# Campaigners criticise UK government for limited support of natural tree regeneration



Campaigners have criticised the UK government for insufficient support towards the natural regeneration of trees in England, highlighting a disproportionate emphasis on tree planting within government-funded schemes. According to campaigners, this imbalance undermines efforts to create more diverse and ecologically beneficial woodlands.

Recent data obtained under freedom of information laws by environmental campaigner Guy Shrubsole reveals that only 5% of Forestry Commission grants allocated for woodland creation have been directed towards natural regeneration, with the remaining 95% funding traditional tree planting. Natural regeneration refers to the process where trees grow and reproduce independently in the wild, through mechanisms such as self-seeding or sprouting from existing roots, without human intervention.

Shrubsole commented on the findings, saying: “Tree planting has its place, but right now the incentives are skewed far too much in favour of planting over natural regeneration. Ministers need to change these ridiculous rules if they want to stand any chance of meeting their own targets for woodland creation.”

The figures reflect activity under the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO), a Forestry Commission scheme launched in May 2021 that provides grants to landowners and farmers to encourage tree planting and woodland development. Since its inception, EWCO has supported just 501 hectares (approximately 1,238 acres) of natural regeneration, compared to 8,642 hectares of new woodland created via tree planting.

Ecologists have emphasised the ecological advantages of naturally regenerated woodlands, noting that such areas tend to host a greater variety of tree species and age classes. These woods are typically better adapted to their local soil and climate conditions, offering enhanced habitats for wildlife compared to more uniform planted forests.

In 2021, the government introduced an option termed “natural colonisation” within the EWCO grant framework, which offers funding to land managers to protect regenerating saplings from grazing livestock by installing fencing. However, strict scheme rules currently stipulate that natural regeneration must occur within 75 metres of existing trees. This restriction is at odds with scientific studies demonstrating that woodland birds can disperse acorns over distances ranging from 1 to 6 kilometres (0.6 to 3.7 miles), suggesting potential habitat for natural regeneration well beyond the imposed boundary.

Shrubsole explained this issue, stating: “Trees are perfectly capable of self-seeding: after all, they’ve been doing so for millions of years. Whilst tree planting certainly has its place, we could have far richer, more natural forests if only we properly supported farmers and landowners to let trees naturally regenerate.”

In response, a spokesperson from the Forestry Commission highlighted that the choice between woodland creation methods lies with land managers. A representative from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) said: “We are committed to increasing woodland creation – it’s why we are investing £400 million into tree planting, have announced the first new national forest in 30 years and provide woodland creation grants. Whilst we recognise the benefits natural colonisation can bring, land managers are best placed to decide what woodland creation measures are most appropriate for their site.”

The debate over the best approaches to woodland establishment continues, balancing the ecological benefits of natural regeneration with the government's current funding and policy priorities aimed at expanding tree cover across England.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://assets.rewildingbritain.org.uk/documents/RB_NaturalRegenerationReport_Jan2020.pdf> - This report from Rewilding Britain highlights the benefits of natural regeneration over tree planting, emphasizing its potential to deliver both climate and biodiversity benefits in Britain.
* <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-uk-misses-tree-planting-targets-by-forest-the-size-of-birmingham/> - This analysis discusses the UK's challenges in meeting tree-planting targets, highlighting the ongoing debate about woodland creation methods.
* <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/09/rewilding-better-than-tree-planting-britain-forests/> - This article emphasizes that rewilding and natural regeneration could be more effective for long-term woodland expansion and biodiversity in Britain than tree planting.
* <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmenvaud/637/report.html> - This parliamentary report discusses the UK's forestry and timber sectors' contributions to biodiversity, including woodland creation targets.
* <https://www.woodlands.co.uk/blog/flora-and-fauna/tree-planting-vs-natural-regeneration-and-a-film/> - This blog discusses the pros and cons of tree planting versus natural regeneration in woodland creation, offering insights into ecological benefits and management considerations.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/forestry-commission-grants-and-schemes> - This government collection provides information on Forestry Commission grants, which could offer insights into funding for natural regeneration versus tree planting under schemes like the England Woodland Creation Offer.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/28/government-failing-to-support-natural-regeneration-of-trees-in-england> - Please view link - unable to able to access data