



New Year 2014 message from Rich Daniels, HOOF chairman

THREE years ago, on January 3, 2011, more than 3,000 of us gathered during a blizzard on the field at Speech House to send a message to the Government: the Forest of Dean belongs to us, all of us, and we will not allow it to be sold off,

disposed or transferred to private hands. Never!

Six weeks later, we were told they'd got the message and the Government performed a 'mea culpa'. "We're sorry. We got it wrong." But we warned everyone then that we had to stay vigilant to prevent the Government from trying to do the same thing again.

And we weren't wrong. The time has come again for everyone to engage again with the fight to save our Forest from predators, and battle a new piece of legislation which, if passed by Parliament, has the potential of leaving our Forest of Dean open to exploitation from (to quote from the latest proposals) "a range of commercial freedoms... [including] mineral extraction, agriculture and industrial lettings of land and premises". HOOF doesn't think there are anywhere near enough safeguards to protect the Forest from being taken over by private leisure and industrial concerns, and we fear that transferring the ownership and management to a public corporation could be a halfway house to full-scale privatisation.

The HOOF campaign ever since the Government 'yew-turn' of February 17, 2011 has been confined to diplomacy: meetings alongside campaigners from other English public forests with high-ranking civil servants and politicians. On umpteen occasions, we have had to confirm again and again our position in response to consultation after consultation: that the Forest remains ours and must always. We have worked very hard and spent many hours and days getting our point of view across repeatedly, firmly and politely, on behalf of all the communities and users of the Forest of Dean. And according to the other published responses to the latest consultation, HOOF is not alone in its concerns – most of our views are shared by many other organisations. But do the views of all of us count for anything versus the will of Government?

The people of the Forest of Dean and elsewhere still support HOOF and share its aims: this was shown at a recent fundraiser at Westbury-on-Severn Village Hall, a ceilidh dance organised by the community association Forest Unity when £500 was raised for HOOF. All who attended confirmed their commitment to our cause and showed they were ready to protest again.

The Independent Panel for Forestry which Government appointed did listen to us and take heed at the universal message they received when they visited the Forest of Dean. This was reflected in the Panel's final report of 2012. However, in its proposals, the Government has turned many Panel recommendations on their head to allow a potential free-for-all of commercial interests, to form a new management organisation which will be a public corporation just as British Rail, British Telecom and Royal Mail were... before they were privatised, became accountable to their shareholders and unaccountable to the public, to whom they previously belonged. And it won't only be the management of the Forest transferred to this public corporation, but our Forest land as well!

In spring 2014, the Government plans to introduce a new Bill to Parliament to form a new management organisation to "own and manage the Public Forest Estate" (of England, including the Dean), a public corporation given the freedom to open our beautiful Forest to "commercial freedoms" which may include leisure complexes or "mineral extraction". It will increase the risk of our Forest being sold or disposed of in the future.

There will be no White Paper, and we will only get to see the draft Bill on January 29, a mere month or six weeks before it is due to be introduced to Parliament. This, combined with the resurfacing of the idea of a "community right to bid" for land that already belongs to us, gives a distinct sense of déjà vu from the 2010/11 battle which HOOF formed to fight. Few, if any, of our demands have been heeded and we feel as if we're back at square one.

In whatever language and jargon the Government dresses its proposals, they amount to the same thing: permitting the removal of OUR Forest from OUR hands and put into others' hands.

Do we want our entire Forest to be opened up to corporations, turned into a playground only accessible for some, by this or any future Government? Foresters, and all those who love our Forest and others across England must speak up NOW and demand with one voice: HANDS OFF OUR FOREST!

Please stay alert for further announcements in the coming weeks and months: we need everyone on board once again! The HOOF steering group will be meeting later this week (beginning of January) to decide on the next steps of the renewed campaign.

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See also www.handsoffourforest.org