FCTU is a partnership of the five Trade Unions representing staff in the Forestry Commission: PCS, Unite, Prospect, GMB and FDA. Approximately 70% of the FC staff in Scotland are members of these unions, more than 600 people.

Summary

1. FCTU endorses the move of FC Scotland (FCS) and FE Scotland (FES) into Scottish Government (SG), but the proposals to separate into a Division and an Agency are a threat to successful delivery of SG policies and strongly opposed by FCTU. It is essential for all FCS and FES staff to identify themselves as parts of one Civil Service body within SG.

2. Integrated working continues to deliver successfully and this will be threatened in separate bodies. Staffs interchange and co-operation on projects widens experience and gives credibility. Our members are passionately committed to a vocation, not a job. A large proportion put in far more than their contracted hours.

3. Separation of Delivery from Policy and Regulation can be delivered through internal governance arrangements under a Management Board with representation from the three arms of sustainability – economic, social and environmental. The ‘public corporation’ status of the current FES with the flexibility to carry balances over financial years can then continue.

4. The financial figures attached to the Bill show between £6m and £12m to pay for rebranding, IT and change management. The Bill proposes that these will be found from within existing FCS/FES budgets, which will threaten resources available for staff to deliver SG policy, so should be minimised. Retaining a single body with internal separation arrangements will help minimise costs.

5. FCTU welcomes SG commitment to Cross-Border working and support for Forest Research. Funding for all areas of work is essential and must not be restricted to the three priorities in the original consultation. Any organisation(s) to deliver cross-border functions must remain part of the Civil Service.

6. We support the Bill’s proposals for a Forestry Strategy in line with the principles of Sustainable Forest Management.

7. In order for staff to deliver as required, felling definitions need to be amended. Compulsory purchase powers do not fit with the style of management that has developed in Scotland over the last few decades, which is about consultation and consensus.
Additional information

1. FCTU response to the Consultation in 2016 gave considerable detail on what has been delivered over many years by the partnership of FCS and FES by a staff group passionately committed to delivering SG policies on what was seen to benefit Scotland, its people and visitors. Clear alignment was offered to each administration in Government, demonstrating commitment to devolution long before these proposals for separation from the FC.

1.2 Separating FCS from FES presents serious danger of destroying the links that delivered:

1.2.1 ‘Branching Out’ – FCS developed policy to create new health-promoting opportunities in our woods and forests, help improve health and life expectancy and reduce health inequalities in Scotland. It established a strategic partnership between the Scottish environment and health sectors, working with SG Health Division, Area Health Boards and NHS Scotland, leading to the ‘Greening the NHS Estate’ national development programme, and management of part of the Forth Valley Royal Larbert Hospital estate by FES, winning many awards. This is a flagship health programme, which SG has committed to support and expand.

1.2.2 The National Forest Land Scheme (NFLS), now replaced with Community Asset Transfer Scheme (CATS) to reflect new SG legislation. FCS developed the policy in co-operation with FES, which now delivers it, successfully transferring sites to communities for woodland management, renewable energy generation and social housing development.

1.2.3 Central Scotland Green Network Youth Employment Skills Programme, designed, guided and funded by FCS and administered through Scottish Lowlands Forest District. The programme equips unemployed young people (16-24) with life skills, technical training and employability skills, mainly on the National Forest Estate, with programmes lasting 10+ weeks. To date half of the c1000 participants have achieved a successful destination and around a quarter have entered the employment market.

1.3 There are many other examples available of this close working from a staff group who will often go way beyond the call of duty.

2.1 ‘Forestry Scotland’ as a name for the new Civil Service body to cover both FCS and FES would represent continuity and change at the same time and bring all FCS and FES staff under one banner to ensure continued delivery of partnership projects. Think of the commitment of politicians – that is how many of our members feel, too.

2.2 Key concerns were to ensure the long-term nature of forestry was recognised and kept away from the short-term political cycle. This could be severely damaged by the current proposals.
2.2.1 One example of the risks of political interference is epitomised by the 2007-15 SRDP Grant Scheme, where FCS was instructed to work through SGRPID. Widespread protests developed from the industry about ability of FCS to deliver the system. Staff at all levels were not allowed to use the skills they had successfully developed for many years previously, and suffered frustration and demotivation at their inability to deliver for the customers. Fortunately, this has significantly improved for the current scheme, though it is still developing as a result of helpful input from the Mackinnon report.

2.3 There is pressure from some for regulation of FES in the same way as the private sector. This proposal fails to recognise that FES is directly accountable to Ministers and the public. FES has to seek approval for Land Management Plans from FCS, has 100% coverage of approved plans, and is subject to independent UKWAS Certification and FoI. It would be a waste of public funds to put something else in place because this level of existing regulation is not recognised, or its implications understood.

3.1 Ministers should appoint a Chair to the Management Board overseeing the new Civil Service forestry organisation in SG. With the appropriate knowledge and background, this person will fulfil the role of Head of Profession that some have already seen as a requirement.

3.2 The Management Board should then consist of the Heads of the two key functions as Executive members and it is important that the Chief Executive of Forest Research (FR) sits on the Board so that FR can continue to act as the Research and Development arm of Forestry Scotland.

3.3 Non-executive members should then be drawn from the forest industry, environmental and community interests to make up a Board of maybe 10-11 people, which will be charged with implementing the agreed Forestry Strategy and annual reporting of progress against this to Scottish Ministers. A Trade Union board member (as is becoming more common in other areas) should also be considered.

3.4 The National Committee of Scotland (NCS) represents a helpful model, with current members feeding in their knowledge of a wide range of interests as well as forestry. Para 55 of the Financial Memorandum proposes abolition of NCS, replacing them with advisers on audit and risk-related matters. This would be a serious mistake if there was no Board as set out above.

4.1 There is grave concern amongst our members about the financial position of FCS and FES going forward. Minimal pay rises over the last few years, increased pension costs and rises in National Insurance have resulted in staff taking home less money than they were many years ago. Despite this, our commitment remains, although stretched, and the move into SG is seen as largely positive.
4.2 However, costs for this move, requiring rebranding, are noted as £6m to £12m, all to be found within our current budgets. While timber prices remain high, there is some scope to take advantage of this, but if there is a fall, we could be severely weakened. Generating separate plans for moving FCS and FES is an unnecessary additional cost, which would be better used for a single organisation, able to realise the cash savings from sharing SG IT contracts and systems.

4.3 We welcome the commitment to a network of local offices for both FCS and FES, but separating FCS means greater likelihood of these offices merging with other SG departments, reducing the focus on forestry, which the industry expects to be maintained into the long-term future.

5.1 The commitment in the Bill papers to Cross-Border working and a single body to maintain this function is warmly welcomed. The result of agreement with England and Wales on joint working with different administrations leading on different aspects, but in consultation with the others, is expected to deliver future success.

5.2 It is important to recognise the full range of priorities set out in the original consultation and not limit them to a few seen as higher priority.

6.1 The Forestry Strategy proposed should be reviewed regularly to keep it up to date, 10 yearly is likely to be reasonable, with an interim review midway to ensure it still meets requirements.

7.1 In line with concerns raised by others, we note that the definition of felling as ‘intentionally killing a tree’ is incorrect, as felling many tree species does not kill them, so this would be unenforceable for our staff.

7.2 We have successfully delivered forestry expansion without the use of compulsory purchase powers and do not wish to see the change in atmosphere for stakeholders that could be brought about by such powers being included in the Bill.

Forestry Commission Trade Unions
August 2017