

Impact evaluation of research

Forestry Commission response

Introduction

During 2012, we commissioned an independent evaluation of research undertaken to deliver the Forestry Commission's Science and Innovation Strategy for British forestry. This is the first time such an evaluation has been undertaken, and it confirmed many of the informal discussions we have had with stakeholders about forestry research over the last five years, but also highlighted a number of areas where improvements can be made. The timing was designed to enable the conclusions of the evaluation to feed into the review of the Science and Innovation Strategy, which went out to consultation between July and October 2013.

The report identifies a number of areas where Forestry Commission research has had multiple impacts on policy, particularly with regard to tree pests and diseases and climate change. A number of innovative contributions to operational practice were also highlighted. It also highlights opportunities for improvements in the way in which research is commissioned and disseminated, which have been valuable in shaping the next strategy.

The report makes seven recommendations, which are set out below with an explanation of how the Forestry Commission will address them.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Genuinely involve a range of stakeholders in Knowledge Exchange:

- **early** in the strategy-setting/problem-framing stage and investigate the impacts they are looking for;
- **throughout** the research process in ongoing dialogues with greater transparency about ongoing research progress;
- **later** in dissemination of findings.

We respond:

The process for determining the research programmes set out in the new Science and Innovation Strategy will engage stakeholders to a much greater extent than previously to ensure that the science is appropriate, well focussed, and will deliver significant impact. Under the current research programmes, which run until 2014/15, we are committed to the release of interim results, where practicable, to ensure that stakeholders have access to the most up to date knowledge. The new Strategy offers a much wider range of media to disseminate knowledge to a diverse range of stakeholders.

'In FC England our input to the SIS revision was coordinated by the National Expertise Team in Forest Services. We engaged a wide range of organisations through cross-cutting groups between June and August 2012. We set up six informal Knowledge Exchange Reference groups, each one referring to a research programme area. They were comprised of representatives from a range of both public (including Forest Enterprise and Fera, private and civil society expertise (such as CONFOR and the Woodland Trust). We also engaged the nine Forestry Commission England Regional Advisory Committees (now called Forestry and Woodland Advisory Committees, FWACs) to play a similar role at a sub-national level. Stakeholders were asked to identify England's future critical forestry research needs and for comments on the research processes. Several of the knowledge exchange reference groups and the FWACs have a longer-term role to supply relevant knowledge in to the sector and feed back any developing requirements to the programme.'

Recommendation 2

Improve awareness among researchers, research managers and also stakeholders of Knowledge Exchange processes that can lead toward impacts so that they are enabled both to improve processes and to identify diverse impacts and impacts-in-progress on policy and practice. This should include consideration of a more informative annual report on the Strategy and better access to research project proposals and reports, as well as qualitative descriptions of even subtle impacts or impacts-in-progress, perhaps as they fall under categories of Instrumental, Conceptual, Capacity-building, Enduring Connectivity or Attitude Change. (Developing a habit of capturing impacts in an ongoing fashion will facilitate future impact evaluations and increase organisational learning.)

We respond:

The current research proposals consider the impacts which the science will deliver. All of the proposals have now been published on the FC website¹ to provide greater transparency and understanding of the work commissioned and the impacts it will deliver. We will continue to produce an annual research report and will seek stakeholder feedback on how it might be improved. The new Strategy will use a regular assessment of impacts to provide feedback on how effective FC science is at delivering evolution in policy and practice.

¹ <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/research>

Recommendation 3

Consider who within the Forestry Commission as a whole (including Forest Research) and who in the wider forestry sector (either individuals or organisations) are best placed to act as 'Knowledge Intermediaries'. Seek to engage with them and enhance research impacts by leveraging their capabilities and networks in order to reach multiple stakeholders.

We respond:

We think this is a valuable recommendation and wish consider carefully how best to deliver it. This is to ensure that knowledge is delivered in a consistent and simultaneous way to the wide diversity and geographical range of our stakeholder community. We have to ensure that we get the right balance between research and dissemination for our key scientists to enable the delivery of our demanding research programmes. We also need to ensure that other intermediaries have sufficient training and knowledge to be able to provide the service, which our stakeholders expect from us. We will also explore alternative media to reach our existing and new audiences to reduce the burden on our key staff, and stakeholder colleagues.

'The Deer Initiative Partnership (DI), was established in 1995 to promote the sustainable management of wild deer in England, and was extended to Wales in 1999. They are a broad partnership of statutory, voluntary and private organisations with a shared vision for the sustainable management of wild deer. The Deer Initiative is working with a wide range of stakeholders to achieve this vision and helping their partners in Government to develop the right framework to support this. Sustainable deer management relies on sound scientific evidence, and one of the roles of the Deer Initiative is to develop the evidence base by reviewing, collecting and commissioning research on deer population dynamics, management methodologies and other fields. Government funders include Forestry Commission England, Natural England, Defra, and Natural Resources Wales.'

Recommendation 4

Develop a Communications Plan to help disseminate impacts. Take advice from stakeholders early on as to how communication mechanisms (such as events, websites, guides) and the timing of communications can be used to optimise the impact of research outputs.

We respond:

A communications plan is in development. We have recently established a new Strategic Publications group, whose role is to ensure the effective and targeted delivery of Forestry Commission technical communication activities. This will ensure that publications are targeted towards the right audiences, media and events to ensure the greatest impact.

Recommendation 5

Take a strategic view of where the Forestry Commission Science & Innovation Strategy fits into the wider research agenda and how to create the dynamic and flexible capability and capacity required to deliver it. This should include determining the role and critical mass of Forest Research but also how connectivity with others in the research community can enhance the evidence base and its impacts.

We respond:

The consultation draft of the next Strategy does this, and makes explicit links to strategies owned and delivered by other organisations. There is a strong commitment to partnership working and collaboration to leverage the FC resources, and enable us to tap into sources of expertise, which are not available within the FC. The role and critical mass of Forest Research is out with the scope of the Strategy itself, though these are issues currently being explored by the Forestry Commission, Defra and the devolved administrations. The majority of available funding currently goes to Forest Research, with some 10% to external providers.

'The Science and Innovation Strategy for British Forestry will complement the ONE Business Evidence project, which is working across the Defra network (Defra, Forestry Commission England, Natural England, Environment Agency, Food and Environment Research Agency etc) on:

- The design and establishment of an Evidence Commissioning Headquarters which will manage and coordinate robust processes for identifying and meeting evidence needs, using Defra resources to maximum effect and ensuring sufficient quality.*
- An Evidence Investment Strategy to set out the role and importance of evidence for the Defra network, its evidence priorities, and how it will respond to future issues and changing priorities.*
- Identifying and driving out efficiencies from monitoring and surveillance activities.'*

Recommendation 6

Consider how genuine interdisciplinary research can be encouraged by the Strategy so that complex problems can be addressed and the socio-economic dimensions of the solutions fully explored.

We respond:

The draft consultation Strategy makes a strong commitment to interdisciplinary research, and we are exploring how to extend the reach of social science into other programmes to achieve this. This will be strongly embedded in the programmes to be delivered under the next strategy. This is now included in four current programmes,

Advice and scientific support for tree health, Protecting soil and water resources, Land use and ecosystem services and Managing forest carbon and GHG balances.

'The OPAL project (2012/13) and EU ObservaTree (2013– 2015) have all been based on interdisciplinary and partnership working between Forest Research's social science and tree health teams. Forest research has successfully bid into a number of Defra-funded projects under the Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Action Plan, which have required integrated working across programmes (social & economic, pathology, entomology, silviculture and IT). Forest Research also has a number of consortium projects under the LWEC Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity initiative (phase 1 2012– 13) and phase 2 (2013– 2015/16). The initiative has stated, as a specific objective, the requirement for interdisciplinary and partnership working with physical sciences and social and economic research.'

Recommendation 7

Consider whether the Strategy needs to be more transparent as to how much resource is allocated to scientists for research and how much to them for providing advice to policymakers and the forestry sector at large.

We respond:

We have committed to a 75:25 split across the suite of existing research programmes to science and knowledge exchange (KE). The KE aspect of this covers scientific papers, publications, conferences, seminars and other events. This will be reviewed in 2014/15 when the current programmes end to see if we have the balance right. However, we also recognise that this balance has to be a trade off, and the more KE we resource, the less science we can undertake, and vice versa.