

8 February 2011.

Rt. Hon. David Cameron, MP.  
10 Downing Street,  
London,  
SW1A 2AA.

Dear Prime Minister,

**THE FUTURE OF THE PUBLIC FOREST ESTATE IN ENGLAND.**

As the trade association that represents the technical and commercial interests of businesses that process British-grown timber in sawmills and other industrial wood processing plants, we write to bring to your attention our serious concern about a statement that you made during Prime Minister's Questions on 2 February, in connection with the Forestry Commission.

You are on record as stating that you believe that organisations such as the Woodland Trust and the National Trust "could do a better job than the Forestry Commission". We were astonished and dismayed that you should have made such a comment, which will, we are sure, have been grossly offensive to the very many professional and dedicated members of staff of the Forestry Commission, past and present, who have been responsible for managing this vital national resource, which has continued to deliver valuable economic, social and environmental benefits for society. It is most inappropriate to compare the Forestry Commission with two charitable and membership organisations, which have vastly different objectives to those of the Forestry Commission. Furthermore, your comment, which seems to us to be particularly ill-advised and perhaps made in the heat of the moment, was made at a time when Forestry Commission staff are facing very uncertain futures, in view of the news of at least 400 job losses, announced last week.

We believe that not only has the Forestry Commission been a force for good since its foundation in 1919, but also, the proposals described in the current public consultation on the future of the public forest estate in England, especially those relating to leasing the large commercial conifer forests, have the potential to cause irreparable damage to the wood processing sector in Great Britain. Serious disruption to well established wood supply chains, increased costs and adverse effects on the competitiveness and profitability of businesses in the sector are a very real likelihood..

We would also like to bring to your attention our concerns about another statement that you and your Government colleagues have made in relation to the Forestry Commission. You, and your Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, are on record as stating you believe that the Forestry Commission is in an anomalous position; in that it is both a significant grower of timber and a regulator of the market. Whilst the Forestry Commission is a large, but not a monopoly, supplier of wood to the wood processing sector, it is completely untrue and misleading to state that it regulates the market.

Repetition of this inaccurate statement misleads people and damages the credibility of the Government. Although the Forestry Commission has regulatory powers, these are very limited; they exist primarily in relation to the very important subject of plant health, (to protect our forests from pests and diseases), and also in relation to the granting of felling licences and to ensure the vitally important requirement for restocking. There is no regulatory role in respect of the market for timber.

In England, Wales and Scotland, home-grown timber is supplied to the wood processing industry not only by the Forestry Commission, but a very large number of private sector timber growers. The Forestry Commission has not and does not regulate this market.

We seek your personal assurance that you, your Ministerial colleagues and your respective officials do fully understand the limited regulatory role of the Forestry Commission in England and that you will no longer repeat misleading statements about its role in the market.

We look forward to hearing from you and would be happy to meet to discuss our concerns about this specific issue and indeed our broader concerns about the proposals for the future of the Forestry Commission in England, if that would be of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,

D.J. Sulman  
Executive Director.