Continuous Cover Forestry and The New Grant Schemes

The Grant Environment in Wales and CCF

The Better Woodlands for Wales grant scheme is now ending with the last grant claims in March 2016. A new suite of grants is being made available by Welsh Government under the Glastir title. The Glastir grant scheme is primarily an environmental scheme offering fairly generous capital grant payments towards forestry operations. Although three grant options are available, Glastir Woodland Management is the scheme of interest being aimed at existing woodland.

Glastir woodland grants have been available for a couple of years and under the previous CAP, entries to Glastir were made during timed windows where an expression of interest was submitted to Welsh Government. If selected a management plan or rather a grant plan was written. Operations beneficial to CCF were available, some of these consisted of cleaning, underplanting, first thinning of conifers where CCF management was proposed, thinning of broadleaves and infrastructure works. This certainly was very encouraging for CCF management systems and aimed to incentivise woodland owners to use CCF systems.

Some additional uptake of CCF management systems were perhaps encouraged inadvertently in PAWS areas where restocking would only be grant aided if broadleaves were planted. However CCF systems could be used to encourage natural regeneration of coniferous species, where this was considered more desirable by the woodland owner. This may not have been the intention of the scheme.

Since the new CAP however no windows to enter expressions of interest for Glastir Woodland Management have been opened by Welsh Government and there is no indication of when they may open again. With the current economic climate the Welsh Government is having to cut budgets and this will have an effect on the availability of Glastir funding.

Whilst knowledge of this grant scheme is positive, with generous capital grant aid towards expensive forest operations. Only the ‘possibility’ of a grant can be a hindrance when advising woodland owners. However current timber prices have been ensured a healthy income revenue and healthy investment in forest operations. How long these timber prices will continue to be healthy in the short term is unknown. The question is; is Glastir Woodland Management a good intention or positive tool for encouraging and supporting good forest management?

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Continuous Cover Forestry and the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme for England

In 2015 the government announced a new scheme to support land-based enterprises, including forestry, called the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS).

There are four main forestry objectives to this scheme:

1. Restore plantations on ancient woodland sites
2. Enhance priority habitats
3. Enhance priority species
4. Improve resilience to climate change through continuous cover forestry (CCF)

Although objective 4 looks very promising at first glance, it is limited to areas designated as within a ‘water quality catchment area for acidification’. The woodland will need to be managed to meet the UKFS Practice Guide titled ‘Managing forests in acid sensitive water catchments’.

A search on the Land Information Site (LIS) shows very few areas that fall into this category especially in the south and east of England. I could not find out what percentage of the total woodland area in England this would cover.

However if a woodland is lucky enough to fall into one of these designated areas applicants must

a. Implement silvicultural transformation
b. Use regeneration felling to encourage crown development or natural regeneration
c. Replant 1,100 trees per ha if native species haven’t started to regenerate naturally 2 years after the removal of conifers (this is for areas larger than 0.25ha)

Items b and c are also applicable in Objective 1; however in all options the requirement is to remove non-native species which will be predominantly timber producing species conifers, sycamore and sweet chestnut.

It should also be noted that there are no longer any regeneration grants for re-establishing woodland. So the expected outcome of this will be either continual thinning, to obviate the need to replant, accept and or encourage natural regeneration, much of which one will be expected to remove if non-native.

In larger woodlands where timber production is able to help pay for the establishment of the next generations of trees this may not be an issue. But on small woodland holdings, where grant support in the past has done a great deal to encourage proactive management, this is regarded as a retrograde step that will discourage owners to manage their woodlands.

It should be said that if one is successful in entering and being approved for a scheme (it is a point scoring system) there is support for several items that will help management under selection systems, such as deer control, high seats and fencing.
From the CCFG’s point of view this could be seen as an opportunity to increase membership from owners and managers keen to learn new skills. However as the scheme is only devised to encourage biodiversity (timber production is not mentioned anywhere), it is ridiculously complex to enter with very onerous requirements for very little money. The feedback seems to be that small woodland owners will not bother to enter. If they wish to continue managing they will just apply for thinning licences, if not just shut the gate.

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