

Orienteering events on Forestry Commission land in Scotland

Prepared by Lynne Walker (BASOC) on behalf of SOA and in collaboration with Forestry Commission Scotland

Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and SOA had already been having a useful dialogue over a period of months looking at how we might improve our working relationship and mutual understanding, when the Fairy Knowe & Doon Hill event (SOL6) took place in October 2012. A 'near-miss' incident at the event, followed by a joint investigation, has ensured that both organisations are focussed even more on the importance of working closely together towards the safe and enjoyable future of orienteering on Scotland's national forest estate.

Competitors at SOL6 came across active harvesting operations on the day of the event. No-one was injured, the harvester operator stopped and the event passed without incident. However, the independently-chaired investigation report has identified a number of actions for both FCS and SOA in an effort to prevent any similar problems in future.

Over the last few months, SOA has been providing guidance and information to FCS on how orienteering events are run. In this article, I hope to provide you, in turn, with some guidelines on working better with FCS, including some insight into FCS' working practices, with which orienteers may not be familiar.

First of all, before committing to mapping costs or 'booking' the date of the orienteering event on the fixtures list, you should communicate with the FCS Forest District. Details of who to contact are at:

<http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-8see3y>

You may well have your own contact, but I suggest you use the district email address when booking a date, as it will always be checked, even if your contact is on holiday, ill or otherwise unavailable.

When you get in touch, it's worth asking about felling, thinning and harvesting plans over the next three or so years (for mapping - after all, why waste money?) or in the next twelve months (for an event). As forest users we also have to be prepared to accept that plans can change, sometimes because of natural events - think back to the gales at the start of 2012 which decimated some of the forest areas.

For an orienteering event, submit an Ordnance Survey map (with the O map area outlined on it) as early as possible. For Level A events, this will be over a year in advance; for Level B, a minimum of 9 months beforehand. Even for smaller events, you need to apply as early as possible – remember, the forest block you're looking at might be hosting another event or activity on the date you're requesting, there may be environmental constraints at certain times of year, or forest operations planned. The Forest District may be able to look at a different date or an alternative area with you if there is a conflict in the calendar.

Why does FCS need so much notice? You will have one contact within the Forest District (a recreation forester or the Communities, Recreation & Tourism (CRT) Manager, perhaps), however, your request for a specific date and location has to be circulated around many different parts of the district team.

Teams will probably include the following: harvesting & operations, environment & biodiversity, CRT, wildlife management, planning, civil engineering, estates along with any tenant businesses, contractors (and subcontractors) and neighbours, if your request is likely to affect or be affected by them.

One of the findings of the SOL6 report is that 'nil responses' from these teams are unacceptable; FCS needs to have a yes/no response from each of their departments before permission can be granted to you.

The earlier all this can happen, the better; if the SOA club applies too late, the Forest District might have to decline the permission for the event due to the other work or activity going on in the area. Looking on the bright side, an early application ensures that your event is in the district calendar and others will then have to work around you!

After obtaining the initial permission for the event, your Forest District contact person should be given a map showing the 'flow' of the courses as soon as possible and finally a map showing the location of all the control sites. Each communication with the Forest District contact reminds them about the event and allows you to ask if there are any changes which could have an impact on the event.

When constructing the risk assessment for the orienteering event, the organiser should not assume that there will be no work in the forest on a Sunday; contractors will work any day of the week, and sometimes at night if they need to get the job done. Include this possibility in your risk assessment. This might seem unnecessary if you have already been given permission for the event by FCS, but **where the land has been sold to a timber merchant as 'standing sales', it's more difficult for FCS to dictate terms and conditions for felling. If the site is a 'direct production' site managed by FCS itself, the permissioning process should ensure that no felling is taking place, but even here, it's better to be safe than sorry.**

Now on to a scenario. It's the day before your event. As the event organiser, you have received permission from FCS. The planner is putting the controls out in the forest and encounters machines working in the area and calls you. The planner does not want to approach the machine operator - these machines genuinely have the potential to be lethal. Put yourself in the boots of the operator. You know there could be the public in the area but your experience is that they will be walking along the tracks and paths, you do not expect to see someone in the middle of a block of forest! If that happens, the operator knows to stop immediately, but it's better to avoid that scenario. Taking 'No action' is not an acceptable course of action from the planner so contacting the organiser who has been the liaison with the Forest District contact is a recognised acceptable action.

The event organiser should have been given an emergency contact number for the Forest District Duty Officer, who will be able to resolve the situation. You need to be able to describe accurately what is happening in the area which will be used for competition on DD/MM/YYYY (date). It might be the case that the contractor will not be working on the day of the competition itself; on the other hand, it might be the case that the contractor does intend to be working on the date of the competition, if, for example, poor

weather means they have lost some work days and/or they have not seen the notice about the orienteering event.

All SOA planners, organisers and controllers are volunteers; imposing a longer timescale and stringent conditions on you might seem to be a hardship - but having to cancel the event is an even greater hardship, especially if all your competitors have already arrived and some might even be in the forest.

What about using the forest area for small group training? For example, you were not able to go to SOL Z but you heard the 'green course' was excellent and your friend has lent you a map. Act responsibly, abide by any forest notifications and diversions (just as any member of the public has to), and you're welcome under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

What if? Whether or not you plan events on FCS land, event organisers (and controllers) might think about having a list of things to go through along the lines of 'Expect the Unexpected' and discuss these at a club level, during an Event Safety course. Think through the control measures you need in place and the preparations you should carry out before the event to try to ensure the unexpected does not happen and plans for mitigation, if it does.

Some examples to get you started on your list:

- While placing controls the day before the Level B SOL, you encounter (or hear) harvesting operations.
- You are putting controls out for a Level D event (a couple of hours before the event starts) and you encounter a road grader working on the route the White to Orange courses take.
- It is raining, the 3m wide river all competitors on the Green to Black courses have to cross is already 'bankful'. It is July in west Scotland.
- A competitor returns to the finish in a state of extreme agitation because they have heard high powered rifle shots while out on their course.
- When putting out the controls on the morning of the event you discover that the electric fences are on. The farmer is at church.
- You have negotiated with the farmer so that he removes livestock from the field the White and Yellow courses go round / cut across. On the morning of the event you discover cows and calves in this field.
- The Level B SOL is taking place in an area of mature coniferous forest. During the night the area has been affected by gale to storm force winds. It is still windy, although not gale force.

Summary time line for Level A & B events on FCS land

This information should be read alongside the relevant and up to date Rules, Appendices & Guidelines from British Orienteering.

- At least 1 year before: liaison begins between SOA club and FCS Forest District. Orienteering map and O. S. map sent from SOA club to FCS. FCS consultation process begins.
- 9 months to 1 year before: SOA club event officials appointed (organiser, planner, controller)
- 9 months: outline permission to hold an event issued by FCS.

- 4 months before: SOA club send 'competitor flow' map to FCS.
- 3 months before: SOA organiser sends the following to FCS:
 - Event risk assessment.
 - Proof of insurance.
 - Orienteering map with provisional control locations.
 - Any special requests reading the event (e.g. access arrangements for emergency vehicles).
- 2 months before: FCS issue permit to hold an orienteering event. Permit to include emergency contact number for Forest District Duty Officer.
- 1 month before: SOA club liaises with FCS, checking details etc. Any changes to control location to be notified.

In a forthcoming issue of SCORE, there will be an article written by Forestry Commission Scotland, telling us more about what they do and why.