



A VISION FOR UK FORESTS

An FSC UK discussion paper

March 2023

How we got here

What do ecologically appropriate forest management practices look like in the UK? What does it mean, in our context, to strengthen and diversify the local economy? How do we know when we are contributing meaningfully to the social development of local communities?

These are the sorts of questions we have to ask ourselves when we develop our national forest stewardship standard, and when we consider our success in delivering FSC's mission.

As an FSC national office, we have come to realise that we don't have definite answers to many of these questions. We have worked diligently to align with international requirements, but in the absence of a clear sense of what they should mean in our context we have had no real basis to challenge the status quo. Without a firm idea of what the preferred end point should be, we have had no way of telling whether incremental changes in our national standard are leading us in the right direction.

We have realised that what we need is a vision.

Some context

FSC has a high level vision, set out in our [Global Strategy](#) 2021–2026. Our 2050 vision is that resilient forests sustain life on Earth: “A new forest paradigm is realized, where the true value of forests is recognized and fully incorporated into society worldwide.”

The 2050 vision is intimately linked to our mission, often summarised as Forests For All Forever: “FSC will promote environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world forests.”

The global mission and vision provide an important general steer for our work, but they don't give us much idea of what we should expect at the forest level.

A far more detailed steer comes from our international [Principles and Criteria](#) for forest stewardship. These tell us what FSC expects from responsible forest management in terms of:

- Compliance with laws (Principle 1)
- Workers' rights and employment conditions (Principles 2)
- Indigenous Peoples' right (Principle 3)
- Community relations (Principle 4)
- Benefits from the forest (Principle 5)
- Environmental values and impacts (Principle 6)
- Management planning (Principle 7)
- Monitoring and assessment (Principle 8)
- High Conservation Values (Principle 9)
- Implementation of management activities (Principle 10)

Even here, though, FSC's requirements are quite generalised – they have to be, because the Principles and Criteria are intended to be globally applicable to all types and scales of forest.

For example, Criterion 10.2 requires forest managers to “use species for regeneration that are ecologically well adapted to the site and to the management objectives”, but it cannot tell us what that means for species choice in every national context in which the Principles and Criteria are applied.

That's why we have national or regional forest stewardship standards which include indicators specifying how each Criterion should be applied in those countries or regions.

In the UK, our national forest stewardship standard is familiar to most people working in the forest sector in the user-friendly format of the UK Woodland Assurance Standard, or [UKWAS](#). UKWAS is maintained by an independent company, and FSC UK is closely involved in every iteration of the standard to make sure that, when it is submitted to FSC International for approval, it is found to address all of the elements of the Principles and Criteria.

In recent revisions of UKWAS, we have focussed on indicating what the Principles and Criteria require. We have not felt able to give any detailed direction on what we think compliance with particular Criteria should look like in the UK context. Even where the FSC UK Board has felt that it would be beneficial to challenge some aspects of the standard, we have only been able to ask the standard developers to consider how well they have reflected the spirit and letter of the Principles and Criteria.

It was the internal conversations about our national forest stewardship standard, and our failure to give a context-specific steer to standard developers, which prompted us to think seriously about the need for an FSC UK vision for the country's forests.

The benefits

There are four key potential benefits to FSC having a clear vision for UK forests:

- **Impact for UK forests:** Forest management is a long-term endeavour, and rapid change is not always possible. This means that many changes to forest stewardship standards must be incremental. A clear vision for the future state of our forests will help us to ensure that such incremental changes are heading in the right direction. It will allow us to challenge UKWAS if the standard fails to drive positive change. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that certification is only one means of pursuing our mission – a vision might also guide us in other efforts to improve the management of forests. Ultimately, we believe that a vision will help to make all of our forest work more impactful.
- **Advocacy:** FSC UK responds to relevant UK and devolved government consultations, but our responses are often very generic, emphasising “environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management”. A clear vision for UK forests, perhaps with any necessary adjustments for different devolved contexts, will provide us with more country-specific asks when responding to consultations.
- **Communication:** As with our advocacy, our communication with stakeholders is also often quite generic when it comes to describing the benefits of FSC certification. A clear vision will help us to explain what FSC really means for UK forests.
- **Motivation:** Perhaps most importantly, a clear vision will hopefully inspire all of us – FSC members, FSC UK trustees and staff, certificate holders and stakeholders – to work together towards our agreed vision.

The process

As a national vision is intended primarily to guide the work of FSC UK, it will be drafted by staff and the decision on the final form of words will be taken by the FSC UK Board of Directors, representing economic, environmental, and social interests.

However, we do want to take into account the views of the widest possible range of FSC members, certificate holders and other stakeholders in the UK, and through this discussion paper we want to share some of our initial thoughts and prompt stakeholders to share theirs.

If we find there is broad agreement on a particular theme, we will draft wording accordingly. If there isn't agreement, we will host topic specific discussions to try to build understanding and consensus.

All of this will feed into a draft vision which will be open for public consultation before the FSC UK Board makes a decision on the final version.

Early thoughts and themes

What would a vision actually look like? What topics would it cover, and what would it say about them? How should we reflect differences between the devolved nations? Our global vision is for 2050 - what should be the timescale for our national vision?

All of these points are up for discussion.

We first started to seriously consider a national vision in 2021, and at that time some of the FSC UK Board members shared their own personal visions. There were differences, of course, but there were also some common themes:

- **Forest area**, including appropriate forest expansion.
- **Social benefits**, including equity of access to the benefits of forest management.
- **Productivity and livelihoods**
- **Tree species, plantations and silviculture**, including the role of native and non-native species, resilience to climate change, and the place of clear-felling in UK silviculture.
- **Biodiversity**
- **Climate and carbon, and other ecosystem services**

Additional issues raised by individual Board members included:

- **Urban trees**, including their role in maintaining biodiversity, climate mitigation, and softening of the urban landscape.
- **Threats to forests**, including grazing/browsing, invasive non-native species, and tree diseases.

Some of these themes were presented as topics for discussion at the 2022 FSC UK Annual Members' Meeting, and attendees were also invited to suggest additional topics. The feedback we received is summarised in the following sections. We also invited input on who to involve in this process, and this will inform our ongoing engagement.

Equity of access to the benefits of forest management

Annual Members' Meeting attendees observed that growing public engagement with profoundly important topics such as climate change was leading to greater public interest in forest management. They flagged the issue of "local" use, which is reflected in FSC Principles 4 and 5 but could perhaps be taken further in the UK. Attendees also noted the potential role of group certification of farm woodlands in maintaining a

mosaic landscape of forest and farmland. Finally, they pointed to the importance of performance indicators for social benefits.

Tree species

Discussions of tree species in UK forest management generally revolve around the role of native and non-native tree species. Climate change resilience and adaptation are hugely important, and Annual Members' Meeting attendees recognised a need for guidance on species choice in this context. This would need to include consideration of provenance (the location of trees from which seed was gathered). Attendees also flagged a need to promote the understanding and use of lesser-known tree species.

One specific issue identified in relation to tree species was the need to ensure that commercial species do not have a detrimental impact by seeding into important open ecosystems – with a particular example of conifers seeding into heath and moorland.

Silviculture

Silviculture is the art and science of cultivating trees collectively (as opposed to arboriculture which deals with cultivating trees individually). For many people, attitudes to silviculture can be reduced to a single question: does it involve clear-felling? But of course, the reality in the forest is more nuanced than that.

Attendees at the Annual Members' Meeting recognised the importance of maintaining a diversity of landscape and habitat types in forest systems. They noted that continuous cover forestry – an approach to management which, among other things, aims to maintain forest conditions and avoid clear-felling – does not exclude small coupe felling or the maintenance of areas of open habitat. They also noted that cyclical clear-felling can actually benefit some important species, such as Nightjar and Woodlark.

The subject of ecosystem restoration was also raised, both the restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites to semi-natural woodland, and the removal of forest to restore high conservation value open ecosystems such as moorland.

Another interesting issue mentioned was the role of grazing – in this context, the management of both domestic and wild herbivores is significant.

Finally, there was the issue of pesticides – attendees recognised not only their ecological impacts but also the importance of public perception.

Other topics

Given a blank slate, attendees at the Annual Members' Meeting identified a wide range of other topics.

Some asked searching questions about the real focus of this work – are we really talking about a vision for forests, or about a vision for forestry practice?

There were comments around the role of FSC certification, including label awareness and public education opportunities, and the need to measure the economic, environmental, and social outcomes of certification. These graded into market considerations, such as engaging with ecosystem services certification and market offsets, responsible timber specifying, and meeting demand for mass timber building. Forest productivity was certainly seen as important in the context of reducing reliance on timber imports.

Targets for increased forest cover were seen as important, as was the resilience of new and existing woodland to climate change. There was also interest in trees in the widest possible range of contexts, including trees outside woods, trees in private gardens, and urban forests.

On the environmental side, there were explicit references to wildlife and habitat protection, and to rewilding and grazing in woods.

Finally, returning to a topic raised in the context of access to social benefits, we were asked to consider what FSC means by “local” – a term crucial to our understanding of local communities and the local economy.