

# Forest sale advisers may

**Ben Webster** Environment Editor

The independent panel appointed to advise the Government on the future of publicly owned forests could recommend that more woodland is bought by the State, according to the bishop leading the review.

In an interview with *The Times*, the Bishop of Liverpool, the Right Rev James Jones, said that the panel could decide to call for the expansion of the 640,000-acre public forest estate in England.

The bishop was appointed chairman of the panel in March after a public outcry had forced the Government to abandon its plan to privatise the entire estate. Bishop James said he was interpreting his remit broadly regardless of the Government's insistence that it still intended to sell 100,000 acres, or 15 per cent of the estate, by 2015.

"There are no holds barred as far as the panel is concerned. The letter I received from Caroline Spelman [the Environment Secretary] makes it very clear that there is a suspension of sales and they will wait until the panel has reported in full. The terms of reference allow us to advise on en-

# tell coalition to buy instead

larging the amount of woodland. We would have to decide how we did that, through the private sector or the public estate."

The Bishop said that the Government had failed to understand the public's deep attachment to woodland. "There is something almost spiritual in people's connection with forests," he said. "Clearly the [privatisation plans] hit a nerve with the public and they feel very passionate about it. I think they [the Government] now understand that.

"People are more conscious now that the environment is not a limit-

less larder that we can plunder with impunity. Trees have more than utilitarian function. There is a mystery in woods and trees that captures the public imagination."

The panel was initially asked to report in the autumn but the deadline has been extended until April after Bishop James said he needed more time to listen to public opinion and meet forest users. The panel will publish a progress report in November.

The Bishop will go to the Forest of Dean next month to meet the campaigners whose first rally turned into a nationwide revolt against the sell-

off. More than half a million people signed a petition demanding that woodlands remain publicly owned.

In a letter last month to Bishop James, Ms Spelman wrote: "All new sales have been suspended until we have considered the panel's recommendations ... We are not making any assumptions at the moment about the level of future sales."

Mary Creagh, the Shadow Environment Secretary, said it was ironic that the panel may recommend more public forests at a time when the Forestry Commission was already cutting 250 jobs in England.