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Planning Afforestation in Iceland

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1 Introduction

Afforestation by planting is the main forestry activity in Iceland. About 1500-2000 ha are planted annually, generally with multiple-use goals but emphasizing developing a timber resource, reclamation of eroded or degraded land and/or amenity. About 80% of afforestation takes place on farms with grants from the state-run Regional Afforestation Projects (RAPs). The rest is carried out by forestry societies, individuals and two state agencies; the Iceland Forest Service (IFS) and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) (Gunnarsson 2004).

2 History of forestry planning

The first maps of state-owned forests were made in 1906. Such maps were basically the only forest planning tools until 1970, when the first district plan for farm afforestation was made. It included a description of goals but no inventory or detailed description of land to be afforested and no forest design maps. The first regional plan including land inventory and forest design was made in 1987 and the first estate level afforestation plan in 1988 (Blöndal and Gunnarsson 1999).

During the 1990s, a total of five regional plans setting long-term afforestation goals were developed covering all of lowland Iceland. These formed the foundation upon which the six RAPs are built. The regional plans were all developed through co-operation between the IFS, local farmers' associations and forestry societies and the Ministry of Agriculture. At the same time, estate level plans were developed and made for several hundred farms (Eysteinnsson 1999).

The first National Forestry Plan was accepted by parliament in 2003. It includes goals and a 5-year budget for the farm afforestation grants scheme administered by the RAPs and provisions for budget increases for forest research and the national forests, both administered by the IFS.

3 Levels of planning

Almost all estate level plans to date are for afforestation of treeless land. The first true management plans for existing forests are now being made for the national forests and plans that include thinning will be made for private forests soon.

Estate level plans are simply a set of instructions from a forester to a forest owner, in other words, professional advice. They are tools to plan fencing, seedling production, site preparation, and other things that precede afforestation, as well as planting. Estate level plans do not go through the official (legal) planning process unless environmental impact assessment is required, that is if the afforestation area covers over 200 hectares or it is located in a nature protection area. The time scale of estate level plans is usually 10 years (Eysteinnsson 1999).

Regional level afforestation plans have been developed for the 5 RAPs. They basically describe the state grants scheme for farm afforestation, which accounts for roughly 80% of afforestation in Iceland. They do not describe where afforestation will take place, since that depends on what land owners elect to participate. They do however exclude some areas from afforestation before hand, mostly wetlands, nature protection areas and land at high elevations. The regions vary in size, with each covering 15-25% of the Icelandic lowlands. Regional level afforestation plans are public and required by the regional afforestation projects act. They do not go through the official planning process according to the planning and building act however. Instead, they are accepted when signed by the minister of agriculture. The timescale of the regional afforestation plans is 40 years.

The National Forestry plan is basically a state budget plan for 5 years, with no guarantee that it will be fulfilled. The time scale is actually one year at a time since it depends on the state budget. Getting an actual national forestry programme and associated plan is a work in progress.

4 Forest planning and conservation

Integrating conservation value into afforestation plans has been emphasized since the mid 1990s. Even though most land to be afforested has almost certainly been wooded in the past and has therefore been deforested, its current state may still have conservation value. Aspects that may have conservation value include biota (animals, plants, habitats), geologic formations and landscape (lavas, cliffs, waterfalls), archaeological or historic sites (ruins, sites connected to specific events), areas used for outdoor recreation (walking, hunting, berry picking) and sites with other types of interest (folklore, "favourite spot").

Conservation value is integrated specifically into estate-level planning through discussion with the landowner, by consulting experts and by reviewing various types of references such as red lists of rare animal and plant species, national and/or local registers of sites of nature conservation interest and archaeological surveys. The most common method is simply to mark the area in question on a map and say, "don't plant here". In some cases, more involved designing is required, especially where landscape is concerned.

Regional and national forestry plans include general goals and considerations regarding conservation.

5 Who plans afforestation?

People with university degrees in forestry are responsible for estate level planning. Consultation is primarily with the land owner, but also with local planning authorities and experts at the IFS and/or other state agencies in some cases. There are no legal restrictions on who can make a forestry plan however and no regulations regarding who must be consulted. Forest owners participating in the RAP grants scheme receive afforestation plans as part of their grant (Eysteinnsson 1999).

Regional level plans are developed by the IFS and directors of the RAPs with input from local forest owners, forestry societies, municipalities and others. The national forestry plan was authored by the Ministry of Agriculture, the IFS and the RAPs. Consultation with stakeholders outside the forestry sector was through official channels while the plan was in parliamentary committee. It was then approved by Parliament.

No forestry plans are required to go through an official planning process according to the planning and building act. The national and regional forestry plans are available to the public on web sites of the IFS and RAPs. Estate level plans are the property of the forest owner and not available to the public.

6 Financing

Estate level plans are financed by the RAPs for participants. Individual forest owners can buy plans from the Icelandic Forestry Association and at least 3 independent forestry consultants. Regional level plans are financed by IFS and RAPs. The national plan was financed by the ministry of agriculture, IFS and RAPs. In other words: almost all forestry planning is state financed (Eysteinnsson 1999).

7 Future trends

Work is about to commence on a real National Forest Programme which will result in a new national forestry plan 2009-?. This will be an open process with participation of all interested stakeholders, ending in acceptance by Parliament.

There are forces at work to increase bureaucracy, mostly through the legislative process. Several attempts have been made to require estate level plans to go through the official planning process according to the planning and building act and attempts have also been made to increase the number of afforestation plans requiring environmental impact assessment. These have until now been unsuccessful since forestry in Iceland is limited in scope and is generally considered to have positive rather than negative environmental effects, resulting in the Icelandic parliament not seeing the necessity for imposing restrictions or additional costs. These attempts will doubtless continue and the forestry sector will continue to fight them.

References

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