

KEITH TAYLOR
Green Party
for the South East of England



6 June 2018

Sir Harry Studholme
Chair, Forestry Commission
Perridge House
Perridge Ln, Longdown
Exeter EX6 7RU

Dear Sir Harry,

Re: Forestry Commission, lease arrangements

I am writing to the board of the Forestry Commission/Forest Enterprise to encourage you to introduce a policy to take no further money from the onshore oil and gas industry. The income the Forestry Commission currently receives from oil and gas companies for exploration leases is in conflict with the first objective in the most recently published Annual Report ¹

“Protecting our trees, woods and forests from increasing threats such as pests, diseases and climate change”.

The legislation for the Forestry Commission tasks it with the “development of afforestation and the production and supply of timber and other forest products²”. It does not seem to me that this would naturally include oil and gas exploration.

It also conflicts with the Government’s carbon reduction commitments³ and the Forestry Commission’s commitment to sustainability of the forest estate. The Commission’s Sustainability report has at its core targets to reduce fossil fuel based energy, which are undermined by the organisation’s commercial attachment to fossil fuel exploration. This growing interest is not mentioned in the 2016-17 Annual Report (the most recent available), underlining the lack of transparency on this topic. It calls itself a “Manager, Protector, Enabler and Supporter, Conservationist, Restorer, Leisure and Recreation Provider” (What we do/how we work – www.forestry.gov.uk). But there is no heading which covers handing out leases for activities that threaten a stable climate, local water and air and which are generally opposed by local communities. While your formal reports talk proudly and rightly about tree planting nowhere do they mention that the fossil fuel projects the Forestry Commission supports in private involve tree felling and endangering local biodiversity and habitats, as well as recreational opportunities, by disruptive oil and gas related activities.

There is a direct conflict with public presentation and what is going on across the Forest Estate and I believe this is a growing trend that is being covered up. It would clearly be in the public interest if the Forestry Commission published the income figures from leases and associated business relating to access to fossil fuels under the land. Please could you let me know when the Board might be able to consider this?

Sherwood Forest

It is the Forestry Commission and the Secretary of State that signed a lease with Ineos for seismic surveying in a SSSI in Sherwood Forest. This was despite earlier assurances that the most

¹ Annual Report and Accounts 2016-17

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/10>

³ Particularly in the Paris Climate Agreement 2015

sensitive areas would be avoided.

Leith Hill, Surrey

Europa Oil and Gas has a renewing lease arrangement here on a site where it hopes to secure permits for exploratory drilling. This is within the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt. When it came to evicting the Protection Camp within the lease area a year ago it was the Forestry Commission that funded the eviction and subsequently put up a fence to support the oil and gas operation on designated Public Access Land⁴, despite there being no active permission that could be implemented. The local community is calling on the Forestry Commission to forego the lease when it comes up for renewal this September.

Forest of Dean

It appears to be only the failure of any oil and gas companies to take up licences in the Forest of Dean that has prevented exploration going ahead here. I understand that the Forestry Commission has not ruled it out.

This is why I am writing to the Secretary of State and the Forestry Commission to ask for a commitment to make the Forestry Commission estate free from fossil fuel exploration and extraction and divest its interest in fossil fuels, which conflicts with its climate change initiatives (eg the Woodland Carbon Fund, the Woodland Carbon task force, the Climate Change Accord, the Climate Change Action Plan and so on) and the Commission's commitment to protect designated landscapes and with the public enjoyment of the forest estate⁵.

Apart from the significant threat posed to our climate and environment, the Commission's association and collaboration with oil and gas companies brings serious risk of reputational damage. I understand that the Forestry Commission/Forest Enterprise has to make an income from its commercial activities but in choosing to partner with fossil fuel companies it is alienating the public whose support and funding it relies on.

I am planning to visit the Forestry Commission site at Leith Hill in Surrey during my next constituency week (proposed date July 18th). Would either yourself or Julia Grant or any relevant staff members be available to meet me and discuss these issues when I visit? It would be very helpful to explore them further with your team.

Yours sincerely,



Keith Taylor, Green MEP, South East England.

cc. Ian Gambles (Director England)
Simon Hodgson (CE Forest Enterprise England)

⁴ Email from Head of Estates, Forestry Commission, sent on June 20 2017, in a briefing to Europa Oil about its media messaging.

⁵ Public opinion of Forestry survey 2017, shows a high proportion of respondents visited woodlands regularly and: "More than nine in ten respondents see woodlands as places where they can relax and de-stress, and a similar proportion see them as places to have fun and enjoy themselves".