

## Red Squirrel Strongholds Consultation Response Form

**Name:** Gordon Gray Stephens  
**Organisation** Scottish Native Woods  
**Postal Address:** 1 Crieff Road, Aberfeldy, PH15 2BJ  
Gordon.graystephens@scottishnativewoods.org.uk

**Consultation title:** RED SQUIRREL STRONGHOLDS

1. Are you responding as: (please tick one, or delete those that don't apply)

On behalf of a group or organisation (go to **2c**)

### 2c. ON BEHALF OF GROUPS OR ORGANISATIONS:

Your name and address as respondees will be made available to the public (in the Forestry Commission library and/or on Forestry Commission website). Are you content for your response to be made available also?

Yes

### 3. SHARING RESPONSES/FUTURE ENGAGEMENT

We will share your response internally. Are you content for the Forestry Commission to contact you again in the future in relation to this consultation response?

Yes

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### 1. Do you agree with the rationale and justification for strongholds? If not, why not?

Scottish Native Woods supports & agrees with the three point strategy for Red Squirrel Conservation of:

- i. Improving woods for red squirrels
- ii. Minimising the threat from grey squirrels
- iii. Research/monitoring.

We believe that strongholds should be a part of the "Improving woods for red squirrels" objective of the strategy, rather than appear as the main focus for the strategy at a national level.

The evidence that these strongholds will work is weak. The principle seems to be that red squirrels that currently live in areas around strongholds will retreat into the strongholds as greys arrive. However there is a strong chance that the reds will carry squirrel pox with them. Further, experts suggest that large blocks of sitka spruce will not necessarily support viable red population (eg FC Information Note 76 Habitat Use by Red and Grey Squirrels), and the timescales required to diversify the species mix is rather long to be effective.

Instead Scottish Native Woods believes that

**a almost all of the limited resources available should be directed at control of grey squirrels.** This approach appears to be working in areas such as

- Grampian; it needs to be applied more widely, and Scottish Government needs to make an ongoing commitment to support this approach.
- b LIS should be widely adopted over the National Forest Estate, and more resources should be targeted at private managers prepared to adopt LIS.** A focus for this work should be the strongholds that have been identified, and increased emphasis should be placed on thinnings to enhance cone production and the identification of long term retention areas.
  - c. There should be stronger links with Scottish Government woodland creation policy.** The expansion and creation of well designed and located native pinewoods, favoured native broadleaf woodlands and mixed conifer woodlands can be used to mitigate climate change and assist with Priority Species conservation.
  - d Strongholds should be seen as a last resort.** We are some way off the need to adopt this approach. Implementation of a-c will help to reduce the chance that we will have to rely upon strongholds, while also delivering other public benefits.

## **2. Do you think that the management approach for strongholds is appropriate to achieve their objectives? If not, why not?**

The consultation document itself raises a degree of uncertainty over this approach highlighting the areas where more research is required. In particular if grey squirrels spread unchecked, will these strongholds “protect” red squirrels from contamination by squirrel pox virus.

Scottish Native Woods also questions the concept of “Site defendability” which suggests “discouraging” woodland networks on private land in the vicinity of these strongholds. Not clear at what scale this would work however we question whether it is realistic to “enforce” on private landowners. Further this approach runs in the face of other Scottish Government policy e.g. in the Cairngorms (reference stronghold Balmoral to Inver) of encouraging expansion in Forest Habitat Networks.

## **3. Do you have comments on the suitability of any particular site or sites to act as a stronghold? Please state which site(s).**

### **i General comment on scoring within selection criteria**

#### **ia size of conifer blocks**

Pepper & Patterson 1998 is partially quoted “Areas above this area (2000ha) are considered to be “ideal to conserve a population”.

Text actually reads “An area of conifer forest between 2000 and 5000ha is considered to be ideal to conserve a population of reds with a high chance of success. It may be possible to support a small viable red population in cores reserves of as little as 200-300ha together with buffer zones...less that 10% large seeded broadleaves....prospects dubious”

However in this document ever higher scores are allocated to ever larger blocks without justification (except within the text that larger blocks are “believed” to be best), treating over 10,000ha as ideal for scoring purposes.

Combining this with scoring ASNWs, SSSIs & Large Seeded broadleaves on a percentage basis means that substantial oakwood SSSIs (eg Dalavich within **Inverliever**) have a minimal impact on the suitability of large blocks of conifer. No attempt is made to explain how the differing requirements of the management of designated sites and the species specific management envisaged here by the Scottish Government are to be reconciled.

**ib Use of anecdotal evidence in scoring**

Red Squirrel density is scored on “anecdotal evidence”. Before Scottish Government devotes resources to strongholds up-to-date site information should be gathered by employees or recruited volunteers to more accurately assess the importance of the identified strongholds. Otherwise the whole is constructed on weak foundations, and a revisiting of the evidence might produce results as varied as these are from previous work. For example in “Selecting Forest Reserves for Red Squirrel Conservation, Site Selection Paper” by Jason Reynolds and Sarah Bentley ([http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned\\_reports/f02ac334.pdf](http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/f02ac334.pdf)) we note that Minard (ie Kilmichael) is ranked 38<sup>th</sup>, Inverliever 78 and Erredine 79

**ic Impact of age categories**

Insufficient attention is paid to scoring for age categories of the blocks (except for the exclusion of areas of Cowal on age grounds).

**ii Impact on other priority species within strongholds**

In Moray & Aberdeenshire two of the three areas proposed have issues of other Priority species management which needs to be balanced with red squirrel objectives. For example large area of the **Balmoral to Inver** stronghold is a Natura site and within the Core Capercaillie area. The river Spey & its tributaries SAC follows the boundaries of the **Ordiequish, Whiteash to Ben Aigan** stronghold.

Also see comment at Question 2 above re site defendability.

**iii Impact of existing broadleaf habitat networks within strongholds.**

**Inverliever, Erredine and Kilmichael** all include substantial strips of waterside native woodland which extend far into the surrounding landscape.

**4. Do you think that the boundary of any particular site or sites should be changed? Please state which site(s), how the boundary should be changed, and why.**

In the **Balmoral to Inver stronghold** the area of pine north and east of the A93 road at Coilacriech could be included, as it is adjacent to the proposed stronghold and is good quality red squirrel habitat.

**5. Do you think that the proposed support for management will be sufficient to achieve stronghold objectives? If not, what support is needed?**

In the **Balmoral to Inver** stronghold there is a need for support to improve the forest infrastructure e.g. roads in those areas of pine plantations where thinning & extraction work is appropriate.

