European and External Relations Committee

The EU referendum and its implications for Scotland

Written submission from Woodland Trust Scotland

EU regulations and directives

Leaving the EU throws a question mark over many of the protective regulatory and legal frameworks that currently apply to Scotland’s wildlife and habitats. Namely the Birds and Habitats Directives, as well as those which cover Plant and Soil Health.

In addition, Scotland’s ambitious Climate Change and Biodiversity targets underpin wider international goals, such as the Aichi Biodiversity targets and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Whilst the assurance offered by the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform that the Scottish Government will not take this opportunity to “dilute” environmental protection it does remain the case that there are a number of targets which Scotland is still not meeting, and there will always be a temptation to moderate ambition in some areas, especially if there is no wider obligation to meet EU standards.

Land Management funding

Whilst there are few environmentalists who will mourn the loss of the Common Agricultural policy and the environmental outcomes that it promotes; the fact remains that almost all the positive environmental and greening measures which the Scottish Government are able to fund – including Forestry Grants - are paid for in a significant part through the SRDP element of CAP.

Look at the significant impact that changing over from one model of SRDP to another earlier this year had on the new woodland planting figures (down to just 4,700 hectares in 2015/16, less than half of the Scottish Government’s target of 10,000 hectares each year) and you will see the effect that uncertainty of funding can have on the environmental outputs. So, whilst the Treasury in Westminster have offered some limited assurance about the continuation of payments until 2020, we share the Scottish Government’s concern that this does not cover all the elements of land management that it needs to.

The prospect of a new outcome-focused system of land management funding in which public money is focused on delivering public goods, such as greater biodiversity, more woodland cover, better deer management, etc… is very appealing, but until we know how much Scotland is likely to get from a new system designed at a UK level it will be difficult to know how successful it might be.

Our own work with the Scottish Wildlife Trust on the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape Partnership is dependent on more than £340,000 of SRDP funding which will allow us to secure more than £200,000 through leveraging other funding sources with the original SRDP pot.
The same issue is found with our HLF funded Ancient Woodland restoration project whereby expert advisors seek out private landowners and offer free advice on how best to manage damaged ancient woodland sites, but without SRDP funding being available to assist with that work there is little incentive for private landowners to restore the sites at their own expense.

The same goes for our Crofting partnership with the Forestry Commission and the Crofting Commission encouraging individual crofters to consider the benefits of small scale woodland planting on their crofting land. Without the assistance of SRDP Forestry Grants there would be very little new planting.

In short though, without SRDP funding there will be very little new woodland creation or forestry management taking place in Scotland.

It is also worth noting that significant elements of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy are dependent on the work of NGOs like the Woodland Trust working with external funding bids to bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, or EU LIFE+. One example of this would be the £11 million Atlantic Woodlands project led by RSPB Scotland and Plantlife, and supported by the Woodland Trust, which would have removed large amounts of Invasive Non-Native rhododendron ponticum from the West coast of Scotland, but which now – post-EU Referendum – may not quality for EU funding from LIFE+. 