Appendix III

Strategy for Restoring Peatland Habitats

1. Rationale

1.1 Northern Ireland Forestry Strategy

The Northern Ireland Forestry Strategy, 'Northern Ireland Forestry – A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth' (2006) restates policy as:

- The sustainable management of existing woods and forests.
- A steady expansion of tree cover to increase the many diverse benefits that forests provide.

The strategy indicated that an amended Forestry Act would place a duty on the Department to promote afforestation and sustainable forestry, which duly came into effect in 2010.

The Northern Ireland and UK Governments approach to sustainable forestry is set out in the UK ForestryStandard (UKFS), which is currently in its 4th edition (2017). The UKFS reiterates the legal requirement that "Appropriate protection and conservation must be afforded where sites, habitats and species are subject to the legal provisions of EU Directives and UK and country legislation". In addition in Northern Ireland, the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 places a General Duty on every public body to 'further the conservation of biodiversity so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions [it exercises]'.

The UKFS includes a number of general forestry practice requirements and guidelines that are applicable to afforested peat or peatland habitats modified for afforestation.

The standard requires forest plans to take full account of a range of requirements and guidelines relating to forest design, biodiversity, water, soil, climate change and provides scope for undertaking peatland restoration projects to improve the delivery of ecosystem services. The requirements that are most relevant to the topic of restoring peatland habitats are Forests and Biodiversity general forestry practice requirements 1 and 4:

- Forests and woodlands should be managed in such a way that conserves or enhances biodiversity; opportunities for enhancing biodiversity should be considered in forest management plans.
- Particular consideration should be given to conserving, enhancing or restoring priority habitats and species identified in the statutory lists of priority species and habitats for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, through the delivery of country biodiversity strategies and local level plans.

Forests and Biodiversity Guidelines 24 and 26 refer specifically to restoration of habitats and degraded features:

- Consider practical opportunities to restore open habitats where their value could be reinstated and sustained.
- Ensure wetland features such as springs, flushes and bogs are protected, and take opportunities to restore degraded features.

The UKFS is also the basis of forestry practice for the independent UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS), which is used for voluntary independent certification. The relevant UKWAS sections include: 2. Management Planning, and 4. Natural, historical and cultural environment:

- 2.1 Long-term policy and objectives
- 2.2 Documentation
- 2.11 Conservation
- 2.13 Conversion
- 2.14 Implementation, amendment and revision of the plan
- 2.15 Monitoring
- 4.1 Statutory designated sites and protected species

1.2 Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy

The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy, 'Valuing Nature - A Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020' (2015), refers to the importance of peaty soils and associated priority habitats, including blanket bog and lowland raised bogs, in providing ecosystem services, such as clean water supplies, carbon storage, and recreation, and identifies forestry and other land management practices as potential threats to these services.

The strategy indicates that many ecosystems, such as peatlands, are in a relatively poor condition, and states the need to reverse the decline and work towards Favourable Conservation Status. It emphasises the importance of peatland soils and vegetation as a carbon store and suggests their value in sequestering carbon may become a particularly economically advantageous characteristic as carbon accounting becomes more important.

1.3 Review of forest design plans

The review stage of forestry planning involves re-examining management objectives, and the forest data on which they are based. Long-term objectives are presented in the form of design plans, which show planned boundaries between forest and open ground and planned felling and regeneration. Forest design plans meet the requirements of the UK Forestry Standard in relation to the proportions of tree species, the proportion managed as open ground, and overall area managed primarily for biodiversity. Adjustments to these proportions are made in the course of felling and regeneration, which can include the introduction of more open ground, and through specific programmes, including, for example, tree planting, and, removal of trees colonising open ground.

1.4 Stakeholder engagement

'Restoring Peatland Habitats' is one of 11 topics identified as a basis for engaging with stakeholders at the initial, scoping stage of forestry planning. Stakeholders responding to the Sperrin scoping consultation in 2018 indicated they were in favour of the restoration of afforested peatlands; responses from forest industry stakeholders suggested that peatland forestry was, in some cases, an unsustainable land use, while others indicated that restoration could generate environmental benefits, including carbon sequestration and flood risk mitigation.

Stakeholders will be given the opportunity to comment on proposals to review forest design plans via the forestry pages on the DAERA website. As planning proceeds proposals will be developed for all remaining forests by 2022.

1.5 Restoration potential

The rationale for restoration of blanket bog reflects the potential to achieve appropriate hydrological conditions, based on external peat depth and slope datasets. Proposals to convert afforested peatlands or peatlands modified by forestry practices to priority bog habitat will exclude sites that have become degraded due to peat cutting or erosion, intensively drained areas dominated by heather, areas colonised by native tree species, and areas that have developed into native wet woodland.

1.6 Sustainable wood production

The strategy should not affect the potential of forests to deliver sustainable wood production. Candidate restoration areas will mainly consist of areas that were previously identified as open ground in forest design plans and will be excluded from regeneration plans. Assessments undertaken in conjunction with forestry planning have indicated that peatland forests also include a proportion of uneconomic stands comprised of checked (where growth has ceased or stagnated), nutrient deficient or dying trees.

2. Prioritisation of candidate restoration areas

2.1 Site selection criteria

- Planned open ground (either current or in forest design plan).
- Adjacent and integral to designated areas*, or non-designated priority habitat.
- Peat depth ≥0.5m and slope ≤3° over most of the area.
- Afforested areas which are uneconomic (failed, checked, nutrient deficient or dying) or unplanted areas modified by forestry operations and / or colonised with non-native species.

*SAC/ASSI, ASSI, NNR, LNR, and SLNCI

2.2 Prioritisation of restoration

Priority 1: Meeting all criteria: uneconomic stands, peatlands modified by forestry practices or areas colonised with non-native trees shown as open ground priority habitat in design plans, adjacent and integral to designated or non-designated priority habitat, and where peat depth ≥0.5m and slope ≤3° over most of the area

Priority 2: Planned open ground, predominantly meeting remaining criteria; may include up to 30% productive stands (Sitka spruce General Yield Class (GYC) ≥ 10 or lodgepole pine GYC 8).

Priority 3: As for Priority 2, but does not fully meet peat depth and slope criterion.

3. Context of the Strategy and Implementation Plan

- The strategy for restoring peatland habitats in forests supports Northern Ireland strategies for forestry and biodiversity.
- It updates earlier Forest Service strategies and plans related to restoring peatland habitats.
- To prepare operational plans for bog restoration for Priority 1 areas.
- By 2022, to ensure all forestry planning areas have been reviewed to identify candidate peatland restoration sites.
- By 2030, to review the strategy and undertake a strategic review of candidate peatland restoration projects.

4. Review

The rationale and strategy will be subject to review as necessary in respect of:

- The potential to make adjustments to felling plans in response to significant changes to timber marketing conditions affecting poor quality and diseased lodgepole pine, and checked and nutrient deficient Sitka spruce stands.
- The requirement to undertake restoration of heathland habitats; this will be assessed as planning reviews take place.
- The development of a wider Forest Service strategy for the management of open priority habitats.
- New research and technical information