

Tripling woodland expansion targets while saving £900 million in taxpayer money: the National Deer Management Plan

May 2025

The deer management section of the Natural Environment Bill has focused attention on the tensions between the actions needed to restore Scotland's nature at scale and the cost associated with sustainable deer management. We have collected data on the financial resources required to achieve woodland expansion under different deer management models.

The figures show that diverting some of the existing budgets to fund a National Deer Management Plan will achieve woodland expansion above and beyond current government targets at significantly lower cost to the public purse compared with than planting trees behind deer fencing.

Managing the national deer herd through a funded and coordinated plan with the deer management and environmental sector will be cheaper and less carbon intensive as it saves on fence materials. It will directly support long-term and stable employment in deer management, and it will create much more favourable conditions for trees to naturally regenerate and colonise, ensuring Scotland's woodlands are diverse and resilient.

Cost of the National Deer Management Plan: £59 million over 4 years

The Government's Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan calls for an increase in Scotland's total deer cull of 25-30%. This aligns with thinking by the Strategic Deer Board and takes us to 250,000 deer culled per year.

NatureScot's population model shows that sustaining this cull level for four years would result in a nation herd of 390,000 deer and a national average deer density of 5 deer/km², a level at which natural regeneration of less palatable tree species starts to become possible.

To maintain that national deer density in the long term, the Plan will have to carry out a maintenance cull of 80,000 per year (compared to 180,000 currently).

Data on costs collated by Darren Wisniewski for Trees for Life¹ indicates that the additional ongoing operational and capital costs of achieving this cull would be £59 million over the first four years (just under £15m per year on average). Including income from venison sales could reduce this figure by approximately 20%.²

Outcomes for woodland creation targets: up to 320,000 hectares of new native woodland in 10 years

Natural expansion from our existing native woodlands is both the cheapest and most nature-benefitting way to meet Scottish Government targets for nature and climate. Reducing deer browsing to allow native woodlands to naturally expand into a 50m zone around existing areas could create 320,000 hectares of new native woodland over ten years, with no need for additional planting.

It should be noted that to deliver nature-rich woodlands that include the species most palatable to deer, this national deer density will have to be brought lower locally to enable the restoration of critical habitats such as Scotland's rainforest, montane woodland, or the Caledonian pinewood. These efforts should be guided primarily by tracking changes in Woodland Herbivore Impact Assessments, with cull levels adjusted accordingly.³

Using a typical deer fencing approach to create the equivalent amount of new woodland would cost £3,600 per hectare, while public subsidies for woodland creation through the Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS) amount to £4,200 per hectare. These fence-dependent methods of woodland creation still necessitate ongoing deer management, while fencing needs to be replaced on average at least every twenty years, vastly increasing long-term costs.

The table below summarises the indicative costs per hectare of different methods of woodland creation to establish an additional 320,000 hectares of native woodland over the first four years. Costs are shown for supporting the total cost of the National Deer Management Plan (i.e. 250,000 deer) and for only the additional cost of increasing from the current average annual cull from 180,000 deer to the required 250,000.

Method	Cost per hectare
Typical deer fencing	£3,600
National deer management plan <u>total cost</u>	£610
National deer management plan <u>additional cost only</u>	£185
Average FGS for comparison	£4,260

¹ Contact Trees for Life or the John Muir Trust for access to the original report.

² Investing in wild venison marketing could increase profits from venison sales, further diminishing net costs of the National Deer Management Plan.

³ To enable full restoration and expansion of native woodlands and these more fragile habitats, deer management plans should be aiming for densities below 2/km².

The table below provides the costs of creating an additional 320,000 hectares of native woodland over the next 40 years. It includes inflation, estimated at 3.5% per year after the initial four years.

Method	First 4 years	Years 5-20	Years 21-40	Total 40 years
Deer fencing ⁴	£1.15 billion	£115 million	£2.5 billion	£3.8 billion
National plan total cost ⁵	£195 million	£317 million	£741 million	£1.2 billion
National plan additional cost only ⁶	£59 million	£0	£0	£59 million

Other climate and nature benefits of a National Deer Management Plan

While not modelled here, reducing deer populations to the level envisaged by the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy will deliver a range of other benefits. Woodlands that expand naturally from existing native forest remnants will be more biodiverse and resilient than woodland we create by planting.

In addition to creating more biodiverse and resilient native woodland, this national plan will protect and improve the condition of woodlands and commercial plantations subsidies by taxpayer money over the past thirty years.

Future commercial forestry will benefit, as conditions improve for growing a much fuller range of productive timber species.

Damage to peatlands, our most important natural carbon store and a valuable part of our biodiversity, will reduce very significantly at 5 deer/km². Areas where peat has been eroded and are currently acting as sources of carbon emission can be expected to recover and revert to becoming net stores of carbon as the levels of trampling pressure are reduced.

⁴ To be conservative, we assumed deer fencing would incur 10% maintenance costs for the first 20 years after installation. We assumed that the fences would need to be replaced after year 20 on average and an additional 10% was allocated for maintenance over that period. Note that additional deer management costs are not included in the overall costs for the deer fencing method. Real costs are therefore likely to be higher.

⁵ To calculate ongoing costs of for the National Plan, we included maintenance cull costs after the initial 4-year cull period using an 80,000 per year cull figure.

⁶ If the Scottish Government only funds the additional culling required to reach the target, they will only need to support the initial 4 years, after which the current cull figures of ~180,000 per year should be more than enough to cover the maintenance cull of 80,000 per year, which is why the last line in the table does not include ongoing costs.

Conclusion

The following table compares the average cost of woodland creation of the different models over 40 years and contrasts those costs with the current budget allocated by the Scottish Government to the Forestry Grant Scheme (FGS):

Method	Average cost/year	FGS budget	Difference over 40 years
Typical deer fencing	£95m	£53m ⁷	- £1.7b
National plan total cost	£31m		+ £870m
National plan additional cost only	£1.5m		+ £2b

The conclusion is clear: fully funding a National Deer Management Plan would cost less than current forestry subsidies and save close to £900 million of taxpayer money while tripling Scottish Government's woodland expansion targets.⁸

Doing so will enable a Just Transition for the deer management livelihoods that are so essential to meeting the challenge of restoring nature and combatting climate change in Scotland.

Recommendations for the Scottish Parliament

We therefore recommend that the Scottish Parliament commits to:

1. The principles of a National Deer Management Plan and developing its implementation plan.
2. To begin funding that plan by redirecting existing subsidies from the FGS budget for large-scale industrial conifer plantations to deer management.

For more information, contact the John Muir Trust or Trees for Life.

Thomas Widrow, Head of Campaigns,
thomas.widrow@johnmuirtrust.org

Benjamin Wold Birmanis, Parliamentary Officer,
benjamin.woldbirmanis@johnmuirtrust.org

⁷ See [Chapter 10 Rural Affairs, Land Reform & Islands- Scottish Budget 2025 to 2026](#). We assumed the FGS budget would remain at £53 million per year for the next 40 years, therefore incorporating an effective cut of 3.5% per year every year.

⁸ Scottish Government current total woodland creation target stands at 11,000 ha for 2025-26, or 110,000 over 10 years.

This briefing and the associated asks are supported by:

- Scottish Environment LINK
- Stop Climate Chaos Scotland
- Scottish Rewilding Alliance
- Community Land Scotland
- Scottish Tenant Farmers Association
- RSPB
- Woodland Trust
- National Trust for Scotland
- Scottish Wildlife Trust
- Plantlife
- Borders Forest Trust
- Rewilding Britain
- Nature Foundation
- North-East Mountain Trust