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Public ready to rise up again if Government fails them over public woods & forests

In a survey carried out by **Our Forests** with 38 Degrees [1], just under 90% of those responding [2] said they would campaign against the Government [3] if their concerns about and hopes for England's public woods and forests are not met [4].

Hen Anderson founder of Save Our Woods and **Our Forests** member said, *"This survey confirms what we know directly from our grassroots networks, in communities across the country people are gearing up again to challenge the Government and put pressure on their MPs if needs be."*

Our Forests has been in touch with many of those groups who share our concerns and who have signed up to the following public statement, which we will be putting to Government and sending out to all 171 MPs with public woods and forests within their constituencies:

"We believe that public ownership of the Public Forest Estate must be secured, through new legislation. The rich cultural, historical and natural diversity of our forests and woods, and full access to them, is best protected under the continued stewardship of the Forestry Commission, fully resourced to sustainably manage and expand our multi-purpose Public Forest Estate now and in the future."[5]

The Independent Panel on Forestry is due to publish its report and recommendations to Government on the future of our public woods and forests (the Public Forest Estate), the Forestry Commission and England's woodland and forestry policy in general on Wednesday, 4th July [6].

In its first policy U-turn, the Government was forced to declare that it would halt its disposal proposals on 17th February 2011, but England's public woods and forests are still not safe. The initial tranche of 40,000 hectares put up for 'disposal' has only been taken off the market *'pending'* the publication of the Independent Panel's report. [7]

Rich Daniels, **Our Forests** member and chair of Hands Off Our Forest said,

"It would seem political suicide to do so, but the evidence on record from Parliament is that the Government could put significant areas of public woods and forests back on the market. If they go against the public will on this issue, they can expect a conflagration in constituencies across England.

It would be unwise for Government to think that the sale of any significant part of OUR public Forests and woods would pass without reigniting the flames of protest in the hearts of people and forest communities across England. The prospect of any our public woods and forests being threatened again after we have fought so hard to protect them will be met with even more determined campaigning."

Not surprisingly, given the still present threat of future sales, almost everyone surveyed wanted to get the Secretary of State's hands off our public woods – under current law that political appointee is said to 'own' our woods and forests [8]. While people wanted an end to all short-termist political meddling in the management of our public woods and forests – they were strongly in favour of the Public Forest Estate remaining a publicly-owned and supported national resource.

Nearly 90% of respondents felt that the Public Forest Estate merited on-going taxpayer support – with over 65% of those prepared as taxpayers to contribute at least £5.00 annually with 32% willing to see taxpayer contributions of more than £10.00 per year. The current settlement for the management of all 1,500 of England's public woods and forests amounts to a subsidy from taxpayers in England of just 30p per person per year (70% of the costs of managing the 258,000 hectares of the Public Forest Estate are met by income generated from activities taking place and products generated from the Public Forest Estate).

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Notes to Editors

1. Summary of **Our Forests/38 Degrees** survey attached.
2. 1,292 people responded to the survey (comparable number as for standard opinion poll).
3. Public woodland and forestry sites are located in the constituencies of 171 MPs: 126 Conservative; 32 Labour; 12 Liberal Democrat; 1 independent.
4. At the height of the public furore over the Government's 'disposal' proposals for the whole of the PFE, some 534,000 people signed 38 Degrees' on-line petition to 'Save Our Forests!'
5. Grassroots groups from across England who have signed up to the statement above:

Friends of the Lake District – www.fld.org.uk

Friends of Thetford Forest - www.fotf.org.uk

Hands Off Our Forest (HOOF – Forest of Dean) - www.handsoffourforest.org

Keep Our Forests Public

Save Cannock Chase - www.savecannockchase.org.uk

Save Chopwell Forest - www.friendsofchopwellwood.org.uk

Save Delamere Forest - www.savedelamereforest.co.uk

Save Lakelands Forests - www.savelakelandsforests.org.uk

Save Our Woods - <http://saveourwoods.co.uk>

Save Sandlings Forest - <http://www.savesandlingsforest.co.uk/>

6. Independent Panel on Forestry, see: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/forestrypanel/files/IFP-newsletter-3.pdf>
7. 40,000 hectares is equivalent to 15% of the total area (258,000 hectares) of the Public Forest Estate – 15% is the maximum amount the Government's lawyers advised they could 'dispose' of under existing legislation i.e. without a change in the law. The following Parliamentary questions were answered by Jim Paice, the Minister responsible for Forestry at the time:

26 Apr 2011: Forests: Kent

Michael Fallon: *To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has for the sale of publicly-owned forests in Kent. [51311]*

Mr Paice: *All new sales of public forest estate were suspended from 17 February 2011. We will decide on the level of any future sales and the conditions to be attached to them only once we have received and considered the advice from the Independent Panel on Forestry.*

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110426/text/110426w0001.htm>

8 Jun 2011: Forests

Neil Parish: *To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what arrangements she has put in place to ensure the protection and continuation of existing permissive access rights under any prospective sale of Forestry Commission land. [58033]*

Mr Paice: *All new sales of the public forest estate have been suspended until the Government have considered the recommendations from the Independent Panel on Forestry.*

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110608/text/110608w0001.htm>

The above responses confirm that 'disposals'/sales could resume once the report has been published and "considered" by Government.

8. Forestry Act 1967 (as amended); Forestry Act 1979.

Our Forests was formed to ensure that the views of the more than half a million people and myriad grassroots groups who rose up in opposition to the reprehensible plans to sell-off or otherwise dispose of the Public Forest Estate in England are fully understood and taken into account by the Coalition Government and its appointed 'Independent Panel on Forestry Policy'. Individual members, in alphabetical order, are:

Hen Anderson (Co-founder 'Save Our Woods', who also runs a smallholding and woodland on Exmoor)

Richard Daniels (Chair of the grassroots campaigning group Hands off our Forest (HOOF) in the Forest of Dean)

Dr Gabriel Hemery (chartered forester, cofounder and Chief Executive, the Sylva Foundation);

Tony Juniper (independent environmental advisor, campaigner, writer and former Director of Friends of the Earth);

Rod Leslie (former Chief Executive, Forest Enterprise);

Robin Maynard (environmental campaign consultant);

Jonathon Porritt (Founder Director Forum for the Future and former Chair of UK Sustainable Development Commission).