



2014:

An explanation of the latest Government plans...

...And why we have to carry on campaigning
to keep our Forest of Dean in public hands

Introduction

In 2010/11, more than 11,000 people in the Forest of Dean and more than 500,000 nationally signed petitions against Government plans to sell off or dispose of our Forest and other public forests across England. More than 3,000 people gathered at Speech House for a rally in freezing weather; and thousands of people, from schoolchildren to OAPs, wrote passionate letters and marched with banners for the cause.

The Government admitted they'd got it wrong and shelved its plans – a great victory for Foresters' people power! But HOOF predicted that wouldn't be the end of it.

Three years on, the Government has announced plans to form a new organisation to run our Forests.

The good news is, our Forest will remain in public ownership and further removed from politicians. The bad news is that the law – if passed unchanged from the current plan - could pave the way for a mass sell-off or gradual disposal of our Forest in the future.

HOOF recognises the need for legal reform of forestry, but it must be to protect our Forest and other public woodlands, not endanger their future.

This leaflet explains what is being planned, why HOOF is concerned and why we believe it's vital people are aware and ready to fight another day, if necessary.

WHY IS HOOF CONCERNED?

The Government wants to introduce a new law to form a new organisation which would manage our Forest and others across England (known as the Public Forest Estate) and also own all the land, facilities and assets on behalf of the nation (ie us, the people of Britain). It would operate independently of Government, and the Government says it will only buy and sell land and allow commercial freedoms which protect or improve the entire estate.

Many principles outlined by the Government in January sound fine – including “conserving” and “enhancing” our Forests “for the benefit of people, nature and the economy”; “publicly-owned and operational independent of Government”; “managed by experts”; “work closely with communities” and “sustainable forest management”.

But HOOF is far from satisfied with the detail.



Here are four reasons why:

NO FUNDING GUARANTEE: In the whole of England, £22 million is needed annually (about 38p per taxpayer; per year) to properly manage all public forests. This is a minuscule amount of Government spending, but neither Conservative or Labour ministers will guarantee the funding. Neither do the latest plans. The evidence of funding cuts can already be seen with closure of public facilities, getting on top of tree disease and managing the boar and other wildlife. It has been calculated that the £22 million annual spending produces a return of £400 million annually in terms of health benefits and other accountable “natural capital”.

ACCOUNTABLE TO WHOM? While HOOF welcomes the assurance that community representatives will be included on the board of management alongside industry, conservation and access representatives, we understand the board – or at least its chair – will be appointed by the Secretary of State, and only this minister (currently Owen Paterson) will have the power to intervene to stop land sales. A separate board of guardians, acting as a watchdog, will have no “teeth” or legal power to prevent sell-offs or commercial exploitation. The guardians must be given the power to stop land sales, leasing or change of use of land.

UNSAFE AND UNSTOPPABLE? In addition to questions over the accountability and powers of the board of management and guardians, HOOF has worries over the strength of a proposed Charter and its safeguards. We have been told it will have no legal or statutory power. And although we and Parliament will get to view a draft, it is up to the board of management to adopt it only when the new organisation has been established, after a new law has been passed. Cart before horse?

GETTING CORPORATE: The new organisation will be set up as a public corporation. Numerous public corporations – from British Rail to Royal Mail – have been sold off during the past 30 years by Governments (both Labour and Tory). Forest Enterprise England (FEE), the operating arm of the Forestry Commission is also a Public Corporation, but FEE does not own our Forest. This new organisation will.



Between 1981 and 2013, these were some of the public corporations sold off by governments:



The Government assures us that its plan to form a public corporation to "own and manage" our Forests is "not a halfway house to privatisation". While this Government insists it will not privatise Forests, it cannot guarantee a future Government won't do so. Mrs Thatcher said she would never sell off Royal Mail, but our current Government did so!

HOOF insists that within the new legislation there must be a guarantee that the public corporation cannot be privatised during the lifetime of this Act of Parliament.



WHY WE NEED NEW LEGISLATION

HOOF has long been campaigning for a new law that will keep our Forest safe from being taken away from us, both for now and for the future.

While existing law protects the Statutory Forest (the main block) of Dean from being sold, there is no law protecting us from ruinous decisions that may be taken by politicians now or in the future about the way in which our Forest will be run, and nothing to stop disposal of outlying land, woods and other forests being sold, leased, traded or swapped to balance the books.

The most recent example of the piecemeal loss of our public woodland possible under current law is the buy-out of the majority of the Forest Holidays by Lloyds Development Capital. This has resulted in communities across England losing access to their woodlands, which are being developed into exclusive log cabin sites. The Christchurch campsite in the Forest of Dean closed at the end of the last season, and will now be replaced by expensive log cabins for upmarket tourists, also depriving ordinary, non-wealthy, people of a place to camp or go caravanning.

This gradual back-door privatisation is why we decided to fight for new legislation, to secure our Forest's future and also to keep it out of the hands of ministers.

WHY WE NEED NEW LEGISLATION

After 18 months of work, the Independent Panel for Forestry, appointed by the Government in the wake of scrapping its original sell-off/disposal proposals, eventually came up with a solution we believed achieved a good balance of benefitting people, nature and economy equally.

The Government says it is following the Panel's recommendations. But it has turned the most crucial one – as far as the people of the Forest of Dean are concerned – on its head.

We and the panel wanted communities to be given more of a say in how our Forests are run, to be able to prevent the commercialisation of our Forest, and to ensure it could not be taken out of our hands.

The new model proposed by the Government offers none of these guarantees, which HOOF says is vital.



Public ownership explained: the current situation

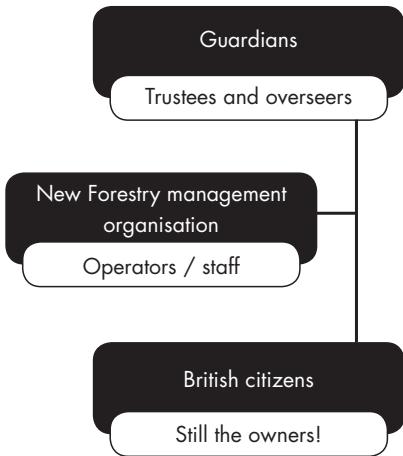


The Environment Secretary is ultimately in charge, via Defra. Defra is the boss of the Forestry Commission.

Ownership of the English Public Forest Estate (including the Forest of Dean) is vested in the Environment Secretary (formerly Caroline Spelman, then Owen Paterson), who holds it in trust for the nation. (The Crown has not owned the Forest of Dean since 1923)

While HOOF supports the Forestry Commission, and its staff's level of skills and expertise, the public service aspect of their work in managing our Forest has recently been increasingly undermined by staffing nationally being cut by a quarter; budgets slashed from £22 million to £16.5m in 2015, and decisions forced upon staff and their bosses by politicians. It's as if the Forestry Commission has been set up by the Government to fail.

In its plan, the Government has followed the Panel recommendations that the new organisation build on the strengths of the FC and to be an exemplar of sustainable management. HOOF welcomes these commitments.



Proposed model by Forestry Panel (supported by HOOF)

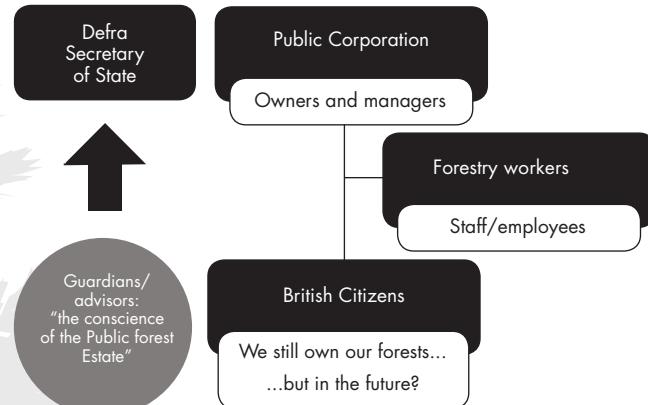
Forestry Commission staff would continue with the same duties as currently, but be run by a board of executive directors, acting on decisions made by the Guardians. It will be placed at arm's length from Defra. FC staff will no longer be civil servants but overseen ultimately by the Guardians or Charter Trustees. The 'evolved' organisation may be renamed.

A Board of Guardians or Charter Trustees, with equal representation from communities, conservation and businesses, would oversee the management and ownership of forests, be bound by a Parliamentary Charter, and be answerable to Parliament (rather than the Secretary of State/ Government). They would hold the forests in trust for the nation. How these Guardians would be selected and appointed is not determined.

In 2012, HOOF declared its support for recommendations drawn up by the Independent Panel for Forestry, headed by Bishop James Jones of Liverpool (who also produced the Hillsborough Disaster Report), while calling for extra safeguards, a means of recalling Guardians found in breach of trust, and a statutory Parliamentary Charter lasting for at least 25 years, rather than 10 as proposed. This remains HOOF's stance.



Government's proposed model (as of early 2014)



A new Public Forest Estate Management Body to be established as a Public Corporation, which will also hold forests' ownership in trust for the nation. It becomes the employer of the forestry workers, so they are no longer civil servants. Non-executive members of the board will represent communities, conservation and business. It will adopt a non-statutory Charter after becoming established. Guardians will also have the same representations, and act as an advisory watchdog with no legal powers, rather than overseers or managers (as the panel proposed).

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Where might we be now if we had not succeeded in defeating the Government's plans in February 2011? Our Forest would no longer be ours, it would belong to a charity at best!

HOOF acknowledges the benefits of being able to meet with the Government, and also the Forest of Dean people's key role in shaping the Panel's views and final report.

There is very little chance anyone will try to sell off our Forest before the next election, at least.

Our task is now to ensure politicians can't do so in the future and the new law doesn't enable them to do so, that we get public funding to ensure the management of our Forest doesn't go to rack and ruin, and also watch out for piecemeal privatisation.

We expect the earliest we will get to see draft legislation will be in May.

The stage we are at is crucial to securing the long-term future. We MUST remain vigilant until we get the safeguards we need.

We ask that you help spread the word, show other friends and relations this leaflet, visit www.handsoffourforest.org or find us on Facebook and Twitter; and look out for updates.

This leaflet is to help you get clued up in case we DO need to rally once again! We also welcome your feedback.
What do you think of our campaign aims?

HOOF is also happy to come and give presentations to groups and community public meetings.

Please contact: owen@handsoffourforest.org for more information.

DONATIONS FOR THE HOOF FIGHTING FUND ALSO GRATEFULLY RECEIVED!





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