



PRESS RELEASE

Behind closed doors decisions could change the Welsh countryside forever

Decisions made behind closed doors by the Welsh Government now could change the way the countryside of Wales is managed forever – without consulting the people of Wales.

WG wants to set up a Single Environmental Body to look after the landscape by bringing together Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency Wales and Forestry Commission Wales.

Already civil servants have drawn up plans for a 'Shadow Body' - and what some believe is a flawed business case for various different options to be considered by Assembly Members next week.

“But so far there has been very little consultation with the forestry sector which will be adversely affected by this major change in the way Wales works,” said Andrew Bronwin of the Wales Forest Business Partnership, which promotes private timber interests.

“Calls for meetings have been ignored and there has been no engagement with the forestry sector – which supports 16,000 jobs and puts £1.7 billion into the Welsh economy – or the people of Wales.

“This is the first opportunity WG has had to use its new powers and we believe that it should be more open and inclusive in its approach,” he said.

Following devolution the 114,000 hectare public forest estate, which had been Forestry Commission GB responsibility, was taken over by the Welsh Assembly Government which is now the single biggest landowner in Wales.

“We can see the sense of bringing EAW and CCW together, but the role and functions of FCW are very different, and there is a real threat that the new body would damage the forestry and timber industry ,” said Mr Bronwin.

“The sector needs reliable timber supplies and a commercial approach to the management of the Welsh forest resource, both public and private. There is a real risk that the commercial imperative will be swamped by the environmental focus of the new body.

“And at a time when this vital, truly sustainable industry is beginning to make great strides through the development of new construction methods using Welsh timber and the increased interest in wood fuel, this would be nothing less than a tragedy for the Welsh economy.”

“Just as importantly the cost savings identified in the draft business case – some £11.6 million – appear to be flawed as they do not include the substantial costs which Forestry Commission Wales would face for services currently provided by Forestry Commission GB,” he added.

There are also particular concerns over shared research resources which in the past have helped the UK to control pests and diseases and provide a forestry service which is the envy of much of Europe.

WFBP believes that the two environmental regulatory bodies, more used to limiting the environmental impact of industry than stimulating activity, will dominate the new body.

The fear is that it will quickly become focused on environmental protection through regulation – and will not be interested in the economic benefits that a thriving timber sector can provide.

Businesses along the supply chain, including agents, woodland managers and sawmills have expressed deep concern that the merger will undermine investment in wood processing and it is believed the merger will threaten investment, which in turn damages markets for wood.

ENDS

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Editor's note:

Single Environmental Body

The Welsh Government embarked on the Single Environmental Body programme, reviewing the functions of the Environment Agency Wales (EAW), Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) and Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) as well as some of its own functions after a statement in January 2010 by the then Environment Minister, that Wales' natural environment demanded more integrated ways of working, including the provision of ecosystem services. The programme is now in its second phase, a draft of the detailed business case based on bringing together the three bodies, which has not been made public, is to be passed to the Environment Minister, John Griffiths, in early December. If the decision is to establish a single body it is presumed that there will be a public consultation during January and March 2012, with a shadow body expected to be in place by late summer/autumn and formal establishment in April 2013.

Wales Forest Business Partnership

The Welsh Assembly Government's forestry strategy for Wales "[Woodlands for Wales](#)" includes the development of world class forest product industries as a key strategic objective. Wales Forest Business Partnership (WFBP) is a voluntary grouping of businesses and other organisations across the forestry sector which has been established to meet this objective. Its members believe that collaborative activities undertaken by the Partnership will strengthen the competitiveness of their businesses and the forestry sector as a whole.

