

The Daily Telegraph

Planning reforms could lead to loss of ancient woodland, warns trust

Vast areas of ancient woodland could be lost if the Coalition's planning reforms become law, conservationists warned yesterday.

By Louise Gray, Environment Correspondent, and Martin Evans

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The Woodland Trust, which campaigns to preserve what is left of the country's historic woods, fears that proposals aimed at simplifying planning regulations will lead to thousands of trees being chopped down to make way for developers.

An area is designated as ancient woodland if it has been continually wooded for at least 400 years.

There are about 760,000 acres remaining in Britain, but conservationists warn that the areas are becoming increasingly fragmented, with eight out of 10 woodland sites in England and Wales being less than 49 acres.

The Government's proposed National Planning Framework aims to make it easier for developers to build homes, commercial properties and transport projects by removing red tape.

As part of the planned legislation more than 1,000 pages of planning regulations have been reduced to 52 and ministers claim the new system will help stimulate economic growth and address the shortage of new housing.

The Woodland Trust is the latest group to call for a rethink on the proposals, amid mounting concern that building projects will take precedence over the preservation of the countryside.

One of the most controversial aspects of the draft legislation is the inclusion of the "presumption in favour of sustainable development", which opponents have labelled as a developers' charter. The legislation is still at the consultation stage and The Daily Telegraph has launched the Hands Off Our Land campaign, urging ministers to think again.

Sue Holden, the chief executive of the Woodland Trust, has highlighted one caveat contained in the proposed legislation that she suggests could allow developers to chop down trees — where "the development in that location clearly outweighs the loss".

Ms Holden has urged the Government to remove that caveat to offer some protection to ancient trees and woodland.

"New guidance must be clear; no development should bring about the loss of ancient woods or trees," she said.

Ministers have rejected much of the criticism, even describing some of the opposition as "nihilistic"

and “semi-hysterical”.

Opponents of the planning reforms point out that there is a large amount of empty housing across the country and say developments should be designated on brownfield sites first.

As well as the Woodland Trust, the National Trust, the RSPB, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and the Open Spaces Society are among the groups who have called for a rethink.

Dame Fiona Reynolds, the director general of the National Trust, said: “The National Trust is not against new housing or development: we just want it to be properly managed, and for a proper balance to be struck between economic, social and environmental concerns.”