

Letter from Sarah Boyack to Trade Union representatives within the Forestry Commission

December 2008

Edward Shephard
Trade Union Side Secretary
Forestry Commission
Edinburgh

Dear Edward

I wanted to thank you for the opportunity to meet yourself and senior trade union officers from the Forestry Commission and representatives from PCS, Unite T&G section last week.

I wanted to put in writing our opposition to these plans. We do support the proposals to enable the Forestry Commission to enter into joint ventures so that the maximum public benefit can be gained through the development of renewables in our forests. However we totally oppose the suggestions that at least 25% of the Forestry Commission Estate should be handed over to large private forestry companies to be managed for 75 year leases or hived off to a trust which would not be run by the government and which would be empowered to sell of the forest land it has been given.

Labour strongly supports action to reduce carbon emissions but we do not think these proposals are thought through and would be deeply damaging. We will oppose these plans when they are discussed in Parliament during the passage of the Climate Change Bill and at every opportunity. The accompanying documentation to last week's Climate Change Bill referred to the valuation of the forest estate at being over £850 million. But it does not say how much money would be released from Ministers' proposals. However, there is mention of £0.2m in 2009-10 and 2010-11 for the letting of cutting rights and establishing contracts, and £0.3m in each of those years for establishing a trust to which the receipts would be transferred, and £0.5m for each year for the creation of joint ventures. We therefore regard the suggestions that these are merely proposals and that Ministers will listen to the results of their consultation with suspicion.

We agree that promises to protect staff jobs, terms and conditions are not promises that can be made in the long term given that TUPE rights only operate for the first three years and these leases are for 75 years. We also understand that the offer of redeployment will also be hard to sustain in rural parts of Scotland.

Rhoda Grant Labour's Rural Spokesperson, Labour list member for the Highlands and Islands, and Elaine Murray MSP for Dumfries, our Environment Spokesperson, have already met with local Forestry Commission staff. We are encouraging our colleagues to

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work with your members locally and are keen offer our support to your campaign to persuade Ministers to drop these damaging plans.

We will also be working with other interested parties, such as those who share our concerns about the potential loss of recreational access to our forests and biodiversity and wildlife interests who are also potentially adversely affected and also with colleagues in other political parties in the Parliament.

From talking to many people over the last two weeks I wanted to share with you how positive many were about the range of superb initiatives that have been taken in the past few years by Forestry Commission staff in working with local communities and a range of organisations to make sure that our forests play their full part in generating resources – both from timber and the development of tourism and in promoting access and environmental benefits across Scotland.

We feel strongly that these proposals would unpick these achievements and be deeply damaging to the public interest. We will therefore be campaigning against these proposals and encouraging others to make their views know to Ministers. Feel free to pass this letter onto to your members and encourage them to sign our petition at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/saveourforests> . We will include a link to your petition on our website.

Yours sincerely

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