



## SNP admits to felling 16 million trees to develop wind farms

Scottish Tory MSP Liam Kerr said figure would astonish the public and communities all over the country had cited concerns about the projects

By Simon Johnson, SCOTTISH POLITICAL EDITOR

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Almost 16 million trees have been chopped down on publicly owned land in Scotland to make way for wind farms, an SNP minister had admitted amid a major drive to erect more turbines.

Mairi Gougeon, the Rural Affairs Secretary, estimated that 15.7 million trees had been felled since 2000 in land that is currently managed by agency Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) - the equivalent of more than 1,700 per day.

She insisted there was a planning presumption in favour of protecting woodland and wind farm developers would be expected to undertake “compensatory planting elsewhere”.

But Liam Kerr, a Scottish Tory MSP, said the public would be “astonished” at the total and cited concerns about the developments that had been raised with him “by communities all over the country.”

Scotland already has turbines theoretically capable of generating 8.4GW of power, well over half the UK's total, but SNP ministers want to add a further 8-12GW.

### Protections for unspoiled wild land watered down

Their latest planning framework relaxes controls on building more turbines, with protections for unspoiled wild land watered down.

The John Muir Trust, a conservation charity, has warned the [new threshold for allowing wind farm companies to build turbines on wild land](#) is so low that it appears impossible for them not to meet it.

The SNP wind power target also includes replacing existing turbines that may be coming to the end of their working life with even taller and larger versions, a process called “repowering”.

It emerged earlier this year that some developers want to erect turbines up to 850 feet tall, the equivalent of more than 60 double decker buses.

In a letter to Mr Kerr, dated July 13, Ms Gougeon said the equivalent of around 7,858 hectares of trees had been chopped down to make way for wind farms since 2000.

With an average of 2,000 trees per hectare, she said: “This gives an estimated total of 15.7 million trees which have been felled in order to facilitate windfarm development.”

The minister added: “Removal should only be permitted where it would achieve significant and clearly defined additional public benefits.

‘Developers must provide compensatory planting’

“Where woodland is removed in association with development, developers will generally be expected to provide compensatory planting in order to avoid a net loss of woodland.”

She said many of the felled trees will have been “replanted on site” or replaced elsewhere, and the vast majority were part of a commercial crop that would have been chopped down anyway “at the end of their rotation”.

But Mr Kerr, a North East MSP, said: “Most people will be astonished to see the number of trees cut down to make way for wind farms.

“I’ve been contacted many times by rural communities all over the country questioning the location of these developments, sharing legitimate concerns not just about the visual impact but also damage to wildlife and business. Now we learn there’s significant damage when it comes to trees.”

He said ministers “must be alive” to the “significant costs” that could be incurred with the siting of wind farms.

FLS said it had planted more than 500 million trees since 2000 and the quantity felled for wind farms equated roughly to its annual harvesting programme.

A spokesman said: “Renewable energy generated from wind farms is a key element in Scotland’s response to the climate emergency and the shift towards net zero and the infrastructure on land that we manage generates enough power for 600,000 homes.”

Morag Watson, director of policy at trade body Scottish Renewables said: “The [volatile price of imported gas](#) has left energy consumers suffering some of the highest prices in living memory, alongside a climate emergency which means cutting the amount of carbon we emit as quickly as possible.

“Building new wind farms - the cheapest form of power generation - tackles both problems at once.”

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