

Community Woodland Management for Woodfuel North West Mull Community Woodland Company Limited

North West Mull Community Woodland Company Ltd. (NWMWCW) was founded in 2005 as a charity and company limited by guarantee. In 2006, under the National Forest Land Scheme, it purchased c.700 hectares of woodland, to be managed for the benefit of the community.

The company has an innovative open book contract with UPM Tilhill to manage the harvesting, extraction and sale of the majority of the timber, with a minority held back for its own woodfuel business. The woodfuel business, Island Woodfuels, selling woodchip, logs, rounds and poles, is a trading arm allowing the generation of funds for the charity.

Why use Woodfuel?

Many people on Mull are keen to reduce their carbon footprint and using woodfuel allows them to do this, as well as save money (compared with oil heating). Therefore lots of homes and businesses on the island have log burners, and an increasing number are installing biomass boilers. A woodchip boiler and storage facility does take up more space than an oil boiler and requires more maintenance, but the lower carbon footprint and potential to claim the Renewable Heat Incentive make it an attractive option for many larger properties.

NWMWCW wanted to provide woodfuel as a community resource and, being island-based, recognised the importance of sourcing fuel as locally as possible to reduce transport costs. Woodfuel sales allow it to generate a regular income to enable investment in community benefits. Woodchip also allows the organisation to utilise lower grade timber in a way that provides a very good margin.

Development of the Woodfuel Business

Working in partnership with local landowners, Forest Enterprise Scotland (FES), Argyll and Bute Council and their harvesting partners, NWMWCW developed a forestry haulage route to unlock 150,000 tonnes of landlocked timber from their woodlands and also provide access for FES to a further 470,000 tonnes of timber. As the road line was cleared, significant timber became available and the felling cost was written off in the road building cost.

Initially products were limited to poles, rounds and cut and split logs, which were processed by volunteers using chainsaws and hydraulic splitters. The manual process was very time consuming and effectively placed a cap on the scale of operations.

To avoid competing against the existing firewood vendor on the island, NWMWCW did not actively promote its products and made sure its prices were higher than those of the local vendor. However, the local firewood provider was still unable to make sufficient margins and ceased trading.

In 2013, a Kindla was purchased for making kindling as well as a Riko firewood processor. These changes allowed output to be more than quadrupled.

In 2014, NWMWCW purchased a local woodchip business, Crannich Woodfuel, and it continues to rent the existing Crannich Woodfuel depot. Crannich Woodfuel had a number of clients but was concerned that, as it did not have its own woodlands, it would be unable to guarantee continuity of supply and therefore provide the necessary assurances to those considering installing woodchip boilers. They were keen to sell to a group with a long-term interest in the community and NWMWCW wished to expand their trading company. NWMWCW have since worked closely with the former owners and are grateful for the expertise they have provided. There are now seven contracted woodchip customers, including the island's Hospital, Isle of Mull organic bakery, and several multi-unit self-catering businesses.

Funding

In 2006, the purchase of the woodlands cost a total of £342,000. Financial assistance was provided by the Scottish Land Fund, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), The Robertson Trust and the Hugh Fraser Foundation. Significant local fundraising was also undertaken and an interest free loan was taken out by NWMWCW. The purchase price reflected the fact that the woodlands were effectively isolated from the public road network.

In 2008, NWMWCW was also awarded 3 years of revenue grants from the Big Lottery Fund and HIE and recently received 2 years of revenue funding from the Scottish Government's Strengthening Communities Programme.

The revenue funding has been vital, as revenue from the first 2-3 years of timber sales has been used to pay for the haulage route. Timber sales over the next couple of years will be used to support the re-fencing and re-planting programme.

Other sources of income have included generous benefactors and a significant local loan which enabled the purchase of Crannich Woodfuel under generous terms.

Woodland Management

NWMCWC are UKWAS accredited, with a forest design plan running from 2009 to 2029. The plan was drafted using expertise from UPM Tilhill and the community was consulted. Felling and replanting is planned in phases, with the majority of the felling at the beginning of the plan because of the age profile of the available trees. When the woodlands were acquired by NWMCWC, they were largely un-thinned, with 200 ha over 50 years old. NWMCWC has commenced the clear fell of much of the mature timber. There are some areas which have been designated as continuous cover and the long-term objectives are to provide a significant core of continuous cover conifer woodland, to provide locally utilised timber and to maintain the amenity of these areas. There are a few PAWS sites and many sites of archaeological interest throughout the woodlands, which are protected during felling. Felling operations have also accommodated the presence of breeding pairs of White Tailed Sea Eagles.

Woodfuel Production, Quality Assurance and Delivery

The source material comes from the community owned woodlands and is 100% FSC certified. The trees being harvested were planted in the 1960s and 1970s. NWMCWC is registered on the Biomass Suppliers List allowing customers to access the Renewable Heat Incentive and their woodchip meets CEN/TS 355 standards. Chip size is controlled by the chipping contractor and monitored by NWMCWC. Moisture content is tested and monitored by the company using a Humimeter and to confirm internal testing, samples are also independently laboratory tested several times a year.

Firewood and kindling orders are currently delivered by volunteers using a Land Rover and trailer but NWMCWC contract local transport companies to make deliveries of bulk logs and bagged woodchip where the distance and quantity ordered make it too time consuming to self-deliver. The next step in expanding the firewood side of the business will be to purchase a 7.5 tonne dropside vehicle, fitted with a Hiab, which will allow NWMCWC to deliver larger loads or make multiple drops and reduce reliance on volunteers' vehicles and trailers.

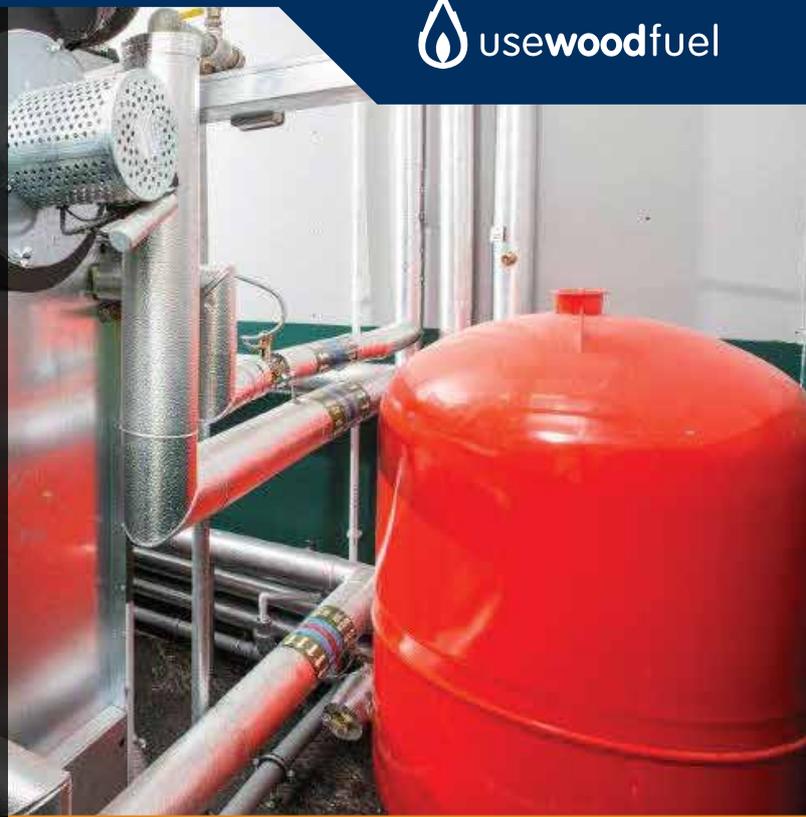
The company owns a tractor, telehandler and three bulk trailers for delivering woodchip. One part time employee is responsible for arranging and making deliveries of woodchip, with the different types of trailer allowing delivery to properties with varying hopper designs. The drying shed is rented from the previous owners, but NWMCWC are in the process of building their own shed with a drying floor.

Community Involvement

The level of community involvement in this initiative has varied over time. Directors are all drawn from the community and there are one full time and two part time employees. Local residents with an interest in archaeology have identified sites within the woodland which have been examined and catalogued. Other residents assist by clearing trees from paths and roads and providing information on the state of water supplies and bridges throughout the woodland. Many local trades people have also provided their services for free or at a reduced rate.

Over the years, numerous training opportunities for members of the community have been provided, including chainsaw courses, outdoor first aid and machinery operation. Weekend courses in the theory and practice of thinning woodlands and in archaeological and surveying skills have also been run.

Consultation proved very important during the adoption of the forest design plan and working with local landowners was vital during the construction of the haulage route. However, there are limits to community involvement in the day-to-day running of the business. This is because complicated projects require sustained effort and can benefit from being managed by paid employees. For example the harvesting of 100s of hectares of woodlands was made much more feasible by working with forestry professionals at UPM Tilhill.



Achievements

- // Produced long-term forest design plan, approved by community.
- // Completed haulage route, unlocking 620,000 tonnes of timber and keeping timber lorries off public roads near Dervaig.
- // All timber produced is exported by bulk shipment, realising a saving of more than 160,000 road miles thus far.
- // Ensured continuity of supply for Mull's woodchip users.
- // Established 9 forest crofts, the first in Scotland.
- // Created a forest school.

Challenges

- // Landlocked timber required the construction of over 10 miles of forestry road.
- // No existing forest design plan at purchase.
- // Lack of regular income in early years limited project development.
- // The volume and diversity of work from taking on a forestry project of this size.
- // Some major benefits will not be visible for many years.

Lessons Learned

- // You will never make everyone happy at the same time.
- // Keep communication as open and direct as possible.
- // Everyone will expect something different from a community woodland so do not promise too much.
- // Feasibility studies and consultants did not highlight all the input that would be required. NWMCWC now ask a lot more questions of "experts" and commit more time to training.
- // Prioritise revenue generation early on to facilitate long-term survival.