

UKWAS Interpretation Note 4 - Lower impact silvicultural systems in conifer plantations

PLEASE NOTE: THIS INFORMATION NOTE RELATES TO THE SUPERSEDED FIRST EDITION OF THE UK WOODLAND ASSURANCE STANDARD

Key Words: clear-fell, coupe size, open ground habitat, rare species, Special Protection Area, environmental impacts.

Relevant requirement references: 3.1.1, 3.1.2 & 3.1.3; 3.4.1, 3.4.2 & 3.4.4; 6.1.1 & 6.1.2

Date: Discussed and agreed at Interpretation Panel meeting on 28th February 2000.

Question:

Where large clear-fells are of specific benefit to certain rare species is it necessary to 'increasingly favour lower impact silvicultural systems'?

Discussion:

Background to this issue is to be found in a paper prepared by Richard Johnstone (RSPB) and Rod Leslie (Forest Enterprise) (appended to Minutes of the Interpretation Panel for its Meeting on 28th Feb 2000).

It is generally accepted (although not proven) that lower impact silvicultural systems (group felling, continuous cover, etc) are of greater value for biodiversity. However, there are some species - some of which are of sufficient priority to be subject to Species Action Plans - that are closely associated with the open habitat created by clear-felling of conifer plantations. Bird species in this category include: woodlark, nightjar, black grouse, short-eared owl, merlin, hen harrier and golden eagle.

The requirement under 3.4.4 to adopt non-clear fell systems in all windfirm plantations could therefore be detrimental to the conservation of such species. In particular, it would be in conflict with the need to take into account the environmental impacts of woodland/forest plans (Requirements under 3.1). It would also contravene the need to identify and protect 'areas and features of particular significance for biodiversity' under Requirement 6.1.1 and 6.1.2.

However, Requirement 3.4.4 does state that such systems should only be favoured 'where they are suited to the site and species present' and the definition of species could be taken to include any species of wildlife rather than just the tree or crop species. Furthermore, Guidance under 3.4.2 expressly lists wildlife habitats as one possible reason for justifying continued use of larger felling coupes.

There is an obvious concern that spurious claims of the benefit to open ground species may be used to justify large-scale felling in situations where the true motivation may be economic rather than environmental gains. There is also the danger that certain high-profile species associated with open ground may be favoured at the expense of less prominent woodland species and communities.

Conclusions:

Increasing use of lower impact silvicultural systems in windfirm plantations may not be appropriate where there is evidence that clear-felling provides habitat that has a high value for biodiversity. This is subject to the following caveats:

- Species and habitats which might justify such high-impact felling will normally be those included in UK Biodiversity Action Plans (HAPs or SAPs) or other widely recognised biodiversity priorities.
- The management plan has clear objectives to favour such species, and is based on sound evidence that they are likely to benefit.
- The wider ecological and environmental impacts of such felling is assessed and minimised. In particular, the impact on species favoured by lower-impact systems is considered, and a balance sought. Where there are obvious conflicts the advice of the relevant statutory agency is sought and heeded.
- In larger ownerships it would be expected that clear-felling is only pursued in a part of the estate, to ensure that species adapted to continuous forest cover are favoured elsewhere.
- Where the species suited to the clear-felling conditions is/are not present in the area then the support of the relevant agency would be expected to ensure that unrealistic expectations were not being pursued.