

Scotland leads the way in agriforestry

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Afforestation can be a farm diversification, not part of a binary choice between farming and forestry

IN THE last four decades, Scotland has planted more trees than anywhere else in the UK, taking the area of tree cover to just under 1.5 million hectares.

Malcolm Young, from SAC Consulting's Woodland team, expects this area will continue to rise as more farmers better understand the benefits of woodland and forests to their farm business.

Commenting on the 2019 Forest Research report, Mr Young said that woodland and forest plantings have been on the year-on-year rise: "Since 2016 almost 35,000ha of trees have been planted, taking the UK wooded area to 3.19 million ha, 73% of which has been planted on privately owned land. The average area of new planting is 24ha, a clear indication that the bulk of planting is being done on farms, by farmers."

He added: "The bulk of this planting has been in Scotland, with almost 28,000ha being planted over the same period, with planting levels in 2018/19 being the highest since 2002. SAC Consulting's woodland team contributed over 1000ha in the last couple of seasons."

Mr Young also highlighted recent reports indicating the very high market values of farms being sold with tree-planting potential.

"Typically, these farms are being sold due to retirement from farming, with the land often being purchased for forestry investment. In my opinion, this is the result of a very binary view – forestry or farming, the sentiment of selling out rather than buying in to the opportunity that trees create.

"These two land uses can sit comfortably with each other," he insisted. "By establishing well designed timber or carbon crops on part of the farm, farmers will be in a position to reap the benefits of tree planting, while maintaining control of their land. Added to this there is the incentive of cash-boost from grants, growing an investment planned for retirement income and/or succession, the downscaling of farming enterprise, shelter belts, flood mitigation, shooting, and carbon foot-print reduction or offsetting. Afforestation can be diversification, not part of a binary choice."

Mr Young continued: "The rise in Scotland can be attributed to an increased focus by the Scottish Government, with full cross-party support on meeting global targets to reduce CO2 emissions, renewable energy, addressing a forecasted slump in home-grown timber, and incentives for tree-planting, compared with the wider UK.

"Based on the enquiries SAC Consulting receives from farm and landowners in Scotland, the interest in planting trees reflects a growing awareness among farmers of the contribution woods and forests can make to farm businesses, for example for livestock shelter which reduces feed cost and keeps animals in better condition; better utilisation of ground with limited agricultural value, succession planning, diversification or reducing diffuse pollution."

The proposals drawn up by SAC Consulting range from small-scale woods designed for shelter, schemes which deliver through to larger areas of hill ground where timber production is seen as a better use of the land, both of which deliver 'ecosystem services'. In terms of species choice, the Forest Research report surmises that 51% of UK woodland area is planted to conifers and the rest to a range of broadleaved trees.

"When you dig into the detail, 74% of Scotland is planted to conifers, the dominant species being Sitka Spruce (58%), followed by Scots Pine (17.7%), but we are also seeing an increase in other conifers such as Norway Spruce," he said.

Sitka spruce continues to dominate due to the species' superior growth rates compared to others, coupled with its ability to establish and grow high quality timber in a broad range of conditions. Farmers are keen that their woods grow in value and produce an income which is why conifer options are favoured.

Source: <https://www.thescottishfarmer.co.uk/news/18392283.scotland-leads-way-agriforestry/>