

A In 1992 the Forestry Commission was split internally to avoid any conflict. It has worked well. No problems have been encountered. The Forestry Commission has 100% of its timber certified under the Forest Stewardship Council and is open to audit and public scrutiny in ways that private forests are not.

Q Could what's left of the Forestry Commission be privatised?

A Yes!

Q How do we compare internationally?

A England has the lowest ratio of public forests in Europe. Even the right-wing Government of Canada decided to retain forests in public ownership.

Q How will we control pests and disease in future?

A The Forestry Commission was established to provide the nation with a strategic control over timber production. It has a country-wide overview of the spread of pests and disease such as the increasing threat from sudden oak disease. Fragmentation of the Forest Estate will break-up such an oversight and mean the loss of specialists, researchers and those involved in public awareness campaigns.

Q I care about all the forests not just in the Dean. Are they now safe from sale?

A Once the Public Bodies Bill is passed the minister will not have to seek a Parliamentary Order to sell off the forest. Who says?

The Chair of Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs Committee asked: "So that's a once and for all legislative permit that you will never again as a Department have to come back for future sales of forestry or such?" DEFRA Civil Servant: "That is the intention."

Chair of EFRA Committee: "So you'll never, ever again have to come and ask permission?" Secretary of State, Mrs Spelman: "We should not have to, no."

Chair of EFRA Committee: "So this is our one and only chance?" DEFRA Civil Servant: "Yes."

Jonathon Porritt has set out one scenario: "The

Public Bodies Act will be on the Statute Book by the autumn. The Government can then start formally negotiating with private forestry companies regarding long leases. But, surprise, surprise, they decide not to play ball because they can't make it work commercially. So this time next year, Mrs Spelman "regretfully" informs Parliament that the leasehold proposal hasn't worked, and they are going to have to sell off the freeholds after all. Bit of an uproar, but there's sod all our sad MPs can do about it."

Q If it aint broke, why fix it?

A You'd better ask Mark Harper that one!

Q What can we do to stop it?

A **Protest!** Support the Hands off our Forest campaign. Sign the petition, display a poster, write to Mark Harper MP, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA phone 01594 823482

or write to Public Forest Estate Consultation Co-ordinator Forestry Commission, 620 Bristol Business Park, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1EJ email: publicconsultation@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Letters written before the consultation opened won't count so please write again.



Hands off our Forest

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A Forest of Questions

The Government has launched a public consultation on the future of the Public Forest Estate in England. This follows months of alarm in the Forest of Dean and other cherished forests. A range of options is set out in the proposals including plans to transfer heritage forests such as the Forest of Dean to charitable trusts.

What does all this mean for the future of the Forest of Dean?

Q What's the Government doing?

A The Coalition Government is pushing through a Public Bodies Bill that will give ministers powers to dispose of the Public Forest Estate. It has also launched a public consultation into the future of the Estate.

www.forestry.gov.uk/england-pfeconsultation

Q Surely the Forest is protected by a Royal Charter and age-old rights?

A These will be over-ridden by the new law.

Q But isn't the Forest of Dean protected under a special 1981 exemption?

A An exemption from sale clause was agreed in 1981 after the previous campaign to protect the Forest of Dean. This clause will be removed under the current proposals. The Government has said that it will now amend its own Bill to guarantee that 'heritage forests' such as the Forest of Dean can only be transferred to a charitable trust or kept in public ownership.

Q When will this happen?

A The Public Bodies Bill is going through Parliament and may receive Assent later this year.

Q Was this mentioned in the election? I don't remember voting for it!

A You didn't! It wasn't in either the Conservative or Liberal Democrat manifestoes. It wasn't mentioned in the Coalition Agreement that formed the Government.

Q Isn't there normally a Green Paper to consider such wider plans, then a White Paper, followed by a Government Bill?

A That has been the process in the past for such wide-ranging and radical ideas.

Q Why are they doing this?

A Local MP, Mark Harper, believes this will shift "the balance of power from 'Big Government' to 'Big Society' by giving individuals, businesses, civil society organisations and local authorities a bigger role in protecting the natural environment and a much bigger say about our priorities for it."

Q So it's not about reducing the deficit and saving money?

A No! The plans will actually cost us a lot of money. Who says? The Government's own Impact Assessment concludes that the costs will outweigh the benefits. The cost of transferring the land will be around £11 million in legal and land agent fees.

Q What are the options?

- A**
1. Leasing of large scale commercial woodland
 2. Community/civil society right-to-buy of multi-purpose, environmental and community woodlands sites
 3. Transfer to charitable organisations of large scale heritage sites.



Q Which option will apply to the Forest of Dean?

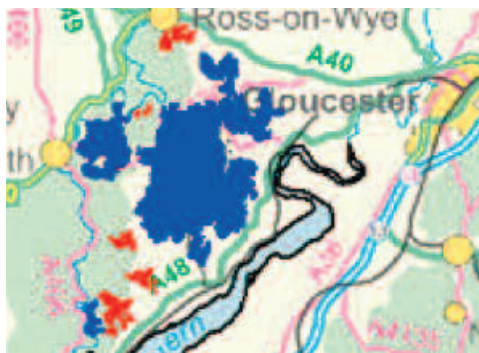
A Most of the Dean is classified as a 'large scale heritage forest' and therefore will be transferred to a charitable trust at no charge.

Q So it's not a sell-off?

A We are told by Mark Harper that it is not a sell-off but a change of ownership.

Q What is the Forest of Dean?

A Not an easy question to answer. The Statutory Forest is marked with boundary stone and recent bollards and in 1981 this area plus some contiguous woods such as High-meadow, Clearwell and Hope woods was protected from sales. But we think of as the Forest of Dean is larger.



The DEFRA map where the blue is categorised as 'heritage' and the red as 'small commercial' forests

Q So what will happen to the 'red' woods?

A They will be taken over by commercial firms.

Q What is happening to the Forestry Commission?

A The Forestry Commission has a team of professional staff who understand woodland management, bio-diversity and the maintenance of a public amenity. It does a good job in the Forest of Dean. In advance of the proposals to dispose of the Forest Estate, the Government has cut the income to the Forestry Commission. Up to 400 redundancies have been announced alongside a further sale of land under current laws. Unions have declared their determination to resist these cuts.

Q What will be left of the Public Forest Estate?

A The Government wishes to dispose of the entire estate. Most will be offered to commercial

interest on long leases. A few other woodlands will be offered to local community groups to buy. The Forestry Commission will be a small agency to regulate forestry.

Q Could a charity afford to run the Forest?

A Not without considerable financial support. The Government has said that it will provide grants in return for "public benefits" but that the charity will have to "become less reliant on Government support over time."

Q What do the woodland charities think?

A The Woodland Trust says: "While we fully support the concept of community ownership, we don't believe that the charitable sector can be the solution to future care of all of the publicly owned heritage woodlands, as it will not have the resources to manage these for decades into the future without substantial and sustained government funding. We don't believe the government has properly considered the feasibility of this option."

Q Isn't this about more local control and management? What about a local charity?

A There is speculation over who might establish a local charity. These include builders, open-cast miners, developers and local landowners. Llamatrek businessman and local councillor, Alastair Fraser wants to spearhead a local trust to run the Forest. These offers demonstrate how difficult it would be to set up a local charity that represents the range of interests and competing claims.

Q What's wrong with such plans?

A Fragmentation of forest ownership and management will increase costs and carry big risks. The Forestry Commission is big enough to employ specialists and to invest in sophisticated forestry equipment. It has centralised management of human resources, finance, IT and the like.

A local charity would need to balance the conflicting and competing interests of those who use the Forest for pleasure and business. The local community is pleased with the way the Forestry Commission has handled these tensions. There are genuine concerns over how trustees of a small charity could cope with such pressures.

Q Couldn't a local charity make efficiency savings or raise more money?

A A small charity would be less efficient than the Forestry Commission. Currently the more profitable forests cross-subsidise the rest. Care of forest would be at risk if professional staff were replaced with volunteers. Income could be raised through increased hunting and shooting and higher fees for fishing and other uses. The League Against Cruel Sports is alarmed by these plans and warns that it not just land and trees under threat but the animals and wildlife. Various leisure pursuits such as off-road driving and extreme adventure activities could be developed.

The charity would need to take out public liability insurance (The Forestry Commission is so big it can carry risk itself). This could prove very costly.

Q Could more money be made from timber?

A There is not much profit to be made in small forests in the south of Britain and it seems unlikely that big commercial logging companies will invest much unless the rules were relaxed significantly.

Q What will happen to the timber industry?

A Some 145,000 people work in the timber industry. The Forestry Commission supplies the market with timber at a constant rate to keep saw mills going. Private forests tend to fell trees when the market price is high. Around two thirds of private forests are not actively managed.

Q Could more money be made from the coal and mineral reserves?

A The Forest of Dean is still rich with coal close to the surface. The most profitable way to extract it would be through strip-mining or open cast quarrying, a process that would devastate the valleys where the coal lies. Restrictions could be placed on the lease held by the charity to protect public benefits.

Q What would happen if the charity fails?

A Receivers would take over on behalf of creditors and would be obliged to secure maximum returns from the assets. Under the amended Public Bodies Bill the land or its lease



would have to revert to public ownership or be passed to another charitable trust. There would be much legal argument about what constitutes the assets of the charity and how to value the lease, buildings and equipment. The Government may be forced to buy back what it gave away or settle the debts of the charity.

Q But who would manage the forest if the Forestry Commission was only a regulator?

A Good question!

Q Will public access be protected?

A The Government says that public rights of way and access will be unaffected. But the Forest of Dean has very few designated Rights of Way. Instead the Forestry Commission provides permissive access to the Forest. This access has to be managed including appropriate parking facilities, gates, walks, etc. It is hard to imagine how this could be guaranteed under new and different owners.

The Ramblers Association are opposed to these plans. Even with the promises for heritage forests the Ramblers say that: "A large question mark hangs over the long term viability of maintaining the levels of access provided by the Forestry Commission by any new charitable body managing such woodlands."

Q Won't local planning rules protect the Forest from unwanted development?

A It should do but the Government is also planning to relax planning controls.

Q The Government says that there is a conflict between the Forestry Commission's role as regulator and supplier of timber. Is this true?