

STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS!
Bishop gives voice to growing unease over future of public woods and forests.
Latest Government plans raise more questions, rather than allaying fears.

For immediate release: 3rd August 2013

Our Forests was on the brink of sending out the attached Press Release when two events occurred to add to & qualify its content & commentary:

- 1. Bishop James, the chair of the Independent Panel on Forestry, provided the following statement to Our Forests' member and chair of HOOF, Rich Daniels:**
"As Bishop James said when he met with you he would not be content with any proposals about the future of forestry which contradicted the recommendations of the Independent Panel. In particular the Bishop would be unhappy if the Government abandoned the proposal to establish a Parliamentary Charter, if it marginalised the proposed Guardians to the point that they become ineffectual, if it failed to establish a distance between the Government and the management and development of the Public Forest Estate. These were all key elements of the Panel's report and recommendations. The Government would be unwise to provoke a public reaction by failing to follow through on the Panel's recommendations."

This statement was in response to the increasing concerns being voiced amongst grassroots communities that the Government is rowing back on some of the promises it made in response to the Panel's recommendations. As such, the Bishop's statement underpins the rationale for & tone of *Our Forest's* press release.

- 2. The Forestry Commission/Defra released (ad hoc) their latest outline for the management structures and governance of the Public Forest Estate management body. Although dated 29/7/13, Our Forests only received its copy indirectly on 31/7/13 and other interested NGOs and groups on 1/8/13.**
The structures and governance outlined in this latest draft appear to address some, but **not ALL** of *Our Forests* concerns or those voiced by other grassroots groups and activists who have been campaigning for a secure and sustainable future for our public woods and forests from the outset. The document is attached.

Rich Daniels, Our Forests member and chair of HOOF said,
"In the face of mass public protests against the proposed disposal of the whole public forest estate, the Government made its first major U-turn and promised to secure not sell off our public woods and forests. That change of heart was very welcome, as were the recommendations of the Independent Panel chaired by the highly-respected, Bishop of Liverpool. But now campaigners fear that much of that long, hard effort to get the Government to understand the wide range of benefits properly-managed public forests deliver may be undermined. The latest arrangements appear to minimise the direct and real influence of the public and forest communities in the management of the public forest estate. And the emphasis for the new body seems to be primarily on developing commercial enterprises that can exploit and extract cash from our forests and woods, rather than maximising their

less readily monetized and marketable, but nonetheless hugely valuable, public and environmental ‘goods and services. The very things and distinctive, unique character of the public forest estate that people came out in defence of en masse.’”

Our Forests specific comments follow and in the attached press release:

- **Point 1**, reiterates the Government’s promise “*that England’s Public Forest Estate will remain secured in public ownership*”. Good to see that upfront, but the details of how that public ownership will be secured remain vague.
- **Point 3**, “*Nothing in this document is fixed*”. Good, because there still appear to be omissions from and dilutions some of the Panel’s key recommendations as set out below and in the Our Forests press release.
- **Point 6**, “*revenue generation and self-sufficiency*” are prioritised above the new body’s duty to balance those “*with generating positive impacts for people and nature.*”
- **Point 8**, The Guardians – as per the concerns Our Forests rises in our press release, as proposed in the document the Guardians appear to have a weaker, woollier role than envisaged by the Panel. They are described as “*the conscience of the Public Forest Estate*”, not the managers and sitting outside the Board of Executive and Non-Executive directors (who will be appointed by the Secretary of State).
- **Point 9**, there is a veiled threat that time is pressing for securing the parliamentary time for the new primary legislation necessary to establish the new structures. This threat has been made obliquely several times to various campaigners and grassroots groups concerned about the future of the PFE – along the lines of, ‘don’t hold things up or you may lose everything.’ The Government shouldn’t need reminding that it was its own actions in proposing to dispose of the whole 100% of the 1,500 public woods and forests that make-up the PFE that got it into this situation in the first place and it is its job, responding to the protests by 100s of 1000s of people across the political and social spectrums, to enable a positive solution. It is the Government and its officials that to date have taken nearly 3 and a half years to reach this point!
- **Point 15**, the document refers to the organisation’s objectives and duties being “*reflected in a public-facing “charter”, setting the body’s remit for a long period, for example 10 years.*” That is not as definite or legally-binding as the Parliamentary Charter the Panel proposed – hence our concerns raised in the press release as to the absence of a real Charter hold.
- **Point 17**, Ownership “*The organisation would take over ownership of the estate ownership would be vested in the new body rather than its Board.*” As the Panel recommended, the PFE should ‘be held in trust for the Nation’ set down in a legally-binding Charter. The Guardians should be an integral part of the new management body (not a separate repository for the ‘touchy-feely’ stuff) and be the part which represents and guards ‘public ownership’.