

Policy and Action

Issue

Grey squirrels out-compete our native red squirrels as well as spreading the squirrel pox virus to them. In England the red squirrel population is fragmented, occurring in isolated populations on the islands in Poole Harbour and the Isle of Wight and across the north of England. There are estimated to be only 15,000 red squirrels left in England and over 2 million grey squirrels.

Grey squirrels also cause damage to our broadleaved and coniferous woodlands, the costs of damage are estimated at between £6 and £10million per annum in Great Britain. Damage from grey squirrels acts as a disincentive to the planting and management of our valuable broadleaved and coniferous trees. This can have a negative impact on biodiversity and on the overall economic value of the crop. It also serves to limit diversity of woodland planting thereby reducing potential resilience to pests, disease and climate change.

Efforts to control grey squirrels in England's woodlands need to be more effective, making greater use of best practice; better coordinated and sustained in order to protect and enhance our vulnerable red squirrel population and to reduce impacts on woodlands so that they can thrive for biodiversity and economic interests.

Policy and Review of England Approach

In January 2013 Government published a [Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement](#) it said:

*"Diseases are not the only challenge. Unsustainable populations of some deer species and grey squirrels have a significant impact on the successful establishment and regeneration of new woodland, woodland management, the quality of timber and the quality of woodland habitats. Similarly, invasive species such as Rhododendron can cause problems. We will continue to support landowners' collaboration to ensure sustainable, well-managed wild deer populations, control invasive species and encourage natural regeneration."*¹

In November 2013 the Secretary of State asked the Forestry Commission (FC) to review the current approach to grey squirrel control to assess the efficacy of existing measures to address the threats posed by grey squirrels both to woodlands and to red squirrels, and recommend any necessary improvements.

¹ Government Forestry and Woodland policy statement (defra) pp10

As part of the review Forestry Commission consulted interested organisations through an online questionnaire and through a workshop held in January 2014.

This review showed that more could be done to improve effectiveness of grey squirrel control. It also found that the approach to red squirrel conservation is working but needs to be sustained. The main conclusions from the review were as follows:

- There is strong support within the woodland and forestry sector for the need to control grey squirrels,
- There is strong support for the existing approach to red squirrel conservation – it is working and needs to be sustained;
- Control activity should be supported through the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) and be targeted based on risk of impact and presence of red squirrels;
- More effective use of control and more incentives will deliver more than additional regulation;
- There is a need for a variety of control methods to be available and these should be supported by good practice guidance. Any new control methods should meet legal and welfare criteria as well as being cost effective;
- Collaboration across landholdings on control efforts is more effective than acting alone;
- Public Forest Estate should take part in collaborative control projects where a co-ordinated and comprehensive control partnership has been established.

These findings have been used to update our action plan for grey squirrel control in England as set out below.

Action Plan

Government (FC and Defra) will play a significant role in more effectively controlling grey squirrels, through advice and incentives for land managers, promoting and supporting better collaboration and partnership, funding research and taking appropriate action on its land holding. The success of this approach relies on these activities being supported and added to by all stakeholders. Where grey squirrels are causing problems land owners and managers are critical to the success of policy implementation by taking responsibility for controlling grey squirrels on their land.

Based on the role set out above we have updated the plan of action to assist landowners and managers to more effectively control grey squirrels to protect and enhance red squirrel populations and England's woodlands. Working with partners will be essential to the success of this plan, and we want to discuss implementation of the actions with stakeholders early in 2015. We will review the plan after 5 years to ensure that progress towards the outcomes is being made.

Theme	Action	who
Incentives	a. We will introduce a specific grey squirrel management prescription within the multi-annual agreement for woodland management in Countryside Stewardship in addition to the funding available for grey squirrel control to support red squirrel populations. Owners would be required to adopt this option where grey squirrels are identified as a significant threat to the management objectives. Subject to EU approval of England programme.	Defra/FC/NE/RPA
	b. Defra and FC will explore and facilitate incentives for local groups to control grey squirrels outside of RDPE grant schemes for example through support for a national squirrel partnership.	Defra / FC
Guidance	c. FC will publish, and disseminate a revised good practice note on controlling grey squirrels in line with latest information and research.	FC/FR

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	d. Support development of best practice for monitoring and survey methods for red squirrels	NE with partners
	e. Prepare and implement site management plans for key sites (squirrel reserves, priority sites and strongholds)	NE with partners
Better coordination of action	f. FC will work with stakeholders to develop a squirrel partnership for England that supports local groups and enhances their ability to work in collaboration to tackle grey squirrels. We will bring prospective partners together at an Initial meeting to be held in 2015	FC/RFS/ RSST
	g. Advisory support for collaborative action by landowners from FC area teams.	FC
	h. Increased action on the Public Forest Estate in England. The FC will undertake enhanced grey control activity on Public Forest Estate (FE) as part of collaborative control projects where a co-coordinated and comprehensive control partnership has been established.	FE
	i. Continued participation in red squirrel partnerships. Such as Red Squirrels Northern England, a partnership between the Red Squirrel Survival Trust (RSST), Natural England(NE), FC and The Wildlife Trusts.	FC /FE
	i. We will work with the other signatories to improve co-ordination of red squirrel conservation and grey squirrel control efforts across the UK.	Defra / FC/ NE
Research and monitoring	k. We will support research into improvements in control methods including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> investigating the efficacy of and best practice for use of new traps, the use of chemical control agents, including Defra funding (2014 – 2016) for research into an oral form of fertility control based on single-shot injectable immunocontraceptive vaccine 	FC / FR / FE/ Defra

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	<p>GonaCon™ from the USA.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the impact of predation by pine martens, better understanding of grey squirrel physiology and how this affects fertility and bark stripping behaviour 	
	l. Defra funding in 2014 – 16 to support development of a vaccine for squirrel pox virus.	Defra
	n. FC will develop a new measure of grey squirrel impact in 2015. FC will report on the impact of grey squirrels on forestry using data from the National Forest Inventory survey.	FC

Evaluation

We will monitor progress against the following indicators to show what impact we are having in delivering policy. We will use them to provide evidence for advice on policy and delivery and to enable our partners to hold us to account.

The reporting frequency and publication will be confirmed once the metrics are developed.

- National Forest Inventory (NFI) – analysis of bark stripping data
- Red squirrel population data
- Grant option uptake / woodland management plan risk assessment
- Report on action plan activity progress