**NOTES FROM MEETING**

**WITH FORESTRY COMMISSION**

**TYNESIDE HOUSE 20TH SEPTEMBER 2013**

**Present:**

**Forestry Commission**

Crispin Thorn

Richard Pow

Iwan Downey

**Industry**

Angus Collingwood-Cameron, NFLG

James Brown, James Robson Brown

Jane Karthaus, Confor (by phone)

**Background**

The meeting had been convened following industry concerns over the performance of the FC in the North East after the closure of the Rothbury office, and the relocation of the admin staff to York. A further consideration was the integration of forestry into the forthcoming Integrated Land Management Scheme (ILMS).

Prior to the meeting beginning, we went to see the FC work station in Tyneside House. This provides a base for the NE PWOs.

**Discussion**

CT explained that the FC re-organisation coincided with a tripling in scheme activity in Yorks and the NE, while the staff levels had been set at the old rate of activity. This new work largely concerned new planting.

There was not a great deal of sympathy for this line. It was pointed out that the FC had gone to great lengths to promote new planting so it should have planned for some success. JB pointed out that the need to draw up a Woodland Management Plan prior to applying for grant aid was bound to increase the work load.

A problem was identified where there was possible conflict between new planting under EWGS and the needs of existing ELS/HLS agreements. There did not seem to be a perfect relationship at ground level between FC & NE, but it was appreciated that this comes down to individual officers. RP stated that they are working closer together with a view to ILMS.

The FC is looking at ways to speed up the approval of Thinning Licences. It was stated that PWOs do not actually need to visit each and every site, and that 10 year licences could be issued in line with management plans, as happens in the NW.

The FC is looking to move as much admin as possible into an electronic format. This may eliminate the problems of docs going missing on the way to York, but it may not suit older applicants. PWOs could be met by appointment in Tyneside House, but there is no formal office management agreement in place with the EA, so dropping in is not recommended.

There were issues over measuring/checking on existing schemes, and the increased involvement of RLR. It is not clear who will be doing this work in the future. There is a greater focus on accuracy, with GPS playing more of a role. The FC stated that there were tolerances built in to allow for the practicalities of forestry, but these were not being noticed on the ground. There were also concerns over how FC measuring could impact on other schemes ie fencing off areas for new planting. There were no plans to make GPS a requirement for applicants, but it seemed that it is/would be used in checking, which does not seem ideal. There were concerns over the possible discrepancies between different systems and the RLR.

This situation was likely to get worse under the ILMS as there was no certainty over who would do the inspections. The likelihood is that it would be one agency. FC, NE or RPA? Quite likely that the work will be done by someone with no working knowledge of forestry. An additional worry is that any fines arising could well be spread across the whole ILMS, so potentially discouraging active operations.

There was an issue identified with communications, both between the FC and its PWOs and also with applicants. Different PWOs appeared to be implementing to their own agenda. This may improve if greater use is made of the Tyneside House work station. It seemed as if there were problems with relatively inexperienced PWOs having to operate in pretty isolated circumstances.

Some cases seemed to involve a difference of opinion rather than application of the rules. It was suggested that perhaps the FWAC could act as a forum for decision in such cases. If applicants do have difficulties with PWO advice, the first action should be to call ID.

Dangerous trees do not need to be inspected by a PWO prior to felling.

The admin staff in York need to be more helpful, particularly in giving out PWO mobile numbers. CT pointed out that all such communication details were included in the recent newsletter. Just showed how many people had read it!

2014 is deemed the year of the seminar. This is because there won’t be much scheme work to do with the RDPE gap and there will be a new template for WMPs. Such meetings would take the form of “applicants meetings” and AECC suggested that the York admin staff attend. This would allow all parties to put faces to names.

The FC believes that the ILMS will be consulted on in October, with Defra sending the RDPE to the EU in March. The EU then has 6 months to approve. This would allow applicants to register for the ILMS in late 2014, with applications ready for approval in early 2015, just after the scheme goes live.

AECC questioned this timescale. The FC was not aware of recent comments emanating the DG Agric that suggest that the timescale might be considerably extended. AECC asked if they could bear this in mind internally with a view to a Plan B if it turns out to be correct.