

A response to the Science & Technology Select Committee inquiry into forest research and the 2010 spending review

SUMMARY

- The 25% reduction in Forestry Commission funding announced in the Spending Review has already dented capacity and will impact on the UK research base in forestry.
- The capacity of Forest Research to collaborate with university academic departments is threatened. Inherent university capacity has reduced in recent years. This is leading to a university skills deficit.
- A significant proportion of Research Council funding for research is directed to overseas programmes, with significant gaps in support of UK-based ecological research.
- Climate change and emerging diseases are already placing significant burdens on capacity; diminishing budgets are likely to make more severe the mismatch between the challenges faced and the capacity available.

The effect of the Spending Review on forest research

1. The 25% reduction in funding for the Forestry Commission announced in the 2010 Spending Review has led to job cuts, site closures and reduced services to the public¹, and it is highly likely that this will have significant repercussions for services to the public. However, the full extent of the effects on forest research is not yet clear. Forest Research, the principal organisation in Britain engaged in forestry and tree-related research, secures approximately 66% of its funding from the Forestry Commission² and therefore an effect on forest research both within and outside the Forest Research agency is also expected. In addition to funding cuts, the Forestry Commission is to be substantially reformed; an Advisory Panel is yet to confirm the future role and structure of the Commission, but implications for spending and research are viewed as inevitable.
2. In light of these fiscal and structural uncertainties, it would be prudent to see the whole future of forest research as at risk, and to focus initially on areas of particular and immediate concern.
3. External recruitment to Forest Research is frozen at present. The 2010-2011 Business Plan details that full-time equivalent permanent staff will be cut by 25, and that non-permanent staff will increase by 12, compared to 2008-09 staffing levels².
4. Forest Research has provided some HE opportunities through sandwich placements, undergraduate and post-doctoral placements, and offers some industrial partnerships for Research Council CASE

¹ Response to 'Shaping the Future of FC England' <http://fctu.org.uk/spendingreview/index.asp> 23 May 2011

² Forest Research Corporate and Business Plan 2010-2011

PhD studentships³. It is an important research partner to several research-intensive universities in the UK, and is specifically the only body of forest expertise available to the Northern Ireland community. However, due to financial pressures, funding for part-funded PhD studentships has been cut. Therefore diminishing resources indirectly threatens the research conducted on forestry in the UK in collaboration with academic institutions.

5. Current financial constraints are set against a history of under-funding for UK forest research since the 1990s⁴. This has been highlighted in government reports including 'A Review of UK Environmental Science, Final Report' from 2003. University forestry departments have also suffered from a continued lack of investment. Lost expertise and infrastructural support at major forest schools at Bangor, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Oxford has decreased core capacity; much of the remaining expertise has been restructured and placed alongside different fields. The capacity for UK forest research at Universities has therefore been steadily eroded.

How priorities in forest research are set and resources allocated

6. The Forestry Commission is the main funder of forest research in the UK.
7. The vast majority of the Forestry Commission's research budget is allocated directly to Forest Research. The Forestry Commission therefore offers fewer opportunities to support independent research by universities and the private sector directly.
8. There is a need for more openness and clarity on how public funds for Forestry Commission research are allocated. **Improved partnership with universities, NGOs and the private sector could build on existing relationships, improve competencies, create a more competitive market and provide the opportunity for holistic research.**
9. The Research Councils (specifically NERC) fund a significant amount of forest research by UK universities. The majority of this research is focussed on tropical forestry; knowledge is therefore utilised only for management of forests outside the UK.
10. The Research Councils fund a limited amount of UK-based forest research. There is an emphasis on fundamental research topics that are relatively disconnected from applied issues. This narrowly focussed research does not traverse the science–policy interface. Because of this, little research is done into the broader ecology and management of British forests outside of Forest Research. This is particularly important given our increased need for understanding of ecosystem services and management on a landscape scale.

How the UK's capability in forest research compares with other countries

11. Forest research in the UK had tended to be under- resourced compared with comparable developed countries. There has now been some convergence, but this is mainly due to widespread austerity measures.

³ <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/infd-5txhaj> 8th June 2011

⁴ Forestry Research; a mandate for change (1990) Committee on Forestry Research, National Research Council, John Wiley & Sons, UK.

12. Many Western countries foster a greater role for privately funded research, supported by commercial forestry companies and NGOs; thereby decreasing vulnerability to changes in public-sector funding. Similar initiatives are now being developed in the UK and should be encouraged.
13. The UK's capability in forest research could be improved by greater international collaboration on applied topics.

Are there threats to forest research in the UK?

14. Skills gaps in forest research are becoming an increasing problem as universities lack the critical mass to provide adequate training, and experienced specialist researchers approach retirement or are subject to non-replacement decisions. The reduced level of government funding may also dissuade younger researchers from entering the British forest research sector.
15. The long term nature of forest research requires long term funding. It is difficult to obtain this degree of security and continuity. There is likely to be a reduction in perceived impact (e.g. peer reviewed articles and other outputs). These conditions can introduce difficulties for career progression, and exclude younger researchers.
16. A reduced capacity for adequate forest research is concerning given the technical challenges ahead. Challenges due to climate change, phenology and susceptibility to disease and the need for carbon storage capacity all relate to forests, and resolution of these issues will require long term research commitment.
17. Woodland diseases such as *Phytophthora lateralis*, *Phytophthora ramorum* and Acute Oak Decline (AOD) are emerging diseases that may place a considerable burden on foresters, requiring on-going research and management. Forest Research was unsuccessful in securing funds for AOD research from DEFRA earlier this year; however their work on this continues through a reallocation of funds. Tree health and biosecurity research is now under review by DEFRA and a strategy is due to be produced later in the year.
18. The UKNEA has identified a large range of ecosystem services that woodlands provide, estimating their monetary and non-monetary value. The range of benefits UK woodlands provide illustrates the importance of these ecosystems to the economic and social well-being of the nation. This should be reflected in forest research budgets and support for forest research workers in the UK.

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