

WALKERBURN AND DISTRICT COMMUNITY COUNCIL
COMMENTS ON FORESTRY AND LAND SCOTLAND
WEST BOLD LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN

GENERAL

1. There is widespread dismay in the area at the proposed Land Management Plan for the hill ground of West Bold Farm. It is of note that this land has been in continuous farming use since Roman times. Disquiet centres around four main issues:

- a. Visual Impact for the Village of Walkerburn and in this part of the Tweed Valley.
- b. The effect of the Plan on local biodiversity.
- c. The effect of the Plan on the local economy:
 - (1) The visual impact on this part of the valley, which is particularly attractive to visitors, particularly those who are not engaged in mountain biking.
 - (2) The effect on the two local farms which will be adversely impacted financially by the loss of grazing land and the possible loss of some employment.
- d. The negative effect of the Plan on achieving Scottish climate change targets.

2. We are aware that The Committee on Climate Change, the body tasked with advising UK and Scottish Governments on setting climate change targets, have recommended at least 30,000 ha of new woodland be planted as one of their 'key measures' to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. (In 2018/19, 11,210 hectares of woodland was planted.) There is undoubtedly a need to increase tree planting to sequester carbon dioxide. However, we are also aware that NFU Scotland has always been clear that any policy introduced to tackle climate change must consider the long-term sustainability of farming and food production in Scotland. Measures that are introduced to reduce emissions should allow for maintaining production and driving forward the performance of agricultural businesses. Clearly this plan completely ignores this requirement.

VISUAL IMPACT ON THE VILLAGE AND THE TWEED VALLEY

3. Walkerburn was built from 1854 as a planned mill village. The village was built in a strip on a south-facing hillside with narrow houses allowing the maximum amount of sunlight into workers' cottages and flats. At the time, there had been very little tree planting in the Tweed Valley and the surrounding hills were largely bare. After 1945, Forestry Commission and private forestry interests gradually planted conifers throughout the Tweed Valley. The hill ground of West Bold Farm, Glenmead Smallholding and the flat valley fields were the only areas left in farming use. The owner of the hill ground of West Bold would not allow planting because these areas faced the village directly allowing light to reflect across to the village as envisaged when the village was designed.

4. The proposed planting scheme for the West Bold hill ground (approximately 121 ha) may be being presented as 'designed' but in reality the result will be that dark green conifers will dominate the hills facing the village. The small areas of broadleaf planting are effectively invisible to most of the village, though they may be seen from the A72. The main area of conifer planting is on steep slopes directly confronting the village and the effect from the A72 will be that of

unrelieved dark green commercial forestry dominating the entire valley. It is impossible to see how this can be described in the Plan as 'being sensitive to the existing landscape character' or "maintaining the existing local valley aesthetics" when, in effect, a huge chunk of that character stands to be permanently ruined.

5. The Plan states correctly that "the dominant slopes of Shiel Craig feature significantly within the wider landscape". However, the Plan is to cover them in conifers. When the trees planned start to mature, the contours of Shiel Craig which directly face Walkerburn will be lost in a sea of dark green. The existing Plan leaves bare only a tiny area at the top of the Craig (Iron Age Fort) which will be visually swamped and there is minimal broadleaf/native species planting. The overall effect will still be a wall of dark green.

6. The 7ha field bordering on the houses at the Glenbenna Settlement was part of land exchanged/bought by Glenmead Smallholding in an effort by Glenmead to preserve some amenity for the village and for Glenbenna in particular. It will hardly answer the need to "maintain the Tweed Valley landscape of open space intimately mixed with surrounding woodland" since the field is only a very narrow strip. (We are aware that the owners of Glenmead sought to acquire and preserve the whole area of Shiel Craig facing the village.)

EFFECT ON LOCAL BIODIVERSITY

7. The land to be planted is currently managed by an organic sheep, dairy and beef farm based in Innerleithen and covering the valley ground up to Scrogbank. The land has been managed in cooperation with the owners of the Glenmead Smallholding specifically to encourage biodiversity. Much of the land is marginal and it cannot support high densities of livestock. It does, however, produce flowers, insects and ground-nesting birds in abundance. Blocks of non-native coniferous trees smother the landscape, driving out wonderful and endangered wildlife. As the trees move in, silence falls across the land. No birds sing, no bees buzz, no flowers bloom.

8. Presumably, as has happened elsewhere, in order to plant this land, the grass will be killed off as will everything living on that ground. Of course, nature is good at recovering but tree cover is not the same as open pasture, especially when that pasture had been managed organically with mixed cattle and sheep grazing.

9. The high-yielding, fast-growing conifers proposed on steep slopes facing the village will permanently destroy the current biodiversity and the planting and harvesting processes are also likely to lead to considerable erosion and water run-off to the small broad leaf planting proposed on the north of the site. (Given the very poor quality of previous plantings of conifer on steep slopes in this area, it is difficult to believe the claim that West Bold planting will be "high yielding".)

10. Bluntly, there is no way that this scheme will increase biodiversity in the area other than possibly in the small areas designated for native broadleaf. We do not believe that public money should be squandered on a scheme which effectively decreases biodiversity.

11. It is important that tree planting takes place following the widely accepted principles of the right tree, in the right place, for the right reason. It is difficult to see how planting tree species which will inhibit the current wildlife biodiversity on this upland farm ground can possibly be 'right'.

12. It is notable that little thinning or active management has ever taken place in the forests surrounding Walkerburn, especially on the steeper slopes. Since Forestry and Land Scotland took over the Glenmead fields at the southern end of the site, the successfully established wildlife corridor hedge has been neither cut nor maintained and the Plan indicates that this will be over-planted with conifer. This does not lead to any great expectation that the management of the West Bold land will be any better. This may be explained by the lack of forestry manpower but the

effect of this Plan, given the probability that the promised high levels of management are unlikely to be achieved, will be to lessen the current levels of biodiversity.

EFFECT ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY

13. Mixed tourism is increasingly important to the local economy. Mountain biking based around Innerleithen is valuable but general tourism is also very important as is testified to by the number of holiday homes to rent locally, aimed at walkers, wildlife enthusiasts and families. Time and again, comments are received extolling the views from Walkerburn across the fields of sheep and cattle to the Minch Moor. There are real concerns from holiday business owners that the closing in of the last hillside grazing area will adversely impact their businesses.

14. Two local farms, Nether Pirn and Glenmead, will have their businesses impacted since the two farms share grazing. Nether Pirn will be heavily impacted financially threatening employment on the farm. The tiny area at the northern end of the site which has scheduled monuments including Plora Craig tower, cannot be planted so the Plan talks of diversifying “income utilising conservation grazing with cattle” This is currently the practice of the tenant farmer but the area designated in the Plan is tiny and will be very difficult to manage if the rest of the Plan goes ahead as currently envisaged.

15. It is notable that food production in Scotland has been accorded a higher priority in the COVID 19 crisis and yet we are faced with heavy planting upon grazing land which has been well-managed for over 30 years by the same farmer. Scotland’s landscape and climate are unique. Much of Scotland’s farmland is unploughable and unsuitable for crops, but is ideal to grow grass and is rarely short of water. It makes no sense to deliberately plant trees on the most productive parts of this hill ground especially as these areas are so dominant in landscape terms.

CARBON CAPTURE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

16. There is ample evidence that organic grassland, properly managed to allow sheep and cattle to graze in rotation, provides a carbon net gain and improves biodiversity to a far greater extent than conifer planting.

17. It is also worth noting that carbon sequestration is required to meet net-zero emissions in agriculture. Managed grasslands in Scotland hold over 170 million tonnes of carbon. It is just as important to maintain existing stores of carbon as it is to establish new stores.

18. If, however, well managed grassland is disturbed by commercial tree planting it can release more carbon into the atmosphere than will be sequestered by the trees. Simply planting trees does not equate to a net lowering of carbon in the atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

19. Walkerburn and District Community Council is strongly of the opinion that the West Bold hill land should not be planted at all but should continue to be managed as at present. Grazing cattle and sheep on our hills and uplands has a positive impact on biodiversity, conservation and Scotland’s iconic landscape scenery. It also helps feed the nation.

20. Should it prove impossible to keep all this ground unplanted, we are nonetheless determined to mitigate the effect on the village of Walkerburn and on our tourism industry by retaining as unplanted ground the steep, north-facing slopes of Shiel Craig which dominate this part of the Tweed Valley.

21. Finally, we wish to make the point that no one knows what the next 30 years will bring. While accepting that the cost/gains analysis of planting conifers on public land is extremely difficult, we would draw attention both to the very poor returns and to the adverse effects on biodiversity of much of the post 1945 planting in this area to the extent that some areas are not even deemed economic to fell.

PETER WALLER
CHAIRMAN

3rd April 2020