

SOCIAL BARRIERS TO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOODFUEL PRODUCTION FROM FARM WOODLANDS: A REVIEW AND PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

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By 2020 the Forestry Commission in England aims to increase the quantity of wood brought to the woodfuel market from currently ‘unharvested’ English woodlands by 2 Mt annually – 50% of the estimated resource available. Accessing such ‘unharvested’ material also forms an element of the woodfuel strategy for the Forestry Commission in Scotland. Much of this resource is located on land owned privately, the majority of which is believed to be ‘unmanaged’ in England [any similar estimate available for Scotland?]. Achievement of the woodfuel production target will rely on changing behaviour of the owners and managers of such woods. This paper assesses the social dimensions of barriers to such change, and potential strategies to overcome them.

Economic and logistical/technical barriers to the development of the woodfuel sector are commonly identified. Reference is made more implicitly to social and cultural barriers, relating to decision-making and power [governance], market visibility and confidence, owners’ value systems underlying other priorities (conservation, access or shooting), limited knowledge and/or information, and it is important to make these (real or perceived) barriers more explicit.

The paper begins by reviewing existing literature, much of which focuses on ‘farmers’ attitudes’, and establishing a framework for analysing stakeholder perspectives and decisions on management. The framework proposes an understanding of the landowner or manager in social and cultural context – in other words, in relation to other stakeholders who might influence decisions through shared social networks or knowledge cultures; power structures; local / regional / national governance. For example, (1) whilst foresters might categorise such woodlands as ‘unmanaged’, owners are making decisions about how to manage farm woodlands, even if the decision is to do nothing; (2) many farmers contract land agents, often with good knowledge of the forestry sector, a strong social linkage which can act to remove the owner from the decision-making and management processes; (3) the farming community has confidence in traditional long-established agricultural markets, which is lacking in relation to ‘new’ products and markets.

The analytical framework is then used as a basis for preliminary empirical testing, through pilot studies in the East Midlands and Fife. Methods used include in-depth interviewing, stakeholder analysis and documentary analysis. We conclude with a discussion about future research directions and priorities, focusing on the need to understand landowners / managers' decisions in the context of local governance and partnerships; and consideration of the role of the Forestry Commission.