GE2024 PARTY MANIFESTO ANALYSIS

With all main parties having now published their manifestos, Confor has examined them for commitments directly relevant to the forestry and wood processing industry.

Confor has prepared a 5-point plan for the next government which has been presented to all parties as a means to provide a platform for certainty and confidence for the sector which can lead to increased economic activity, stimulate investment and job creation, lock up carbon to help achieve net zero and provide places for people and wildlife.

Introduction
Unsurprisingly the election campaign so far has reflected the issues at the forefront of the public discourse, cost of living, state of the NHS, personal taxation and immigration.

A further key theme of the election campaign has been the state of the public finances. Indeed, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) says the state of public finances hangs over the election campaign "like a dark cloud".

This has led to both the Conservatives and Labour trying to outdo themselves on their fiscal prudence and responsibility. Both have committed to getting debt down and adhering to self-imposed rules on borrowing and public spending. When combined with election commitments to not raise the primary taxation mechanisms the defining task of any new government will be a review of public finances with a goal of finding a way to make positive change from the fiscal box they have placed themselves in.

This has resulted in manifestos that are somewhat lacklustre when it comes to a range of economic issues, including forestry.

Prior to the 2019 election, forestry or timber did not feature in party manifestos and in 2019 the focus was solely on targets for tree planting. The 2024 manifestos generally maintain a commitment to tree planting but lack any commitment to actual targets.

Confor asks and manifesto specifics
Below, we compare the published main party manifestos to each of the five points in Confor's document "The Future is Forestry: Working for the wood - and the trees":

1. Create more forests:

Four of the main UK parties make reference to planting more trees,

- The Conservative manifesto commits to delivering tree planting targets but does not mention specific numbers.
- Labour mentions creating new National Forests and planting millions of trees but lacks specific targets. Outside the manifesto during the campaign Labour also committed to establishing a Tree Planting Taskforce.
- The Liberal Democrats aim to plant at least 60 million trees a year and double woodland cover by 2050, which aligns with Confor's ask.
- The Green Party aims to increase unharvested forest and woodland by over 50% but doesn't provide specific planting targets. The Green party is the only manifesto which specifically mentions increasing productive forestry.

The other parties, Plaid Cymru, Reform and the SNP make no commitments to additional tree planting (the SNP does reference its record on tree planting in the context of fair funding for climate).

2. Create a Timber Security Strategy:

None of the party manifestos explicitly mention creating a Timber Security Strategy to reduce the proportion of timber imports to the UK. The Green Party is the only manifesto which recognises that the UK has scope to become more self-sufficient in wood resources.

3. Promote Home-Grown Wood:

- The Conservative, Labour, Plaid Cymru, Reform and the SNP manifestos do not mention promoting home-grown wood in construction.
- The Liberal Democrats mention supporting sustainable wood use, especially in construction, but do not set specific targets.
- The Green Party mentions using wood waste in construction materials as a priority but does not set targets for home-grown wood use.

4. Develop a Skills Action Plan:

With several parties placing the economy as a focus of their campaigns we would have expected improving skills levels across the country to be a big focus. While many of the parties make commitments regarding increasing apprenticeships the focus of the main parties on reducing immigration will mean greater competition for workers and for capacity to train apprentices.

5. Communicate the big messages:

This is an ask that relies on the incoming government recognising there is a forest-based industry and that misinformation, or misconceptions are undermining the sector's ability to achieve planting targets and to deliver more for local economies, tackle climate change and increase the use of home-grown wood in the face of increasing concerns on timber security. It is unsurprising that it has not been picked up in the party manifestos, though Trudy Harrison had understood this issue when she was forestry minister in England.

Summary

In terms of manifesto commitments the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party manifestos most closely align with Confor's 5-point plan. However generally there is a lack of focus on crucial issues like timber security and home-grown wood promotion across all the party manifestos published so far. The lack of specific tree planting targets from the 2 main parties is the key difference between this general election campaign and last time around in 2019.

Given that it now seems almost certain that Labour will form the next government there are a number of other announcements made during the campaign - a new industrial strategy and an Industry Strategy Council - that while not specific to forestry do provide opportunities to advance the sector with an incoming Labour government.

Specific policies related to forestry and Confor's 5 action points

Tree planting

1. Deliver tree planting and peatland commitments through Nature for Climate funding, and continue work to unlock private investment. (p. 67)

2. Cut red tape that holds back tree planting in the planning system by identifying particularly suitable areas where processes and permits will be streamlined. (p. 67)

3. Deliver the commitment made at COP28 to introduce forest risk commodities legislation early in the next Parliament, tackling the UK's impact on illegal deforestation internationally. (p. 67)

Skills

Fund 100,000 high quality apprenticeships for young people, paid for by curbing the number of poor-quality university degrees. (p. 4)

Lifelong Learning Entitlement, giving adults the support they need to train, retrain and upskill flexibility throughout their working lives. (p. 28)

Comment

The Conservative manifesto commits to continuing to deliver on existing tree planting targets and peatland restoration through public funding and private investment. They plan to launch an urban greening initiative and streamline planning rules to make it easier to plant trees in suitable locations. The manifesto also mentions bringing in legislation to address the UK's role in international deforestation early in the next Parliament. However, there are no new specific targets around forestry and woodlands mentioned, nor any policies related to promoting greater use of timber.

Specific policies related to forestry and Confor's 5 action points

As part of plans to improve responsible access to nature, Labour will create nine new National River Walks, one in each region of England, and establish three new National Forests in England, whilst planting millions of trees and creating new woodlands. Labour will expand nature-rich habitats such as wetlands, peat bogs and forests so families can explore and wildlife can thrive, including on public land. (p. 58)

Skills

1. Establish Skills England to bring together business, training providers and unions with national and local government to ensure we have the highly trained workforce needed to deliver Labour's Industrial Strategy.

2. Transform Further Education colleges into specialist Technical Excellence Colleges.

Comment

In the Labour Party 2024 general election manifesto, there are limited direct references to forestry, woodlands and timber.

While the manifesto does mention creating new National Forests and planting millions of trees, it does not provide any specific targets or details around forestry and woodlands. There are no direct references to policies promoting greater use of timber in construction.

The manifesto focuses on protecting nature, improving access to green spaces, and supporting British farming in general, rather than setting out any substantial forestry and timber policies.

Specific policies related to forestry and Confor's 5 action points

Tree Planting

1. Plant at least 60 million trees a year, helping to restore woodland habitats, increase the use of sustainable wood in construction, and reach net zero. (p. 61)

2. Double woodland cover by 2050 as part of targets to "double nature" and stop the decline of the natural environment. (p. 61)

3. Support farmers properly in restoring woodland, creating new natural flood protections and managing land to encourage carbon storage, while producing food for the table. (p. 66)

4. Ensure that nature-based solutions, including tree planting, form a critical part of the UK's strategy to tackle climate change. (p. 64)

5. Work with international partners to fight deforestation around the world. (p. 64)

6. Put the construction sector on a sustainable footing by investing in new technologies such as modern methods of construction. (p. 72)

Skills

Fix the Skills and recruitment crisis by investing in education and training, including increasing the availability of apprenticeships and career advice for young people

Creating new Lifelong Skills Grants for adults to spend on education and training throughout their lives

Comment

The Liberal Democrats plan to significantly increase tree planting and woodland restoration to help tackle climate change and restore nature. They aim to double woodland cover by 2050. Supporting sustainable forestry and wood use, especially in construction, are part of their plans. The manifesto also mentions fighting global deforestation. The policies are carried over from the 2019 Liberal Democrat manifesto indicating a continuity in their approach to this policy area.

Specific policies related to forestry and Confor's 5 action points

Tree Planting

1. There is scope for the UK to become far more self-sufficient in wood resources as part of the move away from products based on fossil fuels. (p. 28)

2. Elected Greens will advocate for:
   a. A substantial increase in productive forestry, in addition to increases in woodland.
   b. Wood and crop waste to be recycled into construction materials, paper and fabrics. (p. 28)

3. A priority would be the re-wetting of all peatland and increasing unharvested forest and woodland by over 50%. We should allow natural regeneration to take place. (p. 24)

4. The Green Party plans to give 30% of land and sea back to nature by 2030 ensuring that it is permanently protected. (p. 24)

Comment

The Green Party manifesto advocates for a substantial increase in productive forestry and use of timber resources to replace fossil fuel based products, as part of their broader plans to protect and restore nature. At the same time, however, they aim to increase unharvested forest and woodland by over 50% and allow natural regeneration. Using wood waste in construction materials and other products is also mentioned as a priority. However, beyond these high-level commitments, no specific targets or detailed policies are provided related to forestry and timber use.

The manifesto briefly mentions trees.

On page 21 under Providing fair funding for climate the manifesto states:

"Scotland has over two thirds of the UK's peatland, and currently plants over 60% of trees in the UK, yet funds restoration and planting within our budget, with no help from the UK Government. Westminster must ensure fair funding flows to devolved nations to enable our, and their, climate ambition given that for the whole of the UK to reach net zero by 2050, Scotland must do so by 2045."

The manifest has no measures related to timber or skills.

The manifesto briefly mentions trees in one section:

On page 47, under "Fairness for our Farmers", the manifesto states:

"We have opposed Labour's Sustainable Farming Scheme proposal for 10% tree cover on all farms demanding a more flexible approach."

The manifesto has no measures related to timber or skills.

The manifesto has one reference to trees;

"We can protect our environment with more tree planting".