

Motor Sport and the Forestry Commission

Stage Rallying

Motor stage rallying in the forests is a sport at which Britain has historically excelled. Over the past fifty years we have produced a succession of international champions, some of whom have become household names. They include Pat Moss, Paddy Hopkirk, Roger Clark, Malcolm Wilson, Richard Burns and Colin McRae.

This success has in turn contributed to the establishment of the world's principal centre of motorsport engineering excellence, 'Motorsport Valley', across the Midlands. The precision high performance engineering companies in this area, working to develop rally and race cars, spread their engineering advances out into many other areas of the economy and export their skills around the world.

But stage rallying is not just about world champions and 'works teams'. A stage rally event also caters for the 'club drivers' of motor sport: people whose involvement in the sport is based either on building and driving a car, or on carrying out any of the many organisational and marshalling tasks that are essential for the safe and efficient organisation of stage rallies. The actual driving is just the tip of a big and sophisticated iceberg made up almost entirely of volunteers' efforts.

The economic value of motor sport to UK plc

'Motorsport Valley' has an annual turnover in excess of £4.5 billion, generates work for over 4,500 private companies, and employs around 38,500 people. At a time when highly skilled jobs are essential to the UK's economic recovery, undermining the UK's pre-eminent position in this area could prove catastrophic. Indeed, research carried out by Sheffield Hallam University in 2010 suggests that a typical forest stage rally contributes around £2 million to the economy, with a significant portion of this going directly into the local economy in the surrounding countryside.

Motor sport and the Forestry Commission

Land managed by the Forestry Commission provides the space and forest roads required for rally stages to be laid out, marshalled and realised within relevant regulations. Modern motor stage rallying is an extremely safe sport and events are managed in accordance with the strict rules and guidelines defined by the Motor Sports Association (MSA) – the national governing body of four wheel motor sport – in which public safety and environmental protection is a priority.

The MSA has for many years enjoyed a centrally-negotiated 'Master Agreement' with the Forestry Commission, paying for the use of the forests on a 'per mile' basis. The Commission reinvests this income into making good the impact of today's enormous logging vehicles on the forest roads.

To its great credit, the Forestry Commission has never sought to put a truly commercial price on the use of its plantations. This is of great benefit to the sport, as the higher rates demanded by the commercial sector would inflate the cost of an event to the point where the ordinary club driver would simply be forced out of the sport.

The value of motor sport to the Forestry Commission

In 2010, 41 motor sport events were held on Forestry Commission land, 31 of which were stage rallies run under the Master Agreement (14 of these were in England). In consideration of these events, the MSA paid £821,645 to the Forestry Commission. The average 'road bill' of a forest stage rally is £25,950.

The potential impact of the proposed sell-off

1. If the Forestry Commission estate is broken up and sold-off piecemeal, then the ability to plan and negotiate a co-ordinated national calendar of events will be lost.

Result: Lack of central co-ordination prevents common access, environmental and operational standards between events and landowners; clubs would have to conduct negotiations with their own individual landowner; no central co-ordination of events prevents management of calendar to prevent over-use of certain areas.

2. New owners may ban motor sport altogether from their land.

Result: Events will be cancelled, clubs will no longer be sustainable and the sport will struggle to survive in those areas. The effects of this would also be felt by local economies, related industries and, ultimately, on the UK's continued ability to lead the world in terms of high performance engineering and world class drivers.

3. The government safeguards access rights, but new owners want to increase fees.

Result: The sport will lose grass roots events as the cost of participation will be out of reach of all but the highest level of competitor. Again, this has the potential to have a devastating impact on local economies and the industries that support UK, and global, motor sports.

Alternative venues

Quite simply there is nowhere else in the UK that could accommodate stage rallying in its current form.

The Forestry Commission plantations are a unique recreational resource. Many are more than sufficient in scale to accommodate a wide variety of sports and recreations, and events like stage rallies can avoid environmentally sensitive places and times of year by making use of alternative areas or seasons.

In the past, the Ministry of Defence has generously offered the use of some of its ranges but in recent years this has been constrained by the understandably high demand on land required by our 21st century Armed Forces' training needs.

Other activities

Forestry Commission plantations are immensely valuable in offering economically viable cost for land use not only to stage rallying, but also to the likes of motorcycle enduros, mountain bike races and mass-participation events, orienteering, and many more. If the Forestry Commission land is fully commercialised then many of these sporting activities will simply not be possible due to a lack of reasonably priced land access.

The cost/value judgement

The annual cost of the Forestry Commission has been estimated at just 30p for each person in the country. Even if it is more than this, the return to society, both economic and social, from sports like stage rallying is worth much, much more.

The MSA is asking the government urgently to reconsider the proposals to sell-off, or lease-off, Forestry Commission plantations. If the proposals do go ahead, the MSA is asking the government to provide statutory protection of *reasonably priced* land access for what are 'traditional sports' in these forests.

The Motor Sports Association, February 2011