Institute of Chartered Foresters

Response to GB Plant Biosecurity Strategy Consultation

Introduction

Pests and diseases are on the increase with exponential growth in the last 30 years, worsening as climate changes. We are facing a huge challenge to the biosecurity of trees, woods and forests. This massive task is taken very seriously but a lot of the activity is firefighting. Historically we have often only dealt with something once it has arrived or even been here for many years without being recognised, which makes eradication practically impossible in many cases. It is crucial that we take a proactive approach, and we welcome the development of the GB Biosecurity Strategy.

We accept that global trade is not risk-free. Businesses will inevitably import forest reproductive material from outside the UK and with that, there will always be some level of threat. If we accept that our climate is getting warmer, we will need tree species from outside the UK, which can take 25 years to grow. The question we must address is how we can acceptably do this for trees in the public and private realm. We need to identify specifically what success looks like, in the face of the 'known unknowns' of the future of plant health.

The Independent Panel on Forestry report in 2011 stated that "modelling across the public forest estate suggests that if no action is taken to tackle diseases and pests, timber yields in England may decline by 35% by 2080 under a high CO_2 emissions scenario". The figure of 35% may be an underestimate, depending on what pests and diseases arrive and thrive, and what tree species are affected. The socioeconomic costs will be huge. Such a decline in timber yields also equates with an equivalent decline in carbon sequestration by the forest estate and therefore has significant consequences for climate change targets. The risks for the urban treescape and the essential benefits it provides are no less grave.

About the Institute

The Institute of Chartered Foresters is the Royal Chartered body for tree professionals in the UK. Its membership covers the full range of tree professionals, and this range of expertise is one of its greatest strengths. It has 2,000 members who practise forestry, arboriculture and other related disciplines in the private and third sectors, central and local government, research institutions, universities and colleges throughout the UK.

The Institute regulates standards of entry to the profession. It provides support to members, guidance to professionals in other sectors, information to the general public, and educational advice and training to students and tree professionals seeking to develop their careers.

The Institute is a member of the Plant Health Alliance, the governing body for the Plant Healthy scheme. We also feed into Defra's Tree Health Policy Group and the Scottish Tree Health Advisory Group through our member representatives. All our members are concerned with tree health, whether practitioners, researchers or policy makers, and many work directly in plant health and biosecurity.

Our Recommendations

The Institute recommends the following high-level, interconnected priorities for the strategy.

Agility

With pest and disease issues moving so fast, it is absolutely crucial to be agile, both in policy and in operational responses to outbreaks. Defra needs to continue to take account of the fact that plant health is a devolved matter and that pests and diseases do not respect internal borders. One example of this agility would be rapid use of grant mechanisms to assist landowners who have pest outbreaks. It is positive to see that *Ips typographus* is included in

the Tree Health pilot but we need to ensure that this approach can be used for other outbreaks.

Collaboration

Biosecurity must be a collaborative effort. We must have effective join-up across nations and departments with rigorous governance arrangements and effective communication. This means working with Northern Ireland and Europe as well as within Great Britain, making it a cross-government, cross-border and cross-department priority, with increased activity on international collaboration, an effective regulatory framework and concerted efforts at pre-border and at border.

There is a strong case for only buying British raised and grown plants. Certification schemes work well, in part to dictate procurement policy. We would encourage governments to adopt Plant Healthy or equivalent schemes in all public procurement, and of course for international stock to be sourced as safely as it can be.

Skills and training

Good biosecurity practices need the right people with the right skills in place. There is a huge piece of work to be done on awareness and knowledge: good skills, education and training will be vital. This needs to include public awareness campaigns, increased media with engaging content in adverts and social media and strong messaging at ports and airports, as in other 'island' nations. Some of the work will necessarily be reactive but we need to put proactive systems in place and a firm commitment to ingrain good practice. There is of course an important link here to knowledge and knowledge transfer, discussed further below.

Incentives and support for businesses

There are common sense measures to stop pests and diseases coming in on live plants or timber but putting them in place can be challenging; change can be hard to manage and adopt. We need to make good practice financially viable and appealing to businesses. We know that well established nurseries find the process of certification a positive experience and that it gears them towards a more proactive approach. However, others are frustrated that without certification being mandatory they are at a commercial disadvantage.

The sector should be considering the impact of pests and diseases on their woods and must be supported to do this. For example, owners of Norway Spruce in the southeast should be considering felling to reduce the risk of *Ips*. We must empower businesses to take action and ensure that those who respond quickly to outbreaks are not financially disadvantaged, or this will increase the reluctance to engage quickly with issues, when agility is crucial.

Research and monitoring

Underpinning all this is the critical importance of research and evidence-based decision making. We must follow the evidence in policy making and fund the research adequately, including committing sufficient resource to Forest Research, a truly cross-GB endeavour. As alluded above, we must then communicate research to practitioners and policy makers effectively. We see a role for the Institute here, in support of the public bodies.

We also need to reiterate the importance of monitoring by professionals as well as by government. The Institute's members are critical in spotting new outbreaks, but they need continued government support to work with the Plant Health team. The recent *Ips* outbreak was picked up through routine protected zone monitoring activities which makes a strong case for increased surveillance and monitoring. New and developing technologies have much to offer such as LiDAR, and there is a role for 'citizen science', particularly as the public become more aware of the challenges our environment faces.

Concluding Comments

The Institute is committed to working with governments and the sector – as partner, convener and communicator. We will be considering how we amplify messaging such as tree health alerts and mitigation plans to membership, how we liaise with partners and initiatives that help raise awareness of biosecurity methods, and how we support research and initiatives aimed at enhancing species resilience.

We would welcome a conversation with officials to discuss how we can best inform the strategy and support the biosecurity agenda into the future.