

Northern Ireland Native Woodland Group

Meeting held at Belvoir Park Forest on Tuesday 16 December 2008

Present:

Stuart Morwood (Chairman)	Forest Service
Godfrey McRoberts	Countryside Management
Richard Weyl	NI Environment Agency
Melina McMullan	NI Environment Agency
Brian Poots	Woodland Trust
Maurice Turley	National Trust
Hilary Kirkpatrick	Ulster Wildlife Trust
Mansil Miller	Planning Service
Orla Maguire	Belfast City Council
Mark Edgar	LBAP Forum
Declan Little	Woodlands of Ireland
Robert Sheaman	Conservation Volunteers
John Griffin (Secretary)	Forest Service

Apologies

Alan Cooper, (University of Ulster), Pat Cregg (Woodland Trust), Phil Davidson (National Trust), John Cross (National Parks & Wildlife Service), Christine Butler (DARD Countryside Management Branch), Neville McKee (Ulster Native Trees), Richard Schable (Forest Service).

Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

Matters arising

Paper on impacts of the single farm payment scheme on woodland expansion to be circulated to the group. **Action - Richard Weyl**

Habitat descriptor sheets and data recording sheets used in the NI Countryside Survey have not been circulated to the Group. **Action - Richard Weyl to liaise with Alan Cooper.**

A list of priority woodlands classed as Sites of Local Nature Conservation Importance (SLNCIs) to be forwarded to the Group. **Action - Melina McMullan.**

Richard Weyl clarified the different approaches taken to *Tilio Acerion* woodland in the UK and the south of Ireland. This woodland type occurs on base-rich soils in moist shady conditions associated with ravines or rocky slopes. In the UK and Ireland the dominant tree species are ash and Wych elm although the latter has largely died out through Dutch elm disease. However the diagnostic European tree species occurring in this habitat, sycamore and lime, are absent from woods in Ireland which otherwise fit this woodland type. The UK has taken the view that these woods conform to *Tilio Acerion* woodland but the authorities in the south of Ireland consider that they do not meet the criteria.

No comments were received on the Forest Service (FS) Ancient Woodland Inventory (AWI) woodland management strategy from group members since the last NINWG meeting on 5 June 2008, although the Woodland Trust had previously provided feedback to FS.

It was noted that there is no member within the Group representing all District Councils – It was agreed that Lindsay Matthews (Biodiversity Officer with Newtownabbey Borough Council) and member of the NI Local Government Association should be invited to the next meeting. **Action - Melina McMullan.**

Reporting on UK Priority Woodlands

Richard Weyl provided an overview of monitoring and reporting on priority woodland habitats in NI which is made every three years to the NI Biodiversity Group and at a UK level through the Biodiversity Reporting System (BARS). The last reporting round was in 2005. Progress towards HAP targets set in 2006 has been reported using data from the NI Countryside Survey (NICS) of 2007, ASSI condition monitoring, DARD agri-environment schemes, Ancient Woodland Inventory and Forest Service and Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAP) data. The NICS indicates a substantial increase in the area of broadleaved, mixed and yew woodland arising mainly from the creation of New Native Woodland (NNW) as well as the restoration of Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites (PAWS). Although precise areas of each woodland Habitat Action Plan (HAP) type are not known, it is considered that there is sufficient data to indicate that the extent of oak, mixed ash and wet woodland is increasing. Work is still required to determine the extent of parkland in NI before trends can be accurately assessed. Generally the condition of woodland ASSIs is unfavourable with a small number classed as unfavourable recovering. Data on the condition of undesignated priority woodland is very limited.

Update on native woodland expansion and PAWS

John Griffin provided an update of areas of New Native Woodland (NNW) created by Forest Service and other areas which have been supported by forestry grants. He demonstrated the predicted development of NNW within Forest Service forests taking one Forest Management Unit as an example. Areas awaiting natural regeneration are expected to take at least five years to meet NNW criteria in relation to stocking. All areas are periodically monitored to identify changes in land use which are then recorded on the Forest Service Geographical Information System (FSGIS) database. A continued decrease in grant applications largely due to a land based grant scheme, market uncertainties and high land prices have resulted in a decline in the area of NNW within the private sector. This situation is under review against the strategic objective of doubling the forest area in Northern Ireland by 2050.

Within agri-environmental schemes, approximately 4,000ha is classified as mixed ash, oak and wet woodland. However, this total also includes woodlands below the 0.5ha threshold, which would exclude many areas from contributing to HAP targets.

Operations to restore PAWS to native woodlands has commenced in 10 sites under the PAWS Restoration Strategy 2001 covering an area of almost 200ha. Each of these areas has a management plan in place. The Forest Service (FS) AWI Woodland Management Strategy now provides the basis for PAWS restoration work within Forest Service forests. John Griffin stated that in practice, areas of AWI woodlands are inspected for remnant features. This now forms an integral part of an internal planning process which applies to all forests managed by FS. Two examples in east Tyrone were provided to demonstrate how the strategy is implemented on the ground.

The Chairman undertook to inform Woodland Trust well in advance of those FMUs which would be subject to upcoming planning reviews.

Review and prioritisation of the Work Programme 2006 – 2009

The Work Programme summarises the work carried out between 2006 – 2009 to meet key HAP actions. Melina McMullan thanked Group members for their contributions. An updated version was sent to all Group members on 15 December 2008 and incorporated all the comments received. It was agreed that after minor adjustments, a copy would be sent to Bob Brown of the NI Biodiversity Group.

Attempts had also been made prior to the meeting to identify any outstanding actions from the current programme and to incorporate them into the new work programme for 2009 – 2012. A simplified version was produced for the meeting – Key Tasks 2009-2012. The Group discussed the proposals at length and lead partners were assigned to the key actions and the main points are summarised below:

- The Chairman stated that it was important that all organisations make a conscious effort to improve designated and non-designated woodland sites which are currently in poor condition.
- It was agreed that a focus must be given to progressing issues relating to parkland.
- Placing as much data on GIS as possible will facilitate reporting and reduce the risk of duplication

Action

Melina McMullan to -

- make amendments to the Work Programme 2006 – 2009 and to forward to the NIBG at the end of January 2009.
- revise the document on Key Tasks 2009-2012 to reflect Group discussions and to circulate to Group members for comment.
- arrange a workshop on 5th May 2009 to progress condition assessment of woodlands which are not designated.

All members to

- review the document “Progress on NINWG Work Programme 2006 – 2009” and forward any additional comments to Melina McMullan by 16 January 2009.
- examine the document on Key Tasks 2009-2012 and to forward any additions or comments to Melina McMullan by 28th February 2009.

Parkland and Wood Pasture

The Group was informed of a recent meeting on Parkland and Wood Pasture at which Dr Keith Alexander presented the findings of the NI wood pasture and parkland scoping study. Minutes were forwarded to all attendees by Georgina Thurgate and it was agreed that the following action points should be brought meeting –

- A leaflet to be produced to promote the cultural history, landscape and biodiversity of parkland and wood pasture. This leaflet should be aimed at the general public.

Action - National Trust to consider taking the lead

- A TV series exploring the cultural, landscape and biodiversity aspects of parkland and wood pasture should be considered by the NINWG.

The Group considered that it was too soon to promote the value of parkland in NI through a TV series – it would be considered more fully when work on parkland had been undertaken.

- An inventory of the parkland and wood pasture resource should be developed using existing information such as aerial photographs, the AWI and the Register of Parks, Gardens and Demesnes.

Action: NIEA Conservation Science to lead.

- Further surveys of the quality of the parkland resource should be carried out using a sample based approach. This will enable ASSI selection criteria to be developed for parkland.

Action: NIEA Conservation Science to lead.

- The NI parkland HAP description should be rewritten in light of new information from the scoping study and the AWI.

Action: NIEA Biodiversity Unit.

- A guidance note on the management of parkland and wood pasture should be produced to inform landowners/managers of best practice. This should be aspirational, not prescriptive and follow the six priorities outlined in Keith's report

Action: DARD CMB to consider taking the lead and to review current NICMS guidance in light of the scoping study.

- A meeting to discuss deadwood management on parkland ASSIs should be organised between NIEA Natural Heritage, NIEA Built Heritage, DARD CMB and National Trust.

Action: NIEA Conservation Designations & Protection to organise meeting.

Woodland cover estimate for Northern Ireland

Brian Poots asked the Group to agree on one figure for the percentage of woodland cover in Northern Ireland. He stated that recently a figure of 6.4% had been quoted by the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. In replying, Stuart Morwood stated that accurate data was available for the 60,000 ha of woodland managed by Forest Service. The area of non Forest Service woodland is based on a 1975 woodland inventory which is periodically updated to take account of new areas of woodland created through forestry grant schemes. Forest Service intends to review relevant GIS datasets to obtain a more accurate estimate. This is likely to include an analysis of the 2007 NI Countryside Survey and the associated land cover map which is due to be

completed in 2009/10. This work will be considered for inclusion in the Forest Service Business Plan.

Recreation and social use strategy

Stuart Morwood informed the Group that the draft strategy is now out to consultation, details are available on the FS website. The closing date for responses is 6 February 2009.

Revision of the 1953 Forestry Act

Stuart Morwood stated that the 1953 Forestry Act is now under revision. The bill is progressing well and instructions are being delivered to the Office of the Legislative Counsel. It is hoped that a full draft of the bill will be cleared with the Executive and the Agricultural Committee by June 2009. The bill is likely to become operative by March 2010.

In response to a query on the upcoming legislation, Stuart stated that it was likely that felling regulation would apply to woodland areas greater or equal to 0.2ha and applicants will be required to submit a felling and regeneration plan.

Member's updates

Woodland Trust –

Plan to restore 25ha in the Faughan area in Co Londonderry

Seeking funding for a 3 year contract for a PAWS restoration officer to raise awareness of PAWS to private landowners whilst encouraging them to restore sites

Conservation volunteers –

Demand for local provenances from the CVNI nursery is very low. This is attributed to higher prices compared to other stock.

Woodlands of Ireland –

National survey of native woodland begun in 2003 in the south of Ireland is now complete.

An information note on native riparian woodlands has been published as part of a suite of guidance notes relating to the management of native woodlands.

The Native Woodland Scheme will reopen in 2009, resulting from funding obtained from Forest Service (Dublin).

Belfast City Council

The public were invited to a native tree planting event at Belvoir Park Forest last autumn. It was organised by the Forest of Belfast/ Belfast City Council and supported by Breathing Places.

National Trust

In light of the recent talk given by Dr Keith Alexander, National Trust is keen to progress management of the parkland at Crom.

AOB

Godfrey McRoberts asked whether the NI Red Squirrel Forum is still in existence and if so when the next meeting was likely to be.

Action

Stuart Morwood to inform Godfrey of the position.

Date of next meeting

Monday 15 June 2009 (to include a field outing)