

Response to the imposition of the 2005 Pay Award

When each of the unions recommended to its members that they reject the 2005 pay offer from HR they did so in the belief that the offer is both unfair, and unnecessarily reduces the value of our pay scales and final pensions. They also made clear that if members were to reject the offer then they may need to be prepared to back this up with some form of industrial action. Union members across the Commission accepted this recommendation and voted to reject the offer by a ratio of four to one. Yet despite this clear statement of concern the Executive Board chose to ignore the views of members and to impose their offer without recourse to further discussion or negotiation. At the end of last week the joint unions Core Group met to consider the implications of this action.

Over the last twenty years staff in the Forestry Commission in common with those across industry and the public sector have had to face a bewildering range of changes and challenges, which in other organisations have often led to discourse and protest. I believe that it is to the enduring credit of all those involved that we in the Commission have always managed to find solutions to our issues, and that protest has only ever been directed toward external dogma such as the attempts to privatise the Commission or impose changes to our pension scheme. Consequently it is our view that the Executive Board's decision to impose a pay settlement without any opportunity for further negotiation is as reckless as it is disappointing. By its actions the Board has indicated not only that it has scant regard for either the views of staff or the negotiation process, but also that some key members of the board have betrayed the legacy of positive cultural change that was passed to them by their predecessors. As a consequence of the Board's decision the joint unions consider that we now have a formal dispute with the Forestry Commission.

Since the imposition of the offer just prior to Christmas we have received a huge amount of feedback that there is significant anger toward both the pay offer and also the board's decision to impose it despite the views expressed by union members. Consequently the unions believe that the concerns of staff cannot be ignored and that the decision of the Board must be challenged. Further, given the options laid out to members in the original ballots on the offer, now coupled with the imposition of the offer without any opportunity for further negotiation, the Core Group gave strong consideration to calling for an immediate ballot on industrial action. However we have always been, and remain of the view that industrial action should only be considered once every other option has been fully explored and exhausted; and despite the Board's apparent willingness to so easily move to administrative action we still believe that the responsible course of action for us is to exhaust all other options and to only consider industrial action as a very last resort (a final decision on this type of action would of course depend on a ballot of all union members).

Therefore despite the imposition of the offer it is our intention over the next few weeks to raise your concerns and seek support from the Board of Commissioners and Ministers. In addition we shall be mounting an internal campaign to enable all staff to register concerns over the Board's action. Although we sincerely hope that our continued efforts to find an amicable solution will be reciprocated, if positive feedback from the Commissioner's and Ministers is not forthcoming then some form of protest action cannot be ruled out. Further details of our plans will be circulated in the next few days.