Written submission from Bell Ingram Ltd

I as Divisional Director at Bell Ingram Ltd, responsible for managing the forestry services division of the company, would like to respond to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the Future of Land Reform in Scotland and welcome this opportunity to comment to your Committee on the general principles of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill.

Bell Ingram manages in excess of 20,000 hectares of forests and woodlands throughout Scotland for a range of woodland owners and is committed to sensitive and sustainable management for the benefit of the environment whilst maintaining financially viable operations, providing local employment and supporting the Forest Industry in Scotland.

On behalf of the company, we wish to comment on the following elements of the draft Bill using the topics identified in the committee’s call for evidence.

Land reform - Scottish Land Commission

It is noted in the draft Bill that the Scottish Government proposes the establishment of a Scottish Land Commission.

In our opinion, if such a Commission is to truly reflect the full range of land use, rural business and environmental interests then it will be important that forestry interests are represented. Forestry occupies a significant percentage of managed land in Scotland and draws in substantial new investment every year into a highly technical and sophisticated industry which requires representation from individuals working and experienced in this industry.

Community Engagement

The forest industry already has highly developed, responsible land use practices and working closely with Forestry Commission Scotland and woodland accreditation agencies has a high level of public consultation and co-operation with other land users built into modern practices and financial support mechanisms.

All major operations involving long term planning, changes to woodland structure, new planting etc. are covered by comprehensive scoping and consultation procedures and any award of grant aid is conditional upon a full assessment of public input into the planning stages.

It is vital that the industry is not further burdened with additional or duplicate bureaucracy that could frustrate development and investment occurring in a timely manner, for no further public benefit.

Part 5- Right to Buy Land to Further Sustainable Development
There needs to be recognition that forestry is a long term sustainable land use that requires continuity and stability to provide woodland owners with the confidence to embark upon the creation and management of timber crops that take decades to mature and produce harvestable crops. The ability to manage woodlands in a commercial manner is fundamental to drawing in investment from out with the local community and to maintaining the longer term financial sustainability of the forest industry.

Woodland owners’ management objectives must be respected whilst appreciating that regulation and compliance with UK Forest Standard provides comprehensive protection of the natural environment and the public’s legitimate desires to enjoy the rural environment without significant financial or legislative penalty.

**Sporting Rates and Deer Management**

We believe that shooting and deer management within woodlands is an often misunderstood practice. In the vast majority of instances shooting is an essential element of maintaining a sustainable balance between wildlife and predators that would otherwise be a damaging influence upon woodland creation and sensitive habitats. This practice is not a sport, is most often undertaken by skilled professionals employed for the purpose and generally costs the landowner rather than generating income. As such there needs to be recognition that wildlife management is not a hobby or pastime of the wealthy and requires the ability to be granted exemption from sporting rates.

There also needs to be recognition that increasing deer numbers represent a significant threat to the sustainable management of a diverse species rich environment and that responsible management of numbers is an essential part of maintaining the desired variety of habitats within the countryside. This legitimate management practice needs to be recognised and encouraged and not burdened with inappropriate regulation, lengthy engagement with community panels or financial penalties.

Finally, we wish to thank the committee for the opportunity to comment upon the proposed Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. As supporters of Confor we also wish to endorse the comprehensive and balanced review that they have undertaken and the legitimate concerns of practicing woodland managers and owners that they represent.