

MINISTER'S OPENING ADDRESS

Scottish Forestry Forum, Battleby, 26 November 2002

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to be here today to look at the progress we've made in the 2 years since we launched the Scottish Forestry Strategy just up the road in Pitlochry.

Coincidentally, today's inaugural meeting of the Scottish Forestry Forum follows hard on the heels of the Scottish Parliament's first full debate on forestry, which took place on 7th November.

It was a well-attended debate and the contributions from Members across all Parties reflected broad support for the Strategy. Of course, colleagues from opposition parties pressed us to spend more on implementing the strategy priorities - without telling us where the money should come from!

I was particularly pleased that so many Members not only understood and articulated the breadth of the problems facing forestry and the forestry industry, but also recognised the considerable achievements of the industry and the Forestry Commission over the years.

John Farquhar Munro reminded Parliament of the Commission's history over the past 80 years and urged us to "support its efforts in order that the next 80 years can deliver the same degree of excellence."

And today, in many respects ladies and gentlemen, we take our first steps towards the next 80 years for forestry here in Scotland.

But before I talk about where we are now and how we take the Strategy forward, I'd like to take a few minutes to mention some highlights of the past 2 years. You have much more detail on this in the report on "Delivering the Scottish Forestry Strategy" in your packs.

The Scottish Forest Industries Cluster is a tremendous success.

Through its efforts to maximise the value of our forest resource to Scotland's economy, this partnership between the industry and Scottish Enterprise plays a crucial role in relation to the Strategy.

The Cluster not only seeks to encourage large-scale industrial developments in the forestry sector; it also promotes smaller-scale initiatives that will increase forestry's contribution to rural development.

We will continue to support the Cluster's work and we have appreciated its imaginative contributions during what has been a traumatic time for the harvesting and processing side of forestry, with timber prices at historically low levels.

This year, we have also been running Treefest Scotland 2002 - an initiative celebrating Scotland's trees, woods and forests, with over 800 events taking place throughout Scotland.

Some of these have been introducing ideas about woodlands in the heart of urban Scotland. For example, the Edinburgh Treefest event in Inverleith Park gave people in Edinburgh an insight into woodland initiatives in central and southern Scotland. And "Tree in the Park" in Hamilton attracted 27,000 people over a weekend, with children queuing to get a shot at felling trees using a harvesting machine simulator!

We also attracted people from around the world to "International Forest Fest", a major forestry machinery demonstration and international competition. This attracted so many visitors that every hotel in that part of Dumfriesshire was fully booked!

I was delighted to spend a day there and was impressed by the sophistication of modern harvesting equipment.

Here in Perthshire, the "Big Tree Country" initiative has shown how joint promotion can be used to increase the value of the local forest heritage to the tourist industry.

Elsewhere, for example in the Borders and around Fort William, forests are being developed as first class mountain biking facilities. This, of course, attracts more visitors to the area and benefits the local economy.

We have also continued to encourage physical activity in the forest for health as well as enjoyment. There is the Forest Fitness programme run by Forest Enterprise. We have also provided additional funding to the Central Scotland Forest Trust to develop "health walks" in Falkirk, West Lothian and North Lanarkshire.

Our recent Spending Review provided an additional £4 million for forest recreation facilities, especially in national parks, and improvements in the natural heritage value of Scotland's national forests.

We have also carried out a major review of the forestry and farm woodland grant schemes, to ensure that they deliver the priorities of the Strategy.

Subject to EC approval we plan to launch the Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme next year. This scheme was developed by a Steering Group comprising representatives - many of them present here today - from the forestry industry, from farming and crofting interests, from environment groups and from local authorities as well as Commission and Department representatives.

A key recommendation of the group was that we should change our emphasis. Presently, about three quarters of the money goes on forestry expansion and a quarter on work to improve the environmental, social and economic value of

the existing forests. In future, we expect about half the money to be used to improve existing forests and half to fund new woodlands.

I know that the Group felt constrained by the need to operate within existing budgets and many consultees urged us to increase funding.

What I can say today is that we have a budget of £26 million for forestry grants next year - one million pounds more than our highest ever expenditure on grants of £25 million, in 2000/2001.

In the summer we published a booklet called "Scotland's Trees Woods and Forests". This well-illustrated booklet aptly describes forestry as Scotland's "hidden industry". An industry which employs 10,000 people, contributes 800 million pounds to our economy and which also provides places for wildlife to flourish and places for people to enjoy.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to welcome the publication of "People and Woods in Scotland".

This book, edited by the Historiographer Royal, Professor Christopher Smout, is billed as a major new book on the Scottish environment.

For forestry in Scotland does have a major impact on the environment. About one-sixth of our land area is wooded and we all recognise that some past forestry practices have been harmful to the environment.

But we have learned the lessons of past. The need to ensure that forestry contributes positively to the environment lies at the heart of the Scottish Forestry Strategy.

It is also appropriate that the book is about "People and Woods in Scotland". As a history book it deals with the relationship that the Scottish people have had with trees, woods and forests in the past. I commend it to you, and copies are available here today.

Looking ahead, I think that it is quite clear that future public support for forestry will depend critically on people enjoying the benefits, now and in the future from Scotland's forests.

When the Scottish Forestry Forum was set up, the Forestry Commission was asked to bring together different groups with an interest in the social, economic and environmental interests of forestry.

These three pillars are fundamental to sustainable development and to our vision that Scotland be renowned as a land of fine trees, woods and forests which strengthen the economy, which enrich the natural environment and which people enjoy and value.

As many of you will know, the Forestry Strategy starts with this vision and a set of five guiding principles. It sets out five strategic directions, and linked to these, are 23 priorities for action.

This morning's workshops will allow you to discuss in detail a number of these priorities, such as improving the timber transport infrastructure, and helping communities become more involved in forestry.

Then, after lunch, three invited speakers will be exploring some of the Strategy's underlying principles: sustainability, integration and the need for forestry to have a positive value. Finally, after feedback from the workshops and discussion, Douglas Greig from the Executive's Land Use and Rural Policy Division will describe how he sees forestry fitting into the wider rural context.

I hope, that by the end of the day, you have a better idea of what is happening across Scotland to implement the strategy.

I also hope that we hear from you about where you feel more focus is required. For example, the preface to the Strategy mentioned the aim of increasing Scotland's forests and woods towards one quarter of our land area by the middle of the century.

I believe that this remains a legitimate aspiration, but how vital is it that exactly 25% cover is achieved by the year 2050? What should be our overriding priorities? Today is intended as giving you all an opportunity to put forward your own views on issues such as this.

Before I finish, I want to say three things.

First, during my time as Minister I have been genuinely impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment of all those I have met with an interest in forestry.

Secondly, I am very anxious to do all I can to help promote the interests of forestry in Scotland.

Sadly it is not within my powers to achieve a 30% increase in timber prices - but I will be meeting representatives of CoSLA and the forestry industry early in the New Year to discuss in detail the problems of timber transport.

And thirdly, I want to refer to the outcome of the Forestry Devolution Review. We will be strengthening the Forestry Commission's National Office for Scotland; we will be making the agency responsible for managing Scotland's national forests more directly accountable to Scottish Ministers; and we will be developing closer links between the Forestry Commission and other departments of the Scottish Executive.

There is no doubt that the public, and we politicians, are beginning to appreciate the contribution that forestry can make to other important strands of our everyday lives.

Forestry can positively influence and enhance our policies in areas such as health, education, sustainability, biodiversity, tourism, economic development, and even energy – whether wind farm or woodfuel!

Looking round the room, I am truly impressed by the range of interests represented here today.

I know that you come from a wide range of backgrounds and I am sure that today's event will help you understand different people's perspectives on the key challenges facing forestry today, whether it is timber prices or the need to achieve better integration of forestry with other land uses.

I would like to thank you all for your help in implementing the Strategy – without your efforts, we would not be as far advanced as we are.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you all enjoy what I'm sure will be a positive and productive day and I look forward to seeing the results of your deliberations.