

RHU AND SHANDON COMMUNITY COUNCIL

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Mairi Gougeon MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

By email to: cabsecralri@gov.scot

30 April 2024

Dear Ms Gougeon

I write on behalf of Rhu and Shandon Community Council (RSCC) to advise of a formal complaint we have submitted to Scottish Forestry (attached). Whilst we await their response we would like to highlight the entrenched disenfranchisement of communities across Scotland with regard to the Scottish forestry industry, from regulators to practitioners.

Here in Rhu and Shandon we are exhausted from addressing the impacts of commercial forestry.

- 40 ton timber lorries navigating a narrow road, with no pavements, a main road in the village, not wide enough for a car and lorry to pass through requiring the car or pedestrian to take evasive action.
- commercial felling operations that polluted the burns so much with brash and silt that eventually SEPA had to come and issue improvement orders.
- 202 hectares of commercial forestry approved and awarded WGS funding, and owned by investment company Gresham House of SNIB fame, progressing with no EIA, with at least two enforcement notices so far, one to mitigate the damage being done to recorded archaeological sites being dug over. In addition we endure and witness increased flooding downhill, peat soils deeper than 0.5m being planted with Sitka Spruce, locked gates removing public access to 'our hillside', and if any Short Eared Owls and Black Grouse now remain in their breeding grounds they'll just have to wait until July because Scottish Woodlands are busy until there might be a bit less rain for the trees to get established.

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In addition we endure the non-commercial abuse of our native woodlands –

- 73 trees / groups of trees with TPOs, including 7 Wellingtonia over 200 years old and sequestering more carbon than any other tree on the planet clear felled with planning permission.
- ancient woodland inventory sites burned and subjected to unauthorised felling.

It is no wonder we are at our wits end at the assault on nature and biodiversity that now encircles Rhu and Shandon.

The final straw in this unending assault was the delivery of a signed and sealed Forest Management Plan for Torr Farm Wood a couple of weeks ago. Scottish Forestry and the landowner promised that after a site meeting in June 2022, attended by 29 representatives of the community, including our MSP and a ward councillor, and followed up with a written report representing the community's views and concerns (attached), that they would produce a second management plan for community consultation.

The community's concern for Torr Farm Woodland, registered in the Ancient Woodland Inventory as Long Established Plantation Origin (LEPO), was raised by long periods of chainsaw noise in April 2021 after the bird breeding season had begun. The attached report by Rhu and Shandon Community Council details the time line and events associated with this particular saga up to June 2022.

The lack of consultation and delivery of an approved management plan as a *fait accompli* 22 months later is the final straw.

We are tired of being treated with contempt, we are tired of sham community engagement consultations, we are tired of being treated as stupid and uninformed proletariat by an industry that is interchangeable with its regulator with huge sums of public and tax haven commercial forestry money sloshing around. In its current state the forestry industry really can't see the wood for the trees. We are in a nature emergency, a climate crisis and losing biodiversity at breakneck speed according to The State of Nature 2023 report. Does it need to be written in large red capitals to reinforce we are at Code Red stage?

Spending money on nature restoration projects trying to rescue our afforested peat lands whilst ploughing up peat elsewhere and utilising land suitable for food production to plant tens of thousands of hectares of an invasive non-native and dead zone biodiversity contribution species is madness. Did we learn nothing from the forestry of the 1980s? Our attempts to now repair the damage is in vain if we continue to do the same thing.

I digress but my passion results from my concern at what is happening all around us and how powerless the people are to stop all this ecocide.

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When Scottish Forestry just sends a *fait accompli* management plan after a great deal of community concern, and time and effort addressing it, about their plans to support felling a quarter of an ancient woodland at the edge of the village this is quite simply not an acceptable way to behave.

Everyone at that site walkover meeting led by SF heard the promise of further consultation on the next version of the management plan and how we would all be reassured it addressed our concerns. Our MSP Jackie Baillie raised this very case and the disenfranchisement of communities and our exclusion from meaningful engagement and inclusion in environmental and forestry matters at the Citizens Participation and Petitions Committee on 17 April 2024 speaking in relation to *PE1812 Provide full legal protection for Scotland's Ancient, Native and Semi native woodlands and woodland floors*. She attended that explanatory walking tour of Torr Farm Woods and sounded as cross as we are at SF renegeing on their promise.

A drastic improvement is required in the way the Government Regulator Scottish Forestry interacts with the citizens of this country. The citizens of Scotland deserve to be respected, we deserve to be heard - is this not the fundamental right and primary objective that our parliamentary democracy is there to uphold? That the Stobo Hope Residents Action Group has been forced to resort to the desperate and expensive action of making a petition to the Court of Session for a judicial review on conifer afforestation and the lack of any EIAs exemplifies just how disenfranchised the population is.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands we hope you will give greater consideration to the standards and operating procedures of Scottish Forestry, the government regulator for which you are responsible.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Baker
for Rhu and Shandon Community Council

Copied by email to:

Dame Jackie Baillie MSP
Brendan O'Hara MP
Councillor Maurice Corry
Councillor Mark Irvine
Councillor Iain Paterson
Members of the Rhu & Shandon Community Council

Encs.

- Complaint to Scottish Forestry
- Torr West Woodland Management Plan RSCC Comment, 24 June 2022.