with deer fences can be a significant cause of mortality for capercaillie in Scotland (Baines & Summers, 1997), with unmarked deer fences causing 24% of juvenile mortalities September to May and 8% of annual adult mortalities (Moss et al, 2000). Trials have indicated that marking fences can reduce collision risk by 64% (Baines & Andrew, 2003).

In a survey of stakeholders connected to capercaillie conservation, conducted in 2022 by the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project, it was identified that there is strong agreement that increased fence marking and removal of fences across the capercaillie range will immediately improve capercaillie survival rates; that it could be actioned quickly; that volunteers could help to accelerate the work; and that additional fence removal will also significantly improve landscape qualities across the capercaillie range.

However, cost is a limiting factor. Funding should therefore be available to all landowners and managers, including those that do not currently have an approved LTFP, as this can be a barrier for smaller landowners / managers. Funding should be available to cover 100% of the costs involved in marking and removing fences. Fence marking also needs to be maintained and funding should be available for this, for the lifetime of the fence. Fence marking can degrade over time and pose a higher collision risk. Landowners and managers can be reluctant to engage if there is no support for maintenance and management costs. As removal of fences, where possible, is the most effective solution to reduce capercaillie collisions, this option should remain.

The requirement for fences to be within 1km of a capercaillie lek is overly restrictive and does not reflect the recorded dispersal distances of capercaillie (Fletcher & Baines, 2020). Lek locations are also not always static. It is therefore recommended that the requirement that fences need to be within 1km of a capercaillie lek is removed and instead, applicants should be required to submit a letter of support from the Capercaillie Advisory Officer to be eligible. This approach aligns with the fence removal option and allows the scheme to respond effectively to changes in the capercaillie distribution.

The Cairngorms Capercaillie Project conducted research in 2022 to identify the approximate scale of the issue of unmarked fences in capercaillie areas and the approximate costs involved in resolving the issue. The key findings of this research are as follows:

~15km of un-marked fencing within 1km of lek sites. Cost of removing: ~£37,000. Cost of marking: ~£82,000

~86km of un-marked fencing 1km – 3km of lek sites. Cost of removing: ~£215,000. Cost of marking: ~£481,000

~156km of un-marked fencing up to 5km of lek sites. Cost of removing: ~£388,000. Cost of marking: ~£869,000

5. Field layer management

A suitable forest field layer, with key food species like blueberry, is crucially important for capercaillie during the breeding season (Summers, 2004). In some capercaillie forests, heather has become overgrown, which can suppress blueberry and make it more challenging for chicks to move around.

The Cairngorms Capercaillie Project has funded robocutting following cutting trials which demonstrated a more than doubling of blueberry cover and invertebrate biomass after cutting and a 7 fold increase on capercaillie usage in response. It is expected that this increased capercaillie usage and improved habitat will have a beneficial impact on capercaillie productivity and population when carried out on a larger scale. Additionally, it will benefit vegetation and invertebrate communities.

Robocutting involves heather cutting using a 'Robocut' with a forestry flail head. This remote-controlled flail mower is faster, cheaper, more efficient, safer and better performing than alternatives (tractor trailed toppler, brushcutter) at field layer management in pine forest. This was demonstrated with a

recent trial in Abernethy Forest where between 0.5 and 1.0 ha was cut each day per machine, depending on access, thickness of vegetation, cut depth and topography.

It is recommended that robocutting is added as a funding option under the Heather Swiping capital item and the payment rate for all cutting options is reflective of costs. Whilst funding is currently available for heather cutting, the payment rate (£210/ha) is much lower than the actual cost for robocutting (£500 to £1000/ha) and the funding is only available when linked directly to a relevant Sustainable Management of Forest Plan and then only when the two are applied for at the same time. Scope therefore exists to be more flexible and aid a more dynamic approach for landmanagers wishing to employ this emerging technique. Flexibility is also key where several small plots and strips may require cutting, rather than one single area. It is therefore recommended that applicants have the option to include several plots in a package of works.

6. Restoring bog woodland

Forest bogs provide particularly important feeding areas for hens in spring and chicks in summer. To re-wet these areas, man-made drains often need to be blocked and the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project is working with landowners and managers who want to complete this work in the most environmentally friendly way. It is therefore recommended that future ditch-blocking options do not include the use of plastic, and instead funding is only provided for sustainable options as appropriate to the locale.

7. Grit piles

Capercaillie use grit to aid digestion and for dustbathing. By providing this resource capercaillie can remain in the forest instead of coming to tracks to source grit, as is often the case, and then being exposed to disturbance. As funding grit for capercaillie is not available through the current scheme, the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project has provided funding for this intervention. On one site, over 50% of the grit piles provided were used by capercaillie in the first year. It is therefore recommended that funding for grit is included as an option in future.

8. Screening

To reduce disturbance from human activity the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project has provided funding for landmanagers to create natural screening alongside forest tracks using branches and felled trees. This stands to make large areas of habitat available to capercaillie where it is otherwise underused by the birds due to disturbance. It is therefore recommended that funding for natural screening is included as an option in future.

About you

What is your name?

Name:

[Redacted]

What is your email address?

Email:

[Redacted]

Are you responding as an individual or an organisation?

Organisation

What is your organisation?

Organisation:

Cairngorms Capercaillie Project (Partnership project led by the Cairngorms National Park Authority)

Scottish Forestry would like your permission to publish your response. Please indicate your publishing preference:

Publish response only (without name)

We may share your response internally with other Scottish Forestry policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for Scottish Forestry to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?

Yes

I confirm that I have read the privacy policy and consent to the data I provide being used as set out in the policy.

I consent