

# DOWN FOREST REVIEW 2015



Mourne Park forest



An Agency within the Department of  
**Agriculture and  
Rural Development**  
[www.dardni.gov.uk](http://www.dardni.gov.uk)

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AN ROINN  
Talmhaíochta agus  
Forbartha Tuaithe

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MÁINNSTRÍE O  
Fairs an  
Kintra Fordèrin

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The mark of  
responsible forestry

## Introduction

The Forest Service directly manages 75,000 hectares of public forest land and regulates 46,600 ha of private woodland cover in Northern Ireland. Almost 7% of the public forest estate lies within County Down and it is these forests which we are currently reviewing.

Forest policy is to manage forests in a sustainable way to provide a balance of social, environmental and economic benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. By encouraging private land owners to grow trees on their land, over the next 40 years we aim to increase forest cover from 8% to 12%

Our powers to spend money and regulate forestry activity are set out in the Forestry Act 2010. This legislation replaced the Forestry Act 1953 under which the forests we manage were established. Significant changes in the 2010 Act include the provision of a statutory right of pedestrian access to publicly owned forest land (subject to byelaws), the regulation of tree felling in woodlands over 0.2 hectares, and the opportunity to development partnership arrangements to support any aspect of our General Duty or to develop forest land for a purpose other than forestry.

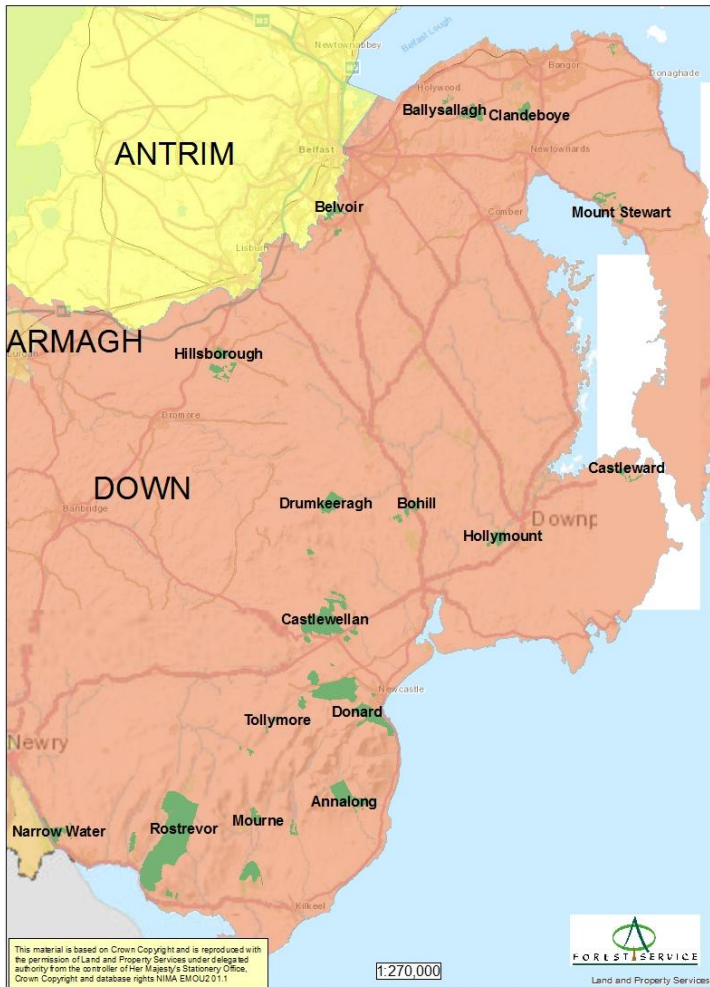
Other legislation that has particular relevance to forestry includes [The Forestry \(Felling of Trees\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2013](#), the Timber and Timber Products (Placing on the Market) Regulations 2013, the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, and the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 and amendments, under which almost 50% of forest land is designated as Special Protection Areas (SPA's) or Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's).

From time to time we formally review our progress towards achieving policy aims, we take stock of what has been achieved, and what more remains to be done. Although much of our considerations are based in science and tend to be discussed in very technical language, the key issues and decisions should always be capable of debate and understanding in plain English.

This paper sets the key issues that require decision and affect the 5,090 hectares of public forests that lie within the Down Forest area. We hope that our neighbours; those who use public forests in the area and, those who have a more general interest in forests or are affected by forestry outputs and outcomes will contribute to our decision making process.

Our objective is to set clear directions for the short and long term development of these forests so those who are affected by forestry activity can take account of our plans as they manage renewable energy projects and protect river basins, maintain roads, process timber, develop recreation and tourism products, and make decisions about land use etc.

## Down Planning Area



## Long term management objectives

Publicly owned forests in Down Planning Area play an essential role in meeting our core objectives of delivering commercial, environmental and social benefits to local communities and to the people in Northern Ireland. Our short term plans and resulting work programmes align with longer-term management objectives that look forward for many years. The following objectives underpin our shorter term plans:

***To promote forest expansion:*** The Forest Service Woodland register (2013) records Forest Service as directly managing 61,600 hectares of woodland while a further 49,400 hectares is in private ownership. Forest Service is committed to the steady expansion of our woodland in Northern Ireland and the primary vehicle for this is through private planting with the assistance of funding through the Farm Woodland Premium and Woodland Grant Schemes.

In addition, where it helps to consolidate or improve access to our existing plantations, we may seek to expand existing public forests through the purchase of available land that is considered suitable for afforestation. Over recent years, low market availability coupled with high land prices and biodiversity considerations have restricted our opportunity to acquire suitable land for this purpose.

Forest expansion is subject to the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations which provide protection for habitats and species which are subject to special protection plans (Habitat Action Plans and Species Action Plans). Therefore land which may be suitable for afforestation would not be planted if it is necessary to protect the habitats themselves or the protected species that depend on that land.

***To maintain productivity of existing plantations:*** We will continue to harvest areas as they mature and restock to ensure a continuing supply of wood to the timber industry while also seeking opportunities to enhance the environmental and social benefits that can accrue from woodland management.

We recognise the benefits of developing low impact systems in more stable areas and we plan to manage many of our native broadleaved woodland areas using Low Impact Silvicultural Systems (LISS). We plan to extend areas of conifer and mixed woodlands managed under LISS in the following forests Rostrevor, Mourne, Tollymore and Donard.

We will continue to clear fell blocks of woodland as they mature or become unstable. These areas will be primarily Sitka spruce planted on the higher and less stable areas of county Down.

We intend to diversify species selection in the next rotation in response to the current pathogenic outbreaks over the past five years.

Within Down many of our crops are being grown beyond economic maturity due to the sable soil conditions and species selection. This results in additional environmental and structural diversity of the woodlands as well as enhanced visitor experience.

We are aware of the potential destructive impact of plant diseases such as *Phytophthora ramorum*, (sudden oak death) which is devastating primarily larch plantations throughout the province and has been found in a number of locations in Co. Down. We will continue to monitor our woodlands for pests and diseases and take actions as required to protect the woodlands and surrounding environment. Periodic planning reviews allow us the opportunity to modify our plans in light of new information. Larch plantations account for 4% of the total planted forest area in our Co. Down forests.

***To conserve and enhance the environment:*** Forest Service is committed to maintaining compliance under the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). This is the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) and Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) endorsed forest management standard for the UK and places an obligation on us to manage our lands in a sustainable way. We will continue to meet the environmental requirements of this standard by:

- Managing at least 15% of our forest area to meet conservation and environmental enhancement objectives.
- Liaising and working with Northern Ireland Environment Agency in relation to areas subject to statutory protection and the management of areas where environmental protection is a management objective.
- Protecting listed archaeological sites and notifying NIEA about possible sites which are not listed.
- Taking account of priority species such red squirrels in our management of plantations.

The development of our plans will take account of these environmental considerations.

***To promote social use and recreation:*** Pedestrians have a statutory right of access to most of our forests for recreational purposes. We facilitate other activities through licenses or the issue of activity permits, provided that these activities are compatible with the broader commercial, recreational and environmental objectives. An estimated 4.7 million visits were taken to Forest Service forests in 2014.

We believe that there are opportunities in Down Forest area to further promote forest based recreation and we are working with Newry Mourne and Down District Council to enhance the visitor experience in this council area. We also are in discussions with Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council, Belfast City Council and The National Trust with the aim of increasing visitor recreation facilities in our woodlands.

During the period of the plan we will continue to work with potential partners to ensure that the opportunities provided are affordable, sustainable and integral to the provision of recreation and tourism in the local area.

***To restructure the forests in line with a Long-term Redesign Plan:*** When we clear fell parts of our plantations we have the opportunity to change the forest design and structure. This may be to construct riparian zones along waterways, to protect or enhance existing conservation areas, to increase the wind firm properties of future felling coupes, or to consolidate productive conifer areas. This long term vision of these forests is set down in Forest Design Plans which are held and available for view in the Local Forest Office. These are also subject to review at this time.

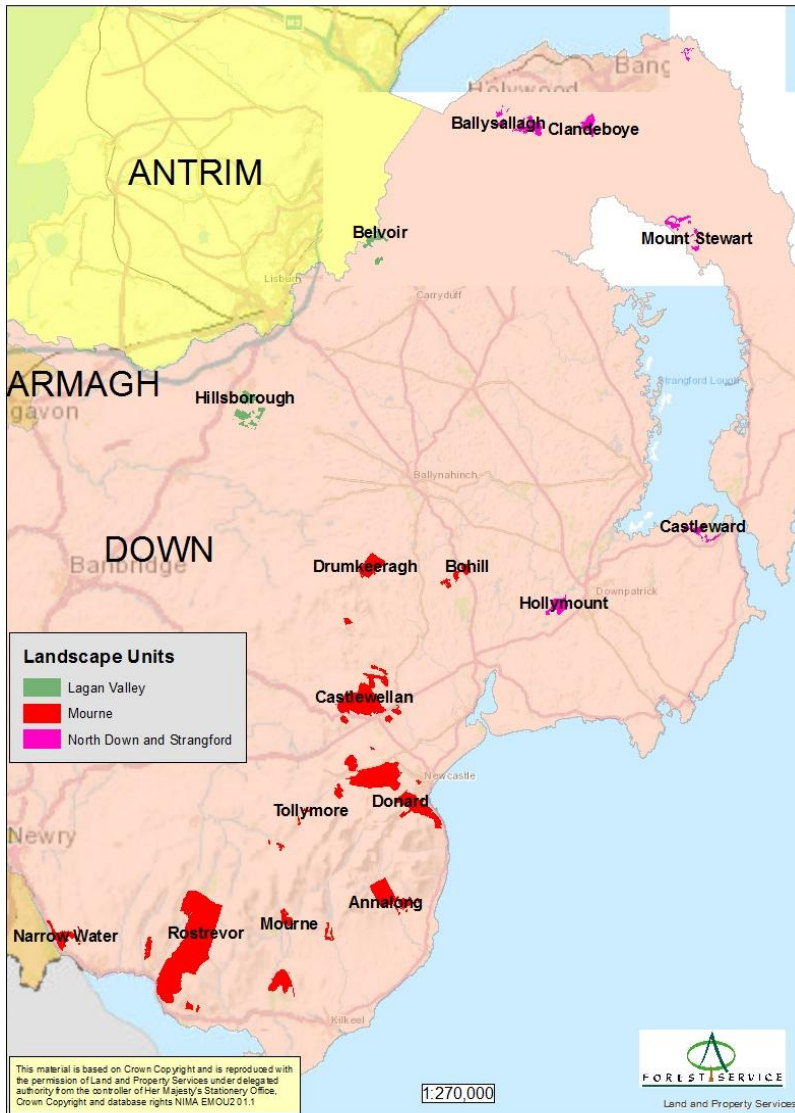
***Private woodlands:*** Private woodlands and plantations play an important role in delivering environmental diversity, timber and fuel wood resource and enhancing the landscape in rural areas. In Northern Ireland there are over 49,000 hectares recorded as woodlands with block sizes in excess of 0.10 hectares. Private plantations in Co. Down cover over 7,400 hectares and these are predominantly small plantations of broadleaves (4,150 Ha) with conifer/broadleaved mixtures covering 1,300 Ha and 725 hectares of conifer plantation. In total private woodlands cover 3.7% of the land area and public woodlands accounting for 2.5% in the Down Planning Unit

[The Forestry \(Felling of Trees\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2013](#) enables Forest Service to regulate tree felling in plantations over 0.2 hectares and this is important in order to provide assurance that woodlands are being managed sustainably. This regulation is supported by the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 which regulates woodland clearance where the owner does not wish to reforest.

In developing our plans for publicly owned forests we recognise the value that privately owned forests and plantations offer in conjunction with our woodlands. In developing our plans for the public forests we will take account of the potential positive and negative impacts that our planning decisions might have on adjacent privately owned woodlands through the consultation process.

## FORESTS UNDER REVIEW

### Down Planning Unit



The Down Planning Unit Charge includes the North Down and Strangford, Mourne and Lagan Valley Landscape Units. Allocating forests that have similar management characteristics to a Landscape Unit within a geographical area enables us to assess and monitor performance at a relatively local level.

Within each Landscape Unit there are a number of Forests. These Forest names are those traditionally used and would have been historically managed by individual forest teams. Block names identify fragmented plantations within Forest Management Units.

Landscape unit	Forest Name	Area	Block names
Strangford & North Down	Mount Stewart	97.50	
	Clondeboye	101.45	Portavoe Clondeboye
	Ballysallagh	161.66	Creighton's Green Cairn Wood
	Castleward	75.28	Mallard Plantation Castleward
	Hollymount	110.95	
Lagan Valley	Belvoir	92.81	Belvoir Hydebank Wood
	Hillsborough	193.59	
Mourne	Annalong	341.78	Annalong Wood Silent Valley

Bohill	90.45	Tievenadarragh Eleven Acres Bohill
Castlewellan	637.78	Bunkers Hill Clarkhill Curletts Mountain Ballymagrehan Castlewellan
Donard	296.78	Tipperary Wood Donard
Drumkeeragh	200.31	Backaderry Drumkeeragh
Mourne	250.56	Spelga Mourne Park Crochnafeola
Narrow Water	138.41	
Rostrevor	1676.39	Yellow Water Ballymoney Wood Ballyedmond Reed Hall
Tollymore	623.99	Tollymore Moneyscalp Trassey Fofanny Burren

## KEY ISSUES

Over the following pages we will identify the key issues which we need to consider in developing our Forest Management Plans which we will then use to inform our operational plans moving forward. These issues will be considered under four general headings:

- Conservation & enhancement of the rural environment.
- Recreation and social use.
- Forest operations
- Estate management.

Additional information which may be useful in informing the decision making process is provided in Appendices or is available for view at the Forest Office, Castlewellan Forest Park, Castlewellan.

### 1. Conservation and enhancement of the rural environment

State forests cover some 6% of the land area of Northern Ireland and play a major role in sustaining biological diversity in the rural environment.

We recognise the importance of designated protected areas within the review area which include the Eastern Mourne, Rostrevor and Hollymount Special Areas of

Conservation (SACs). These SACs provided diverse ecological habitats from the upland dry heath heaths of the Eastern Mourne to the mature oakwood in Rostrevor and the wet woodland in the flooded inter-drumlin hollow area within Hollymount.

In addition to the SACs, there are several Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) within the review area. These are found in the following forests Belvoir, Clandeboye, Castlewellan, Tollymore, Mourne and Rostrevor.

There are also sites of local nature conservation importance (SLNCI) in the following forests Narrow Water, Mourne (Spelga Dam), Hollymount, Hillsborough, Ballysallagh and Clandeboye (Portavoe).

We will liaise with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency on the management of these areas and the protection of their key features as well as seeking advice on the management of other sensitive areas. Through the development of our Forest Plans we will demonstrate how we intend to protect and enhance these important features and we have detailed what we believe to be the priority biodiversity issues in this section.

**Local Biodiversity Action Plans** prepared within the Local Council areas recognise the important biodiversity that exists and sets out how the biodiversity can be enhanced by the development of Habitat Action Plans and Species Action Plans which help protect a range of habitats and species under threat. Forest Service will co-operate with the Council Biodiversity Officers to help deliver on these plans. We will also work with community and volunteer groups to facilitate projects that enhance the biodiversity where this is commensurate with our requirement to maintain sustainable forests.



Tollymore, Donard, Mourne, Annalong and Rostrevor forests (2378 ha of woodland cover) lie within the designated Forest Service Red Squirrel Preferred forests as described in our 2011 Draft - *Identification of red squirrel conservation areas in Northern Ireland – a preliminary analysis*. We propose to monitor damage from Grey squirrels and control as necessary to protect hardwood crops and the indigenous red populations and we will continue to

work with the local Red Squirrel Groups and assist them in meeting our shared objectives.

**Natural reserves** are components of our forests that we manage with minimum intervention as they provide a valuable habitat for a wide range of species when left in their natural state. We have carried out a review of existing natural reserves and have considered alternatives which might better meet biodiversity objectives and recreational constraints. We propose to set aside some 42 hectares as natural reserves.



The ***Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI)*** undertaken by The Woodland Trust with support from Queens University Belfast during 2002-2006 identified forested areas which had been in continuous tree cover since at least 1830 and can be classified as possible or probable ancient woodland. We have inspected these areas, as well as other areas identified in our 2001 Plantation on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS) survey, to identify the presence of remnant features and to assess any potential threats to the native woodland character. We use this information to develop our work plans and future forest management activities in these areas.

The AWI sites are found in Belvoir (26ha), Hollymount (42ha), Bohill (7ha), Castlewellan (71ha) and Rostrevor (69ha) forests. In 2013 a survey identified 18 hectares of ancient woodland sites in Belvoir, Bohill, Castlewellan and Rostrevor that will require interventions to remove threats to the development of the native woodland character and we intend to deal with these over the period of the plan.

### Water catchments

We recognise the risks that some forest operations particularly timber harvesting, forest drainage, pesticide application, road construction and fertiliser applications can have on water quality and in consultation with NIEA, DCAL, Loughs Agency and NI Water we plan our forest operations and forest restructuring following clear fell to minimise the potential negative impacts of these forest operations.



Our Forest redesign plans (available at the Forest Office in Castlewellan Forest Park) include proposals to develop or

enhance existing buffer zones adjacent to rivers and lakes so that surface water is filtered before it reaches the waterways. All our operations will comply with best practice as set down in the *“Forest and Water Guidelines - 2011”*

The forests under review form part of the Carlingford and Newry, Upper Bann, Lagan, Belfast Lough, Strangford, Quoile and South Down water catchments.

Since the early 1980s new forest plantations have incorporated river buffer zones which were generally left unplanted.



However, there are still older conifers plantations which are planted up to the river edges. When we remove these crops we have the opportunity to reshape our forests to provide river buffers to offset the risk of future sedimentation or eutrophication of our rivers. It may be beneficial to incorporate broadleaves along the edges of some rivers and lakes to provide cooling shade and enhance the biodiversity of the

watercourses. We will work with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to see how this can be developed where there is little likelihood that natural regeneration will occur.



**Deadwood** has a high conservation value and is generally present in all afforested areas. We recognise that there is a high demand for fuel wood in Northern Ireland and that this is a limited resource. Therefore we intend to manage our deadwood in line with the “*FS Provision of Deadwood Strategy*” while also considering the commercial value of forest residues. Forests will retain in excess of 20 m<sup>3</sup> of deadwood per hectare and this will include both fallen and standing trees and branch wood.



### Long Term Retentions

Retaining commercial tree crops past their normal economic age can enhance the environmental and aesthetic value of woodland. We have reviewed the range of sites that we are currently retaining and we are proposing some changes to existing areas as crops become unstable.

### Invasive species:

We recognise the threat that invasive species such as rhododendron and laurel pose if they get a foothold in some of our plantations, particularly on the more sensitive sites. This is a particular problem in some of the old estate plantations in Down. Work is ongoing to remove rhododendron and laurel from extensive areas in Donard, Tollymore, Belvoir and Castlewellan forests.

### Diseases:



*Phytophthora ramorum* was indentified in 2011 in Bohill forest. This aggressive fungus like pathogen closely related to potato blight has spread since 2011 to several forests resulting in clear felling infected crops to reduce the risk of spread. We will continue to monitor our forests for this disease and deal quickly where we suspect infection. Japanese & Hybrid larch plantations which are

most susceptible to *P ramorum* currently represent 5.3% of the planted area in this forest charge but we have removed over 200ha of infected trees since 2011 and recognise that their removal has a significant impact in many areas including Belvoir, Castlewellan, Tollymore, Castleward, Bohill and Donard forests. We expect the disease to continue to spread in the coming years.

Over the last few years Ash die-back (*Chalara fraxinea*) which is fatal to ash trees has been identified in recently planted stock which was imported. To date we have no reported cases of infection in the wider environment in Northern Ireland but again we will continue to work with DARD and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to monitor for signs of this disease.

**Environmental enhancement:**

We recognise the importance of working with others to develop our understanding of the forest environment and how its biodiversity can be enhanced. We will continue to work with community project groups, Council Biodiversity Officers and other agencies to develop and facilitate environment enhancement projects on Forest Service lands.

***Compliance with UKWAS Standard for Biodiversity:***

The Forest Plans that are approved will comply with the standards that have been set down in Section 6 of the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS) "Conservation and Enhancement of the Environment"

## 2. Recreation and Social Use of Forests

### Introduction

In reviewing the Forest Plan for Down, the role these forests play in delivering recreational opportunities for the local population and tourists is an important factor. In line with our recreation strategy, we will continue to seek out opportunities to work with partners to help deliver, and enhance, forest recreation / tourism provision. We recognise the statutory role that Councils have to develop recreational facilities as part of their remit and we will continue to work with Councils and other partner organisations to develop sustainable recreational products in our forests.

During this planning review we will consult with stakeholders and recreation providers to develop plans for sustainable recreation provision.

### Current facilities and permitted activities

The public have a statutory right of pedestrian access to most of our forest estate and in the Down Forest Planning area we have over 200 kilometres of forest roads and trails which are ideal for those wishing to get out and wander through our large forest tracts. There are formal walking trails in Castlewellan, Tollymore, Rostrevor, Hillsborough and Belvoir forests and we have been in consultation with Newry Mourne & Down District Council, Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council and Belfast City Council about the potential for further development. We also facilitate a wide spectrum of specialist activity opportunities through licence arrangements and issue of activity permits. It is worth considering existing and proposed facilities a little more closely so that we can consider what further opportunities should be developed.

**Clandeboyne:** Public access is managed by Clandeboyne Estate as landowner. An agreement exists between the Estate and North Down Borough Council covering permissive access for the public on foot along the Clandeboyne Way.

**Ballysallagh:** Public access to most of this forest is subject to the Recreation and Access policy developed by Northern Ireland Water as our forest is planted on lands within a former water catchment area – see <http://www.niwater.com/great-days-out/>

**Mount Stewart:** The house and formal gardens along with the woodland and farmland formerly owned by the Londonderry family have been transferred to The National Trust. Most of the woodlands here are managed by Forest Service under a lease agreement but there is no right of statutory access on foot to the forest.

**Castleward:** Purpose built trails for cyclists, walkers and horse riders were opened here in 2012 and these are managed through a joint legal agreement between Forest Service, The National Trust and Down District Council.

**Hollymount:** The right of statutory access on foot applies here; however, the forest is seldom visited by the public.

**Belvoir:** A very heavily visited forest with a car parking area, three way-marked walking trails and several informal trails. There are two river crossing points from the forest that allow for easy access to the Lagan Towpath.

**Hillsborough:** The woodlands and way-marked walking trails around the main lake in Large Park remain a very popular venue for walking, running and orienteering. Very high numbers of visits have been recorded here, both for local residents and others from the Lisburn and Greater Belfast areas. Fishing for rainbow trout is also a well established activity and the lake is regularly stocked by DCAL Inland Fisheries.

**Castlewellan:** In recent years there has been very substantial public investment in purpose made cycling trails and walking trails, with the Forest Park being the busiest site for numbers of visits recorded during our 2014 – 2015 Forest Visitor Survey. The main lake is also well used for water based activities and offers a continuous run of almost 1 statute mile for rowing, unequalled anywhere else on the island of Ireland. Within the Forest Park there are several caravan and camping sites which are very popular with family groups, outdoor sports enthusiasts, youth groups and tourists.

**Tollymore:** The first Forest Park in Northern Ireland was opened in 1955 and sixty years later it remains as a firm favourite with caravan users, campers, walkers, hill runners, hikers, cyclists, horse riders, wildlife photographers and fly-fishermen. A wide range of walking trails and forest roads offer access to every area of the forest, from the well used Shimna River trail to the less visited Drinns viewpoint. This Forest Park is one of the most popular with film makers and others seeking scenic backgrounds for cinema and TV productions. For the last two years regular excursions have operated to here from Belfast and Dublin for fans of the ‘Game of Thrones’ television series.

**Drumkeeragh:** No formal recreational facilities exist here but the forest is used regularly by those who enjoy fresh air exercise in a remote area.

**Bohill:** Although public recreation is limited to foot access only along forest roads, the three woodland blocks are nonetheless important to the local Drumaness and Seaforde community.

**Donard:** A well known walking route, the Glen River Trail, was asserted in the mid 80’s by Down District Council as a public access path. This remains one of the most used routes to and from the higher Mourne Mountains. More recently a secondary route called The Granite Trail was developed by the Council on privately owned land. This trail passes straight up and down through the forest and was formerly used as a bogie line for transporting granite stone downhill to Newcastle harbour.

**Annalong:** Public access to most of this forest is subject to the Recreation and Access policy developed by Northern Ireland Water as our forest is planted on lands within a former water catchment area – see <http://www.niwater.com/great-days-out/>

**Mourne:** Several inter-linked forest roads offer pedestrian visitors here a chance to access all areas of the woodland. Permission may be granted from the adjacent privately owned estate to access their lands, offering visitors an opportunity to create their own circular walking routes linking the forest with the South Down coastal road.

**Rostrevor:** Purpose made cycling trails were opened here in 2012 by Newry & Mourne District Council as part of an outdoor access project jointly developed with Down District Council. Walking trails are also now managed by the Council, including the familiar Cloughmore Stone trail and the newly created Narnia Trail. The upper forest car park and scenic drive remains in Forest Service management and is well used by visitors seeking to have panoramic views across Carlingford Lough. A small caravan site operates here as part of our 'Touring in the Trees' network. There is also a larger long stay site for caravans and tents owned by Forest Service and this has been operated by the Council since 1982.

**Narrow Water:** The woodland here is leased from a private estate and there is no right of statutory access for pedestrians, though walking on forest roads is permitted. Organised recreation activities, such as mountain biking events, may be agreed with the estate owner.

### **Further opportunities for development of recreational facilities**

The context for further recreational development within our forests is detailed within "*A Strategy to Develop the Recreational and Social Use of Our Forests*" published in 2009. This provides the framework for working in partnership with other organisations to realise the full recreation / tourism potential that our forests offer.

In November 2012 the NI Executive launched the Economy and Jobs Initiative in support of the local labour market and to boost employment in the construction sector. Forest Service was successful in securing £4,000,000 under the theme 'Supporting infrastructural Investment'. This money, dubbed the 'Forestry Fund', was targeted at supporting recreational infrastructure in forest sites at a strategic level within Northern Ireland. To achieve this, all local Councils and The National Trust were invited to present their thoughts and aspirations on how forest recreational infrastructure in their area could be improved. The responses received formed the basis for further consultations with the proposers and the then Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Through this process we were able to prioritise where investing this money would have greatest impact.

Many proposals from councils were not progressed at this stage due to limited funding. These will be revisited as and when future funding opportunities arise.

A number of outdoor recreation providers also expressed interest in using our forests for different and wide ranging commercial activities. Forest Service has a consistent approach to developing operating partnerships of providing a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities. The key principles within which any working arrangements would be developed are;

- The operating partners having the capacity to undertake management, maintenance and operational arrangements and assume responsibility for all associated costs for the operation proposed.
- The operating partners undertaking to manage the interface of the operation and other forestry and recreational activity in the respective forests.
- The operating partners assuming responsibility for Health & Safety and public liability issues associated with the operation.

- The operating partners respecting the fact that the forests will continue to be working forests and undertaking to manage any contingency arrangements arising from both the planned forestry activity and unplanned events, e.g. storm damage to plantations.

We welcome proposals demonstrating sustainability in a forest environment and these will be accommodated through Licences, Leases or other legal arrangements.

### 3. Forest Management

Forest Service generates some £8 million annually from the sale of timber grown in our forests. Sustainable timber production is vital for the continued health of our timber industry which is expected to generate over 100 million pounds of added value to the NI economy annually. In addition Forest Service generates income from the sale of other forest products such as large Christmas trees and foliage, lease of agricultural land retained for biodiversity and recreational activities such as car rallying, horse riding, coarse shooting, caravanning/camping, forest park charges and other commercial events. All these incomes help to offset the overall cost of maintaining public forests.

We recognise that there are further opportunities to commercialise within the forest environment and we wish to explore these opportunities where they do not conflict with our core remit to provide sustainable forests.

In this section we will look at the major forest operations that we need to undertake over the next five years to protect the forest resource and to ensure a sustainable supply of timber as well as consider what other opportunities exist for commercial expansion.

#### Timber production

County Down forests play a significant role in providing timber for the UK and Irish timber industries. Over 140,000 tonnes have been sustainably harvested from these forests in the last ten years realising an income in excess of £2.5 million.

Many forest conifer plantations in this planning area were originally planted in the 1940's and 1950's and reached maturity over the last twenty years.



Our growth rates for our predominant species, Sitka spruce, are among the highest in the world and this will continue to be our primary productive species in Co Down, although the percentage will be around 23% which is considerably lower than other Planning areas within Forest Service. Much of the Sitka spruce plantations are on second rotation at this stage and we propose to clear fell

these crops when mature and programme this through long term harvesting plans.

With many Co. Down forests being on drier stable soils there is the ability to grow a wide range of tree species for period well beyond economic maturity or Maximum Mean Annual Increment (MMAI). Many of our forests in Co. Down are at this stage



but the benefits of retaining these crops include providing structural and ecological diversity as well as aesthetic quality in terms of landscape.

In 2015 we will review our short, medium and long term felling plans for all our forests in Co. Down and expect our timber volume, as a result of clear felling, to decrease over the next five to seven years. However, we expect an increase in the level of thinning operations over this period.

During this review period we will amend the existing felling plans to optimise timber yield from our forests while, at the same time, incorporating the needs of others in use of the forests. These objectives will be fulfilled by:

- Deferring more felling past MMAI provided that we are satisfied that crop stability will not be compromised.
- Reviewing felling plans in forests that have been or may be affected by *P Ramorum*.
- Presenting our felling proposals for focused and open consultation.

## Reforestation



Most clear felled areas will be replanted after harvesting. We also regenerate areas using natural regeneration using both conifers and broadleaves depending on our objectives as set out in the Forest Design Plans.

In some instances we will not restock areas in order to create open habitats, water or wind buffer zones and this will align with our forest design plans.

## Fertiliser application

No fertilisers were applied during the last planning period and we do not anticipate that fertiliser will be required in these forests over the next five years. Any decision on fertiliser application will be based on foliar analysis of the crop.

## Fire prevention

There have been no significant forest fires in Down since May 2011 when we witnessed some of the worst wild fires in recent memory. In that year Forest Service Annual Report and Accounts reported a loss of over 700 hectares of planted land

with an associated timber valuation loss of £981,000. An additional 1096 hectares of unplanted land was also damaged at that time. South Down was particularly badly affected at this time.

Our forests are most susceptible to fire damage during the period, March to May, when grasses are still browned off and have not yet flushed. Young conifer plantations and open areas with Molina grasses or heather are particularly vulnerable.

Forest Service manages fire risks in our forests through an Emergency Fire Plan which was developed in co-operation with NI Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS). This plan is reviewed annually in liaison with NIFRS. The plan outlines protection measures which may be deployed depending on the perceived risk and value. Fire maps which identify areas of higher risk are reviewed annually and assist our staff and NIFRS when dealing with fire incidents.

Fire resilience is built into forest design through the creation of fire barriers such as broadleaved corridors, riparian zones and maintained forest roads which can be used to stand off approaching fires. Clear felling and replanting gives us the opportunity to improve these fire prevention measures. In some instances we will create fire traces where we strip off the surface vegetation. However this is usually a short term measure and is not as effective as permanent barriers.

### **Illegal activities and encroachments**



Illegal activities such as dumping of waste causes damage to crops, to the forest environment and are a drain on resources which we would like to commit to more positive forest developments.

Fly tipping including commercial, agricultural and domestic dumping continues to be a major problem. We will continue work with Local Authorities, NIEA, local communities and PSNI to help reduce the environmental and antisocial impacts of fly tipping that have cost Forest Service

over £80,000 in the last three years in this area. We have taken action to improve the security of our forests in the recent past and we will continue to work with our neighbours to secure forest areas.

Forest Service will protect the public value of the forest estate by taking appropriate actions to deal with encroachments. We will lease some forest and non-forest areas where this meets Forest Service objectives and in these instances we will seek best value through open market tendering or by valuation arranged by Land and Property Services.

## ***Deer management***



There are herds of wild Fallow and Red deer in some of our Down forests. The management of wild deer populations within the area remains important to the welfare of the deer, maintenance of habitat biodiversity and reduction of risk of road traffic accidents. If deer populations are not controlled they can cause significant damage to tree crops and cause problems with road traffic. We have set annual deer cull targets for forests where we have identified potential deer management issues. These include Clandeboye, Bohill, Drumkeeragh, Tollymore and Donard forests.

## **4. Estate Management**

County Down forests form part of East Forest Region and technical staff along with administrative support are based at Castlewellan Forest Office, Castlewellan, Co Down, BT31 9BU

We have a number of buildings which are no longer required for operational forestry purposes and during this review process we will consider how we should dispose of these while ensuring that their public value is realised.

### ***Commercial developments***

It is Government policy, and a key aim of the forestry strategy, to obtain better value from the public forest estate. Forest Service will explore the potential for increasing the commercial opportunities within the forest estate, and to develop appropriate arrangements for unlocking the extra revenue streams identified. Possible enterprises could include the development of eco-tourist facilities within forests. Any development proposal would obviously have to meet all statutory requirements and would be bound by normal planning restrictions to ensure its sustainability within a forest environment.

## **5. Linkage with wider plans, (internal and external)**

When we are developing our plans we must ensure that they are compatible with wider forestry and government objectives.

***Internal plans*** include our obligations and objectives to protect and enhance the environment; many of our forests have large tracts of designated environmentally sensitive sites and some types of recreational activity would be incompatible.

We are also committed to providing commercial timber and conifer plantations which are becoming unstable or are programmed for clear fell over the next few years. These would not be suitable for the development of facilities such as cycle trails or fixed orienteering courses at this time.

Our obligations to other forest users such as people with turbary rights or holders of shooting rights may also limit the potential for some developments which may conflict with their rights.

**External plans** include our commitments to other government agencies and organisations. We have already developed agreements with Newry Mourne and Down District Council on the provision of services in their area and are liaising with Belfast City Council, Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council and The National Trust so that we can work together in a more focused way.

We are also in discussion with recreational umbrella groups so that we can set down procedures for the co-ordinated development of local projects. New development proposals would have to be considered within an agreed framework.

## 6. Recording and Monitoring plans

In order to ensure that our management actions and forest activities deliver against our long and medium term objectives and directions we monitor economic, environmental and social aspects over time. We aim to ensure that the frequency of monitoring and degree of recording is commensurate with the risks and benefits associated with monitoring activity.

Forest Service continually monitors the status and condition of woodlands through normal supervision visits to forests. In addition we input to and retain information on our Geographical Information System (FSGIS) and this is used to report on forest composition and status and to assess our performance against core objectives. At each planning review relevant information is tabulated and presented in the completed Forest Plan.

Achievement of objectives and assessment against management directions is reviewed in detail and formally reported on at the planning review. We will carry out more frequent monitoring when we require the information to inform management decisions between reviews.

## 7. Consultation arrangements

We have now prepared our outline proposals for the delivery of recreational and social delivery as well as environmental protection and enhancement and commercial forest operations. We intend to present these proposals to a wide range of stakeholders and this will be done in number of ways.

**Focused consultation:** We have identified a number of organisations who are likely to be affected by our future plans or who have their own plans which may be impacted by our proposals. We intend to consult directly with these groups so that we can ensure that our plans are compatible and meet our shared objectives.

**Strategic consultation:** We believe that working in partnerships with others is critical to the success of our Recreation and Social Use Strategy as well as delivering on our environmental protection and enhancement objectives and we see these partners including representatives from public bodies, non-government organisations, recreational activity providers and community groups. To develop strategic plans it is important that we take the opportunity to meet collectively as our interests are generally intertwining. We propose to invite a range of representatives to a focused planning consultation meeting in November 2015 where we will present our proposals and invite comment and the opportunity for written reply as well as inviting further focused meetings. Attendees have found these strategic meetings useful as it gives them the opportunity to see other's views and helps them to better inform their own.

In drawing up the list of invitees we will consider how we can expand the range of stakeholders who attend these meetings to include groups who may not normally visit our forests. We are aware that some groups and especially young people can be difficult to reach and we propose to seek their views through focused group meetings and invitation to the strategic consultation meeting. We will also seek representation from other groups such as Disability Action and Age Concern.

**Public consultation:** We have found it difficult in the past to involve local people in our planning process. In order to rectify this we will advertise open days where we can meet the public directly and discuss our proposals. We will record the outcomes of these consultations and they will help inform our final plans. We intend to hold consultation meetings in November 2015

In October 2015 we will be placing forest planning information on the Forest Service web-site:

<http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/forestry/forest-planning/forest-planning-reviews.htm>

Current forest plans can be viewed at:

<http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/forestry/forest-planning/forest-plans.htm>

## 8. Contact Details

If you wish to comment on any issues raised in this Planning Review or, if you require more information please contact our Forest Office at the address below. If a technical forester is not available to deal with your query we will get back to you as soon as possible.

Address	Forest Office Castlewellan Forest Office Castlewellan Forest Park Castlewellan Co. Down BT31 9BU
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