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Logging the impact on timber



In his monthly column, **Professor Frank Peck** of the University of Cumbria's Centre for Regional Economic Development will tackle the burning issue of Brexit. This month, he focuses on how leaving the EU could effect the thousands of Cumbrians working in the timber industry

Timber haulage - a common sight on Cumbrian roads. But where does it all come from... and where is it going?

The fact is, timber haulage is a visible part of commercial enterprise that plays a major role in rural areas of the North of England.

The forestry and timber industry also has considerable reach, not only in providing employment in rural communities, but also through its links to other sectors including

agriculture, manufacture of wood and paper products as well as recreation and tourism.

According to Cumbria Woodlands, just under 10 per cent of land in Cumbria is covered by woodland (61,671 ha).

A significant proportion of this is under public ownership (28 per cent) and managed by the Forestry Commission (including Grizedale and Whinlatter forests).

The rest is owned and managed by a wide range of private owners that include, for instance, the National Trust (Tarn Hows) and Center Parcs (Whinfall Forest).

• **The BSW Timber mill at Cargo, near Carlisle**

Some forested areas clearly have "commercial" objectives, but many woodlands are protected and important for the environment and natural habitats and most are viewed as assets to be used in promoting recreation and tourism.

Latest data from the UK Business Register and Employment Survey in 2016 shows that there are around 1,100 involved directly in logging, forestry and sawmilling and another 1,600 engaged in the manufacture of wood products.

However, there are major employers in Cumbria involved in



the production of paper and paperboard products that process timber as well as recycled or “recovered paper”.

This increases the total number involved in some part of the wood and paper processing supply chains to at least 4,400 employees.

These supply chains are highly complex and by no means bounded by the administrative area of Cumbria.

There is significant movement of timber across the UK as a whole and internationally.

At the Port of Workington, there are imports of timber and wood pulp to supply the Iggesund integrated pulp and paperboard mill.

Other leading employers in this sector include prominently, the sawmill operations of BSW Timber at Cargo, Carlisle and Penrith-based AW Jenkinson Forest Products.

In addition, there are at least 17 small and medium-scale sawmills scattered across the county.

So, what are the implications

• **Top right: AW Jenkinson Forest Products, based in Penrith**

of Brexit for this sector in Cumbria?

There are too many issues to cover in detail here. There are, for instance, generic risks to businesses in this sector – changes in employment legislation, access to labour from overseas, changes in business support and grant aid, access to advice on technology and exporting. There are also many implications for woodland management associated with potential changes in environmental legislation and withdrawal from the EU Common Agricultural Policy.

Recent debates within the forestry industry, however, have focused on the trade implications.

It is significant to note that the UK as a whole is a major net importer of timber and wood products. Domestic production only accounts for 36 per cent of UK consumption of sawnwood and 49 per cent of wood panels.

Forty-three per cent of UK imports of sawn softwood and 20 per cent of wood pulp is imported from Sweden.

The UK also imports a significant amount of processed wood products from countries such as Germany, Latvia and France.

The question is raised, therefore, subject to a hard Brexit, what is the likely effect of increased cost and administrative burden on the level of imports?

A number of organisations

have attempted to answer this question, including recent discussion documents prepared by the UK Confederation of Forest Industries and the Scottish Parliament Information Centre.

One possible outcome, they suggest, is that tariffs and more complex administrative barriers could reduce international trade in timber and wood products, leading to an increase in domestic harvesting.

They also point out, however, that this apparently simple outcome to the Brexit process overlooks many complexities.

First of all, despite attempts to stimulate activity, the UK has experienced relatively low planting rates in recent years and a deficit in supply is already predicted in years to come.

Also, imported timber from Scandinavia meets critical standards for use in the UK construction industry and there are questions whether domestically grown timber could fully meet this demand.

On the other hand, forest management in the UK currently needs to comply with EU environmental legislation.

It is not clear at present what form this legislation may take in the UK post-Brexit but clearly liberalisation of these rules could remove a barrier to the pace of domestic tree harvesting and replanting with consequences for rural communities and natural environments that would require careful scrutiny.

Once the UK the construction industry comes out of its current difficult trading conditions and demand for timber increases, all these issues will come to the fore.

‘The UK as a whole is a major net importer of timber and wood products’