



## Guidance to Forest Managers preparing Forest Plans within the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC/SPA.

Some of the SSSIs which comprise the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Natura sites are in unfavourable condition. Recent [research](#) has recognised that conifer plantations and specifically their edges are, in places, deemed to be having a detrimental effect both on blanket bog (SAC) and some breeding waders (SPA). When preparing forest plans or felling licences it is necessary to address these edge effects.

### Policy context

The [Peatlands of Caithness & Sutherland Management Strategy](#) (2005) sets out [page 29] “there will be cases where replanting of forestry will not be required by FCS and where restoration to bog or wet heath will be appropriate. [...] The highest priority cases will be those areas of forestry which are affecting the interests on Natura sites.”

The [Forests and Peatland Habitat Guidance](#) (2000) sets out forestry policy and practice in relation to peatland habitats. The FCS [Supplementary Guidance](#) (2014) provides further advice on how to address the carbon impact of forestry on deep peat alongside other priorities and interests.

Where the edge effects are deemed to have a significant impact upon Natura sites the Scottish Government’s [policy on control of woodland removal](#) states that there will be no requirement to replant or provide for compensatory planting. In addition there may be further areas of deep peat within the forest suitable for restoration to UK BAP priority habitats, notably blanket bog. The FCS Supplementary Guidance (2014) sets out how to address the carbon impact of any restocking on deep peat.

Healthy peatlands provide a range of benefits including a rich biodiversity, good water quality and carbon storage. The [National Peatland Plan](#) (2015) highlights the importance of our peatland and what actions need to be taken secure their sustainable use, management and restoration.

### Management of forests adjacent to the Peatlands SAC

The Forests and Peatland Habitats Guideline Note sets out how to avoid undesirable ecological effects on blanket or raised bogs (mainly drying) from planting forests. This sets out a minimum buffer for planting of 100m where there are hydrological linkages to active bogs (usually defined by local topography). To avoid such drying effects and potential conifer regeneration a 100m buffer should be applied to replanting of existing woodlands adjacent to the Peatlands SAC.

### Management of forests adjacent to the Peatlands SPA

For edge effects on the Peatlands SPA topography, the presence of pool systems and degree of enclosure of the adjacent open ground are significant factors in the degree of these effects. The most sensitive forest edges for Golden Plover and Dunlin are where

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the adjacent habitat is flat and with pool systems. Here forest edges should be removed and not replanted for up to 800m from the edge of the SPA. New forest edges should be shaped to minimise enclosure effects on adjacent open ground i.e. be convex in profile.

The [sensitivity maps](#) show the degree of benefit likely to result to bog habitats and Dunlin and Golden Plover populations from removing forest edges adjacent to the Caithness and Sutherland Natura sites. The maps identify areas where removal of the forest edge will be likely to reduce pressure on sensitive habitats for Dunlin or Golden Plover and yield the most benefit. These are shown as orange and red on the maps. Outwith this mapped area surveys may be required to assess the quality of adjacent habitats, the presence/absence of breeding birds and to help judge likely degree of edge effects.

### **Deer Management**

For areas where woodland is to be removed to address adjacent designated open habitat sites, consideration should be given to the position of deer fences and the likely requirement to treat conifer regeneration. Moving fences may help to manage regeneration and reduce deer trampling effects on the designated sites.

### **Monitoring**

Further monitoring of areas where trees have already been removed will be undertaken by FCS and SNH and will inform the review of the decision tool and this guidance.

### **Financial Assistance**

Assistance with woodland removal is available through the Scottish Rural Development Programme including Woodland Improvement Grants, as part of the Forestry Grant Scheme. Where the operations are aimed at bringing features on adjacent designated sites into favourable condition then financial support of up to 100% of eligible actual costs is available.

A draft plan should be provided to FCS for consideration.

**Forestry Commission Scotland  
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