

Torinturk: note of our discussion with Forestry and Land Scotland

18 August 2026

Action West Loch met Richard Thompson, Native Woodland Ecologist at Forestry and Land Scotland, to discuss how the restoration of the Torinturk Plantation on Ancient Woodland Site (PAWS) should be carried out following the FLS site meeting of 10 August, and to put to FLS our proposal that Torinturk be developed as a formal demonstration of high-quality PAWS restoration.

Ed Tyler, Paul Hawes, Owen Paisley and Alain Karmitz attended for AWL. This is our own record of the discussion, and it has been shared with FLS.

Demonstration site

Richard supported the proposal. He considered that formal demonstration status could raise the profile of the work, bring in FLS's national environmental expertise, and encourage a particularly careful standard of practice in relation to remnant woodland, diffuse pollution, deer management and long-term monitoring — with the connected marine environment of West Loch Tarbert explicitly recognised. He offered to raise it with colleagues and to convene a further meeting including FLS's environment and harvesting leads, at which AWL's marine work would be presented.

Felling method

Richard said that he would ordinarily prefer gradual removal, which maintains humidity and avoids abrupt change. For the mature, largely unthinned stands at Torinturk, however, he judged that repeated partial opening would risk extensive windthrow, dense non-native regeneration, sheltered deer habitat and potentially worse diffuse pollution, and that a carefully planned removal followed by active restoration would give the better long-term result.

This was site-specific advice rather than a general position. AWL's concerns about humidity, forest-floor continuity and downstream marine effects remain central to how any operation here is designed and monitored.

Retention and veteran trees

Modern harvesting can retain a substantial amount of native regeneration, even where stems are thin or unstable. Retained stems should be identified and marked before operations begin — and an untidy appearance immediately after felling should not be mistaken for ecological failure.

Veteran native trees need advance care. Where felling is more than five years away, Richard favoured halo thinning around them, so that the trees and the lichens and mosses they carry can adjust gradually to greater exposure. Where operations are closer, the trees should still be located and recorded so that they can be protected during felling.

AWL undertook to map the veteran oaks, hazels, willows and riparian remnants at Torinturk, including the small pockets along the burns.

Deer and the protection of regeneration

Natural regeneration will not succeed without effective control of browsing. Richard emphasised the need for a deer management group operating at landscape scale, together with regular herbivore impact assessment, and offered to train AWL members in that method.

Where browsing pressure cannot be reduced sufficiently, he recommended protecting groups of naturally regenerating trees with larger mesh rings rather than individual guards, concentrating on a modest number of well-distributed hazel, willow, rowan and other valuable species, with competing birch managed and regenerating Sitka removed.

Monitoring

A baseline survey of veteran trees, lichens, bryophytes and other rainforest indicators, repeated over at least ten years, would make the project scientifically valuable. Richard identified a PhD researcher connected with Forest Research, working on airborne eDNA sampling alongside field survey, as a possible source of survey design and training support during a forthcoming placement in the west.

Funding

Richard advised that funding for work of this kind on public land is more likely to be achieved through a collaborative landscape partnership, or a bid to the Nature Restoration Fund, than through AWL acting alone.

Where this now stands

Since the meeting, Keith Kirby — a leading independent authority on PAWS restoration — has spent two days with us at Torinturk and at Dalavich, and has agreed to write a short report on Torinturk. FLS has asked AWL to produce the first draft of the Memorandum of Collaboration that will govern the felling and the restoration that follows it, and that work is under way. The definition of what demonstration status would mean in practice is being taken forward with FLS.

Action West Loch is a community conservation group working on woodland, freshwater and marine restoration in the West Loch Tarbert catchment, from ridge to reef.