

**MINUTES OF THE CUSTOMER REPRESENTATIVES GROUP
MEETING
SILVAN HOUSE, EDINBURGH –10 June 2016**

Attendees: Brendan Callaghan FCS (Chair), Douglas Wright FCS, Keith Wishart FCS, James Nott FCS, Keir Smith FCS, Tom Davies FCS, Marius Sleenwenhoek FCS, Ian Davidson SGRPID, Anne Gray Scottish Land and Estates, Peter Jones SRUC, Jamie Farquhar Confor, Jill Aitken LINK, Mark Hamilton Social Forestry, Sian Williams LINK

Apologies: Jim Dewar FCS, Jim Colchester Confor, Gordon Gray Stephens Community Woodland Association, James Hepburne-Scott RSFS, Rodney Shearer Confor (Nursery Group), Jonathan Hall NFUS, Robert Patton Highland Council

1. Introduction & Minutes from 4th February 2016

Brendan welcomed everyone to the meeting. Minutes were accepted as being an accurate account of the meeting. Robert Patton, Highland Council has now retired and FCS will seek another Local Authority representative.

Action June 2016/1: FCS to seek a Local Authority representative to replace Robert Patton, who has now retired.

2. Matters Arising:

| Action Date | Action | Update or Action agreed at June 2016 Meeting |
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| Aug 2014 /1 | Explore if there has been any research on mapping of potential abandoned sheep land against land designated as 'preferred' in regional F&W strategies. | FCS has not lost sight of this. Update on Sheep and Trees initiative with Sheep Association to be given as part of June Meeting agenda |
| Sept 2015/2 | Customers to consider carrying out capital works in 2015 to maximise use of the grant budget. In the event that work was not carried out, FCS will guarantee a claim year variation to 2016. | A similar situation is developing this year with currently uncommitted budget in 2016. Applicants with a 2017 claim year are encouraged to bring forward work into 2016. |
| Feb/1 | FCS will contact NFUS to request a regular representative | This was followed up with no response from NFUS and is likely due to current priorities within CAP. Action closed. |
| Feb 4/2 | FCS agreed to consider a planning grant mechanism as part of a suite of measure to stimulate woodland creation | FCS is exploring the potential of loans with SG to assist with upfront costs. If schemes do not go ahead due to factors external to an applicant then these would not be repayable. |
| Feb 5/1 | CRG members to note that annual recurrent payments will be delayed until after May/June 2016 | Payments of forestry cases have now started with delays due to the prioritisation of CAP Pillar 1 payments. This action is now closed. |
| Feb 5/2 | FCS agreed to consider the frequency of clearing rounds in order to approve cases more | FCS intends to continue with regular monthly clearing rounds. |

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| | quickly and relieve the high stock situation in tree nurseries | |
| Feb 5/3 | FCS will update the clearing round budget table on the web and alert applicants of the change to the score threshold for claim year 2016 for WIG Restructuring Regeneration and WIG Habitats & Species Options | This was done and action is now closed. |
| Feb 6/1 | Mark Hamilton to provide feedback to Brendan on proposals to improve support for mixed conifer/broadleaved woodland | FCS accepted that improvements could be made. Conifer Options will be updated to allow broadleaves as part of the conifer component. [Guidance updated on 10 th June] |

2. Ex Post Evaluation of SRDP 2007-2013

Douglas briefed the CRG of an evaluation that is underway by SG on the last programme using two contractors (EKOS and Rural Development Company). A number of small workshops will be held and CRG members will be invited to attend the Axis 2 and Axis 3 events, which were the most relevant Axis for forestry under the last programme.

3. SRDP 2014-2020 Implementation

3.1 Clearing Rounds and Budget - FCS shared the latest information of approved cases from the 16th May Clearing Round. There have been 883 applications **received** with a total value of £34.96 million. This includes 251 applications for woodland creation covering 5675 ha.

A total of 534 applications have been **approved** with a total value of £20.27 million. This includes 147 applications for woodland creation covering 3471 ha with conifer/diverse conifer options representing 66%.

Average time to process woodland creation applications from submission to clearing rounds is 15 weeks.

3.2 SAF 2015 RP ARG Payments - Payments for 2015 SAF Rural Priorities forestry annual recurrent grants started to be paid manually last week. Historically this has started in March. Forestry Commission Scotland accepted that this was not acceptable although delays were due to the prioritisation of CAP Pillar 1 payments to avoid disallowance by EC for not making stipulated EC payment deadlines.

FCS expects a much improved timescale on capital claims compared to Rural Priorities and are aiming at 6 week turnaround.

Whilst it is not yet possible to monitor charter times as there is not a full IT system, it was agreed that an FGS Charter should be drafted.

Action 3/1: FCS to prepare a draft FGS Charter for processing applications and claims for discussion with CRG

3.2 Mixed Woodlands - At the end of the February meeting, Mark Hamilton raised the issue of support for mixed conifer/broadleaved woodland within the new FGS. Whilst it was not possible to agree all of Mark's suggestions, FCS has accepted that improvements could be made

to encourage more mixed woodlands and the conifer and diverse conifer options will be amended to allow broadleaves as part of the 2nd conifer element.

3.3 FGS Queries

Jill Aitken raised a number of queries on the processing of FGS applications including length of time to get applications through the system and lack of support and advice from Woodland Officers in particular at Perth. The transition to the new FGS has been an extremely challenging time for FCS staff in having to deal with an incomplete IT system which has meant operating a parallel case management system to track and monitor cases. However, FCS was not aware of any serious delays with cases and was prepared to look at specific cases. It was agreed that Jill should speak directly with Tom Davies, Senior Operations Manager.

Action 3/2: Jill to liaise with Tom Davies at Perth on processing issues with specific FGS cases

5. Forestry Consultation Action Plan – Public Register

Marius Sleeuwenhoek from FCS provided an overview of main action from the recent review of the Forestry Consultation Procedures which is the upgrading of the public register. The aim is to bring the public register up to the same level as the e-consultation procedures operated by Planning Authorities. This is a major project that will improve transparency and efficiency of viewing details of forestry applications. Three options are currently being considered – purchase of a new Public Register, develop a bespoke Public Register or develop a hybrid solution with the current case management system. FCS uses the latter for felling licences. Decisions on the preferred options will be taken shortly with at least 12 months before the new Public Register is in place.

6. UKFS

6.1 Breaches Guidance - Brendan provided the background on the rationale and drivers to having a process to monitor the compliance of UKFS and to deal with occasions where breaches to UKFS take place. SEPA welcomed the guidance in an effort to head off problems especially in relation to diffuse pollution. CRG was supportive of having a defined process although Confor had concerns. A register can be helpful to provide evidence of a track record and could be used to apply a lighter touch to operators with a satisfactory record. The Guidance was not signed off by the CRG and it was agreed to await feedback from Confor.

Action 6/1: Confor to send comments to FCS by 12 August

6.2 Clarification of UKFS Interpretation and Forest Plans – FCS presented a paper that aims to give additional guidance and clarification on the issues of adjacency and species diversity in relation to UKFS and Forest Plans. Problems generally arise where plans are too ambitious. There were no substantial comments on the adjacency issue and it was considered that greater flexibility on timing of restocking was a pragmatic approach.

On species where this is constrained by site conditions then there may be scope to have more than 75% of one species to make best use of the site

conversely where site conditions are better FCS would expect a wider selection of species. Greater amounts of open ground would only be permitted where this delivers significant environmental gain. Technical basis for species selection would be based on the Ecological Site Classification (ESC).

Mark Hamilton suggested that workshops on the use of ESC would be helpful.

Action: CRG members to send comments to FCS by 12 August

7. Sheep and Trees Initiative

FCS is currently working up a proposal together with Sheep Association entitled Sheep and Trees Initiative that aims to create productive woodland on upland sheep farms to provide an economic asset with benefits to farm business of shelter and access. Woodland Creation grants would be combined with access roads through infrastructure option. The aim is to run a series of workshop events on farms during 2016.

AOB

- Forest Plans – FCS will run 4 workshops for customers together with ICF and Confor during September to launch the new Forest Plan Guidance.
- A consultation on an EC directive to implement changes to EIA (forestry) regulations to be launched in July.