

MUNTJAC AND CHIPS: PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FARM WOODS ASSOCIATED WITH ALIEN DEER AND WOODFUEL HEATING

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Motivation for managing farm woods to meet economic and environmental objectives is often low. Traditional markets often demand a minimum of one 25 t lorry load of single species and consistent quality. This is not practicable on many farm woods which are of mixed species and age classes. Creation of markets for wood fuel can make a significant contribution to the costs of small woodland management. Small scale wood-chip boilers use chip derived from mixed species and dimensions and utilise the whole tree. The value of wood chip is related to the price of the competing fuel, and is much higher than the value of traditional products. With heating oil at 35 p/L, the equivalent value of wood-chip derived from seasoned wood is around £110/t.

Rural Energy Ltd has installed a wood chip heating system in the Allerton Project's main building on its research and demonstration farm at Loddington, Leicestershire. The system provides an almost carbon neutral source of heat, contributing to mitigation of climate change. Woods are managed as part of a game management system to provide wild pheasants for shooting. Woodland management benefits other wildlife, especially birds and plants, and is carried out on a rotational basis, providing a sustainable source of fuel as well as achieving environmental objectives.

Muntjac deer colonized the area in the 1970s and damage to regenerating coppice and woodland ground flora is now reported regularly. In other parts of southern England muntjac cause major damage to rare plant communities and farm wood resources. Could this happen in Leicestershire? Their secretive nature, low carcass weight and minimal damage to commercial crops result in low motivation amongst local people for muntjac control. We used a GIS map of muntjac damage to bluebells as a focus for dialogue with stalkers and others. Damage is currently relatively low but widespread, and influenced mainly by shrub cover. Coppicing farm woods for fuel and conservation of ground flora can lead to increased shrub cover, increasing the risk of damage from muntjac. This issue requires further investigation and involvement of local people.