

Scottish Forestry - Priorities and Resourcing in Early 2021

Introduction

There has been a significant increase in Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) applications and interest in woodland creation in the last year.

- over 900 FGS applications worth in excess of £56 million have been submitted since April 2020, including for 13,000 hectares of new woodland.
- Scottish Forestry (SF) has approved applications at a record rate in the last 9 months, with over 10,000 hectares of FGS woodland creation contracts awarded.

This means we are now in a strong position regarding new planting approvals, with contracts in place for 113% of the 12,000 hectare target for 2020/21 and over 50% of the 13,500 hectares for the 2021/22 target.

We are also currently dealing with over 350 submitted FGS applications worth £31m, including 7,500 hectares of new planting.

These high volumes of work, together with Covid-19 working arrangements have put SF Conservancy and National Office teams under tremendous pressure, leading to delays with forestry application processing.

As a result of these continuing workload pressures and the introduction of Covid-19 restrictions in early 2021 it has become clear that we will not be able to deal with all forestry applications in line with our normal customer service standards.

We have carefully considered the options for prioritising SF work, particularly as we approach the peak period for claims and SAF processing, and we will be implementing some temporary arrangements to ensure we can focus on the most important and urgent areas of work.

We would ask that customers, when submitting applications, please try to resolve as many issues as possible in advance to help reduce the need for significant woodland officer input.

1. What are we doing?

We are temporarily pausing the processing of newly submitted FGS applications submitted in RP&S after 8 February 2021 for an initial period of 6 weeks, until 22 March 2021. Applicants will still be able to prepare and submit FGS applications in RP&S.

However SF will not be allocating newly submitted FGS cases to a case officer until after 22 March 2021.

2. Why are we doing this?

This action is needed to help address the increased work volumes which in combination with Covid-19 restrictions, have resulted in unmanageable workloads for many SF teams. We will be focusing our staff on the following priorities:

- processing FGS applications submitted prior to 9 February 2021 with the aim that we issue FGS contracts ahead of the Spring 2021 planting season window.
- to deal with the current backlog of felling permission applications and long term forest plans (LTFP). The processing of these felling consents is important in order to maintain the supply of timber to the industry.
- to ensure our staff are in a position to deal with the annual peak of claims processing. This year over £50m in FGS capital and FGS/Rural Priorities annually recurring grant claims are due to be submitted and approved for payment by the end of June 2021.

By prioritising submitted FGS applications we expect to make good progress towards committing the 2021/22 grants budget over the next few months.

3. Why has this situation arisen?

The growing interest in woodland creation has resulted in a 33% increase in the volume of woodland creation applications we are dealing with compared to 2019/20.

Our ability to administer the increased volume of forestry applications and claims is currently restricted due to Covid-19 working arrangements and some staff vacancies.

By prioritising woodland creation in 2020 we have approved a record amount of new planting this year but we now need to take further action so that workloads are sustainable and delays in other areas are managed.

4. What this means in practice

New applications submitted after 8 February 2021 will not be progressed by SF until 22 March 2021.

We will continue to progress and approve submitted FGS applications and early stage pre-application woodland creation projects.

Discussions on new pre-application woodland creation enquiries will continue subject to staff availability.

We will still make some site visits for existing applications, although focussing on our backlog of case assessments and claims processing will reduce the need for field-based staff to visit new sites, helping us to comply with the Covid-19 “stay at home” guidance.

Given the uncertainties about how the overall Covid-19 situation will progress, and the impact this may have on staff, we will review these arrangements in four weeks and will provide a further update to customers at that time.

5. What else are we doing to resolve these work pressures?

During January and February we will be welcoming a number of new operational staff in to SF. These include three new Woodland Creation Technical Officers to support conservancies on complex cases. These additions will gradually increase our capacity over the coming months and help us to deal with the increasing levels of woodland creation and forestry activity we are experiencing.

We are also investing in the development of IT systems to provide improved support for staff dealing with FGS claims and woodland creation pre-application processes. These will deliver significant benefits and efficiencies for staff and managers as they are delivered during 2021.

6. In Summary:

The key points for customers are:

- We will continue to process FGS applications that have already been made and we may be in contact with you to discuss the detail of these cases.
- You can continue to submit applications for felling permissions and LTFPs and we will continue to deal with these.
- You can still carry out due diligence on woodland creation projects you are working on. Please keep in contact with us and we will advise if we can assist although our ability to visit sites will depend on the Scottish Government Covid-19 restrictions.
- You can still submit new FGS applications via RP&S. However we will work through these from 22 March.

- We will use the next six weeks to work through our backlog and we would appreciate it if you could respond to any queries we raise to help us get back on track for the peak of claims work during the months of April through June 2021.

Please contact [Scottish Forestry's national office delivery team](#) if you have any queries about the content of this note.

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