

Dealing with self-seeding non-native conifers: an idea for discussion

James Fenton, 25 October 2024

The spread outwards from commercial plantations of self-seeded conifers is beginning to be recognised as a problem throughout the UK. As plantations mature and trees start producing seed, the threat increases. Self-seeded spruce can be found in all habitats and at all altitudes. Spread is exponential and, if nothing is done, then the upland landscapes of Scotland will in future be landscapes of Sitka spruce forest, but also with larch, Lawson's cypress, Lodgepole pine and occasional firs.

Ideally, Sitka spruce should in statute be labelled an invasive non-native species and making it illegal to allow it to spread into the wild, with the onus on the owner of the seed source to remove them. But this is unlikely to happen and in some locations it may be difficult to establish from which particular plantation/garden the spread originated; and when self-seeded trees themselves spread ... a legal nightmare and a lawyer's dream!

Extracting a levy from plantation owners to pay for control teams

Although trees do spread from private gardens, the majority come from commercial plantations. Using the principle 'polluter pays', the following is suggested as a solution.

Every owner of a commercial conifer plantation is charged a levy of, say, £10/ha [amount for discussion] which will pay for the costs of employing teams of individuals whose job it is to cut down any trees outwith the plantation. There could be locally-based teams, each responsible for a specific area of Scotland. They would be similar to the current Footpath Repair teams. This would create local employment in rural and remote areas.

There is the issue of permission to enter land outwith that of the plantation owner, but maybe the Scottish Parliament could issue a derogation? The scheme would be administered by Forest & Land Scotland [who have, to date, refused to recognise the issue], and paying the levy would be a condition of grant-aid. Ideally it would be applied retrospectively to those who have received grant in the past.

Removing self-seeded conifers is much easier than removing rhododendron because, unlike rhododendron, the trees die when cut. Rhododendron spread is also a major issue in some areas, but conifer invasion is more widespread. There needs to be a similar solution for rhododendron (and other invasives), but it is a more intractable problem because there is not the carrot of grant-aid to link to a levy. And soon there will need to be action to control *Leycesteria* which is showing explosive spread in some woodland locations in the west of Scotland.

If nothing is done

Because invasive plants expand exponentially, the sooner we start, the easier and cheaper it will be. If nothing is done, upland landscapes will be transformed into Sitka spruce forest in a few hundred years' time.

Dr James Fenton
Pollidoran
Clachan Seil
Oban
PA34 4TJ
ecology@fenton.scot

25 October 2024