



**England**

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*Chair*

## Facing Up To Change

The Public Forest Estate (PFE) in Great Britain is managed by the Forestry Commission (FC), a non-ministerial government department that is funded by various income streams. The Exchequer provides funds for the provision of central services but as a devolved function, funding is also received through the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and in the case of England, DEFRA. As a result, the FC operates as a cross border function, and is responsible to those Ministers responsible for forestry in the respective countries.

Recently the Minister responsible for forestry in Scotland tried, unsuccessfully, to bring about a deliberate form of privatisation by offering large investment companies the opportunity to lease 25% of the Public Forest Estate in Scotland for a period of 75 years. The Forestry Commission Trade Unions (FCTU) launched a major campaign in Scotland gathering support from Politicians, the timber processing industry and environmental groups. When the public became aware of the Minister's proposal, they rallied their support by signing petitions, writing to their local representatives and the press. Because of the overwhelming public pressure, the proposal was removed from the Climate Change Bill (Scotland) 2009.

The Forestry Commission manages over 250,000 hectares of land in England, providing a unique national asset offering a myriad of benefits. Since 1997, the Forestry Commission has successfully managed a programme of acquiring new, and rationalising existing assets in order to protect and enhance the natural environment, provide economic opportunities and help improve the quality of people's lives.

***On the 24<sup>th</sup> November 2008, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made a statement regarding a study that was to be undertaken to examine the future long-term sustainable role of the Public Forest Estate in England.***

Through the 2007 Strategy for England's Trees Woods and Forests the Government has committed itself to developing a policy on restoring and expanding open habitats from woods and forests. The Secretary of State has asked the Forestry Commission to carry out a study of the future long-term sustainable role of the Public Forest Estate in England and to make recommendations.

## Next Steps

The intention is for the Forestry Commission to hold a series of meetings throughout the country in order to enable key stakeholders to voice any ideas and views that they have on meeting the aspirations of the study. Meetings are scheduled to take place between July and September 2009 and for the study to be compiled during October and November 2009. This will then be followed by an announcement by the Secretary of State in February 2010. Meanwhile, the Forestry Commission will be undertaking what they have termed as a Portfolio Analysis.

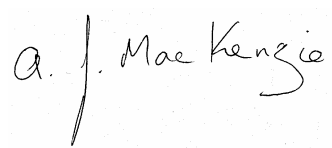
The process will score the performance of individual woodlands and forests against certain Social, Economic and Environmental criteria. The results will then be used to determine whether areas meet the public benefit level required. (This system was used in Scotland to identify areas, which could have been candidates for the leasing proposal.)

## What does this mean for Union members in England?

The FCTU has been assured that the overall number of staff will not be adversely affected, although locations may very well change. Members may find that their area is one of those that has been classified as one, which no longer provides sufficient public benefit and the Commission would therefore be looking at alternatives for it. What the alternatives might be, or how any changes are to be managed are not clear at this stage.

We will be actively engaged from the outset to ensure that all union members are protected and that the interests of staff are taken into account. We will make sure that members are kept up to date throughout and that outcomes are communicated as the process of change starts to develop.

The aim of this article is to alert members about the study in England and its possible implications. I urge everyone to keep themselves up to date on its progress and to contact your Union Representative about any concerns that you may have.



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