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Stephen O'Brien MP
House of Commons
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From Rt Hon Jim Paice MP
Minister of State for Agriculture and Food

Dear Stephen

Thank you for your email of 29 December enclosing your letter of 8 December written on behalf of your constituents who are concerned about public access to the public forest estate after the proposed sale of land.

For more than a decade the Forestry Commission has been both buying and selling land as part of a continuous process to ensure public benefits are being delivered as effectively as possible. The current asset sales programme is to support operational and ongoing investment needs in forests, woodlands and open spaces throughout England. I have put on record that the Forestry Commission will be selling around 15% of the public forest estate, around 40,000 hectares, by the end of this spending review period.

Woodland can be voluntarily dedicated for public access under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW). The vast majority of freehold areas of the public forest estate are dedicated in perpetuity for access on foot under CRoW. This is in addition to existing designated public rights of way, including bridleways. There are currently no plans to designate the public forest estate with higher rights of access to include provision of access for cyclists and equestrians. However, it would be up to the new owner to decide if they wish to continue any permissive access arrangements.

We will shortly be consulting on a number of different models for the management and ownership of the public forest estate, and ways to ensure that public benefits such as access, leisure and conservation, are maintained. However, no decisions have yet been taken on what individual sites may come under any new ownership options that are implemented in the future. I look forward to hearing the views of members of the public, representative organisations and civil society groups as part of this process of engagement.

Yours ever
Jim

RT HON JIM PAICE MP