

# Aigas Community Forest Long Term Forest Plan – Scoping

## Background

Aigas Community Forest secured the ~700 acre Aigas Forest in March 2015; six years after the community first agreed to seek to buy the forest to deliver a wide range of benefits for the area. During this time there have been a number of community consultations and a Business Plan and other documents have been developed which set out the objectives of the organisation and our intentions for the forest. It is on the basis of these plans that we were able to demonstrate our ability to deliver wider public benefits and so secure financial support to purchase the forest from the Scottish Land Fund and others. Our overall objectives are summarised as the 5 E's:

**Environment:** Woodland management which will combine a mixture of replacement conifers, appropriate broadleaves to enhance biodiversity and improve amenity and small areas of open space for biodiversity enhancement.

**Economy:** Use of the forest's resources to create or support local businesses and jobs and to produce a sustainable income source for the effective management of the Forest over the long term.

**Enjoyment:** Development of a path network, wildlife viewing opportunities and associated visitor infrastructure taking advantage of existing key viewpoints. This is to include all abilities access and will build on existing roadside/ River Beauly access. Based on this we will build a range of cultural and heritage events and activities based around the community's close connection to the land.

**Energy:** To exploit existing renewable energy opportunities through the production of fire wood and to explore the viability of other renewable energy technologies in keeping with our community ethos.

**Education:** To participate in the Forest Education Initiative and provide a resource for local primary schools, Aigas Field Centre, who run an extensive education programme for all ages, and others including Highland Council Rangers. Also to build skills within the community through a volunteering programme.

Access to all of Aigas Community Forest's plans and documents can be found on our website: [www.aigasforest.org.uk](http://www.aigasforest.org.uk)

## Introduction

In order to deliver our objectives we need to have in place a Long Term Forest Plan (LTFP) approved by Forestry Commission Scotland. The previous Forest Enterprise LTFP for the forest, based on clear-felling and restocking large blocks, would not meet the community's needs if implemented. We are therefore undertaking a complete revision.

As part of this process we are required to undertake a 'Scoping Exercise' which involves consulting with both statutory stakeholders (e.g. Scottish Natural Heritage, the Highland Council and SEPA) and non-statutory stakeholders including neighbours, the wider community and other interested parties. This document forms part of that consultation.

The following document outlines the concept for the new Long Term Forest Plan for Aigas Community Forest. This document aims to inform the reader of the issues that have already been

highlighted, and how the plan will deal with these issues. It is designed to create discussion on the concept and these issues in principle and the final detailed plan will reflect this feedback. It must be noted that while every effort will be made to take on board what we hear, the final plan must deliver two things: Firstly, we have to ensure we meet the requirements of the funders who provided the money to purchase the forest for the community, this includes delivering a wide range of public benefits, and secondly, we must deliver good forest management which should be both technically and financially viable.

It should also be noted that over the last 12 months we have already been talking to a lot of people about how to implement our plans and any issues they might have. To date we have:

- Spoken to neighbours and Scottish Natural Heritage about deer management
- Had a number of community walks to consider recreation and access provision and taken advice from Highland Council access staff on this matter
- Spoken to staff at Teanassie Primary School about their requirements
- Taken advice from the Woodland Trust about management of Ancient Woodland areas within the site
- Taken advice from Aigas Field Centre about biodiversity and sensitive species on the site
- Undertaken technical surveys of the forest looking at the soils and current state of the tree crops to inform future plans

This work has helped inform the proposals we have set out in this document.

## Your Views

We would appreciate your views on:

- What you currently use Aigas Forest for
- What you like about the forest and what you don't like
- What issues or concerns you have
- What opportunities do you think there are
- What you think of our proposals

We would also welcome comment on other issues that may not have been highlighted. Responses should be sent either by post to Andrew Leaver, ACF Secretary, Northview, Crask of Aigas, Beauly, IV4 7AD, or by email to [donnied@aigasforest.org.uk](mailto:donnied@aigasforest.org.uk)

We will respond within the scoping period, correspondence will then be included in the final scoping report that will be produced before the development of the Long Term Forest Plan begins.

## Our Plans

In terms of forest management we would like to convert Aigas Forest to a more diverse woodland incorporating public access, while still generating local jobs and income for management. The forest at present is very evenly aged having largely been planted in the 1960's. Traditional commercial management would see this clear felled in large blocks and restocked with predominantly conifer species. Our aim is to move, where possible, to continuous cover forestry (CCF), retaining permanent tree cover but producing timber from thinning and selective felling. This will however take some time to achieve. We will be able to start converting most areas of Scots pine within the woodland to CCF immediately as the trees are slow growing, and/or have been thinned in the past, and will respond to further thinning. However some other areas will require clear felling and restocking

before CCF can be delivered as the trees are too large and will be susceptible to windblow. We will also remove trees from areas of deep peat and diversify tree cover to include mixed broadleaves particularly in riparian zones (along watercourses), on steep ground (to help slope stability) or to assist landscaping.

Aigas Forest is an extensive area and while we will follow a number of broad principles set out below in managing the whole forest we have zoned the forest to help describe management priorities and activities in different sections as the nature of the land, the current tree cover and the issues are different in each zone. The zones are shown in the LTFP Scoping Zones map and each is described in turn. The overarching principles that apply to the whole forest are:

- We will follow the requirements of the UK Forest Standard (UKFS) which deliver sustainable forest management and which would enable us to be accredited under the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). (Information on the UKFS can be found at [www.forestry.gov.uk/ukfs](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/ukfs))
- We will work with neighbours and local businesses to ensure that wherever possible our activities are complementary to their needs.
- We will deliver our responsibilities as a landowner under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and in addition deliver facilities for access that facilitate good forest management.

The following activities have been identified as applying across the whole forest and as such they have been described below rather than in each zone and only referred to in the 'zoned' text.

The LTFP Scoping Zones map shows how the forest has been zoned; each zone is then discussed in more detail.

### **Conservation with Commerce**

The overriding theme in this concept is to create a forest that provides in terms of both conservation and commercially. Looking after the ecology of the forest will take equal footing with commercial production. This should allow ACF to produce a forest that is healthy, attractive, is financially sustainable and provides jobs in the local community. This is in keeping with the ACF vision:

*"A productive working forest providing measurable social, economic and environmental benefits for local residents and visitors alike."*

ACF feels that Continuous Cover Forestry is the best way to achieve this. Where possible a conversion to CCF will be carried out; where a conversion is not possible CCF management will be the aim after restocking. The aim through all future management will also be to diversify the age and species structure of the forest.

### **Community**

Providing for the local community is an overarching priority. The aim of ACF as an organisation is not only to provide facilities for the local community as it is today, but also to create a sustainable and highly productive forest for the future. A forest that will provide local employment, and also, through links with local schools, organised events, recreation and other engagement opportunities will help to build a greater 'forest sense' in future generations. Although some of this will be delivered through the provision of the facilities mentioned above a greater part will be delivered through silviculture, purely by creating a forest that people want to be in. Therefore community benefit will be at the heart of any decision making, and will always be considered during any operations carried out in the forest.

## **Archaeology**

The North of Scotland Archaeological Society is in the process of surveying the forest. This survey should be completed by spring 2016. Moving forward ACF will be working with NOSAS to protect any important archaeological features identified and then to develop recreation opportunities around these sites.

## **Ancient Woodland Restoration**

During the first half on 2015 the Ancient Woodland sites at Aigas Forest were surveyed and a report produced as part of the Ancient Woodland Restoration Project – Great Glen and Three Firths. This is a joint project between the Woodland Trust and RDI associates and is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. In this report the ancient woodland sites were assessed with recommendations given for future management to maintain and restore these sites. Ancient Woodland restoration will be an overarching aim in the new Long Term Forest Plan. As such Ancient Woodland remnants will always be favoured during silvicultural operations and, for areas that are in a threatened or critical condition, restoration will always be sought.

## **Deer Control**

No deer control has been carried out in Aigas Forest for a number of years; consequently there are at present very high deer numbers in the forest. In most areas even regeneration from the most unpalatable tree species is struggling to establish, showing that if deer numbers were left as they are natural regeneration and restocking of the crop would largely be unsuccessful. The whole of Aigas Forest along with our neighbours (Aigas Field Centre and Aigas Farm) ground has been deer fenced by other landowners, from roadside to roadside. This deer fence is shown in the LTFP Scoping Zones map. The aim for deer management in Aigas Forest would be to work collaboratively with our neighbours inside the fence to reduce the deer numbers, and our neighbours outside the fence to help maintain it. Discussions are currently ongoing about partnership working arrangements to achieve this.

## **Recreation**

Although the provision of recreational facilities such as car parking, paths and mountain bike trails will be touched on in this document where it affects forest management, a detailed access and recreation plan will also be developed to deal with this in more detail.

## **Bio-security**

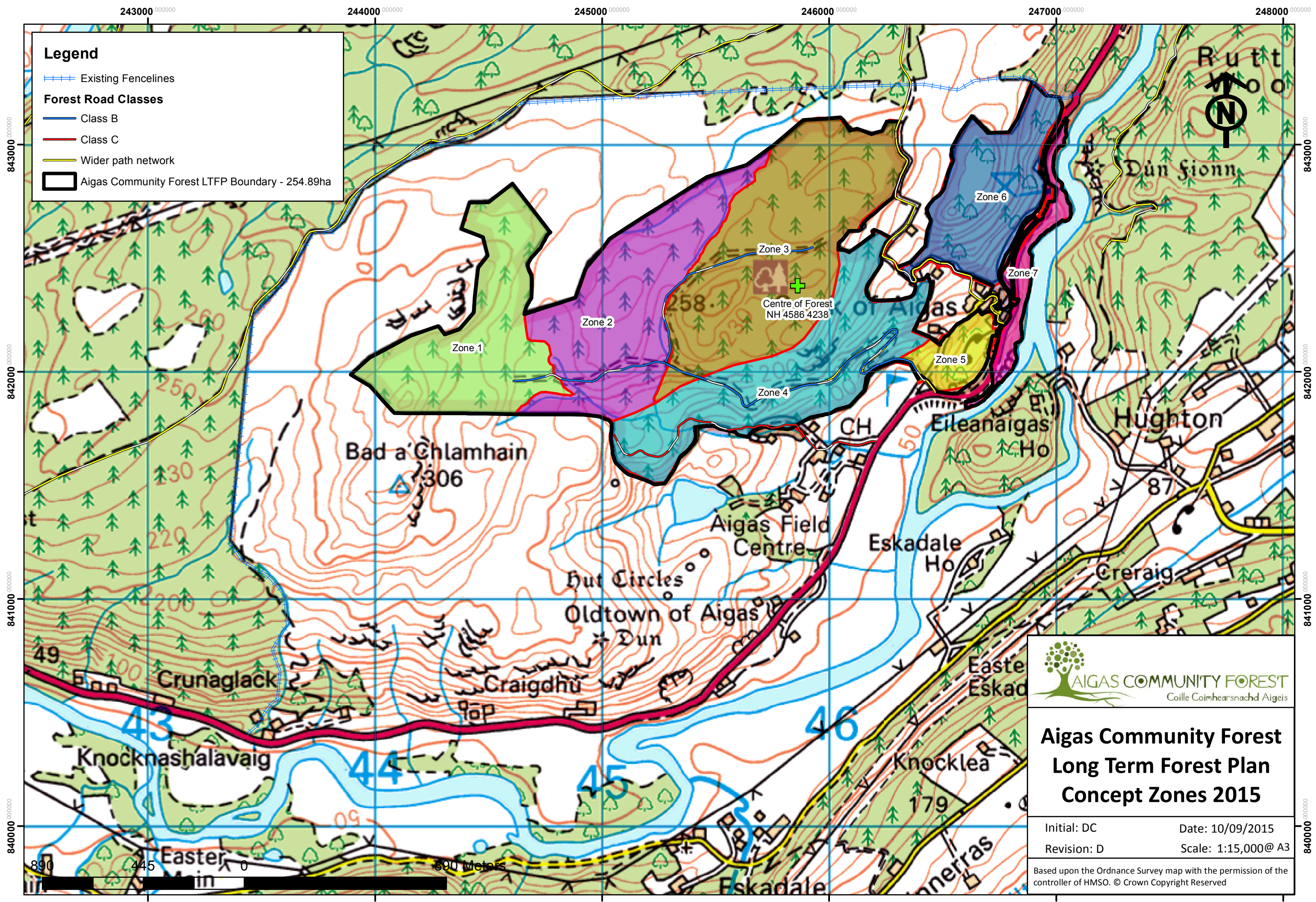
As is mentioned in this scoping document Pine Tree Lappet Moth (PTLM) has been found in Aigas Forest. A number of studies into the population of PTLM are currently using Aigas forest and we intend for this to continue. Due to the forest being in what is currently considered a high risk zone for PTLM the movement of timber off the site is restricted from mid-May to the end of August, with practical bio-security measures being put in place during harvesting operations. As these studies are on-going, no conclusions have yet been reached as to whether or not any treatments are needed or what these treatments may be if they are. However if a treatment is decided upon in the future we could be issued with a plant health notice, forcing us to carry out the treatment. This could significantly affect the plan we are looking to put in place. At this time, although still unclear, it does not look likely that this is going to happen.

Another potential disease threat to the forest is Dothistroma Needle Blight (DNB). While this has not yet been found at Aigas the lack of thinning in some areas of non-native conifers would leave the forest susceptible to this disease. Statutory control measures are not being issued for DNB. It is felt that the problem is too widespread for large-scale felling as a control measure to be practical or

cost-effective. However if DNB is found in the forest future timber yields from the current crop would be affected in these areas. Future management through CCF, with its associated thinning, would largely mitigate against DNB being a long term problem.

Chalara Ash Dieback is also spreading throughout Scotland at present. Chalara is a fungal disease in Ash trees that causes crown dieback and bark lesions. Once the trees are infected it is usually fatal. If this disease does make it to Aigas Forest it is not likely to have a significant impact as there are not many Ash in the forest at present. This could, however, have a significant impact on the choice of species available to restock with in areas with richer soils.





**Legend**

- Existing Fencelines
- Forest Road Classes**
  - Class B
  - Class C
  - Wider path network
- Aigas Community Forest LTFP Boundary - 254.89ha



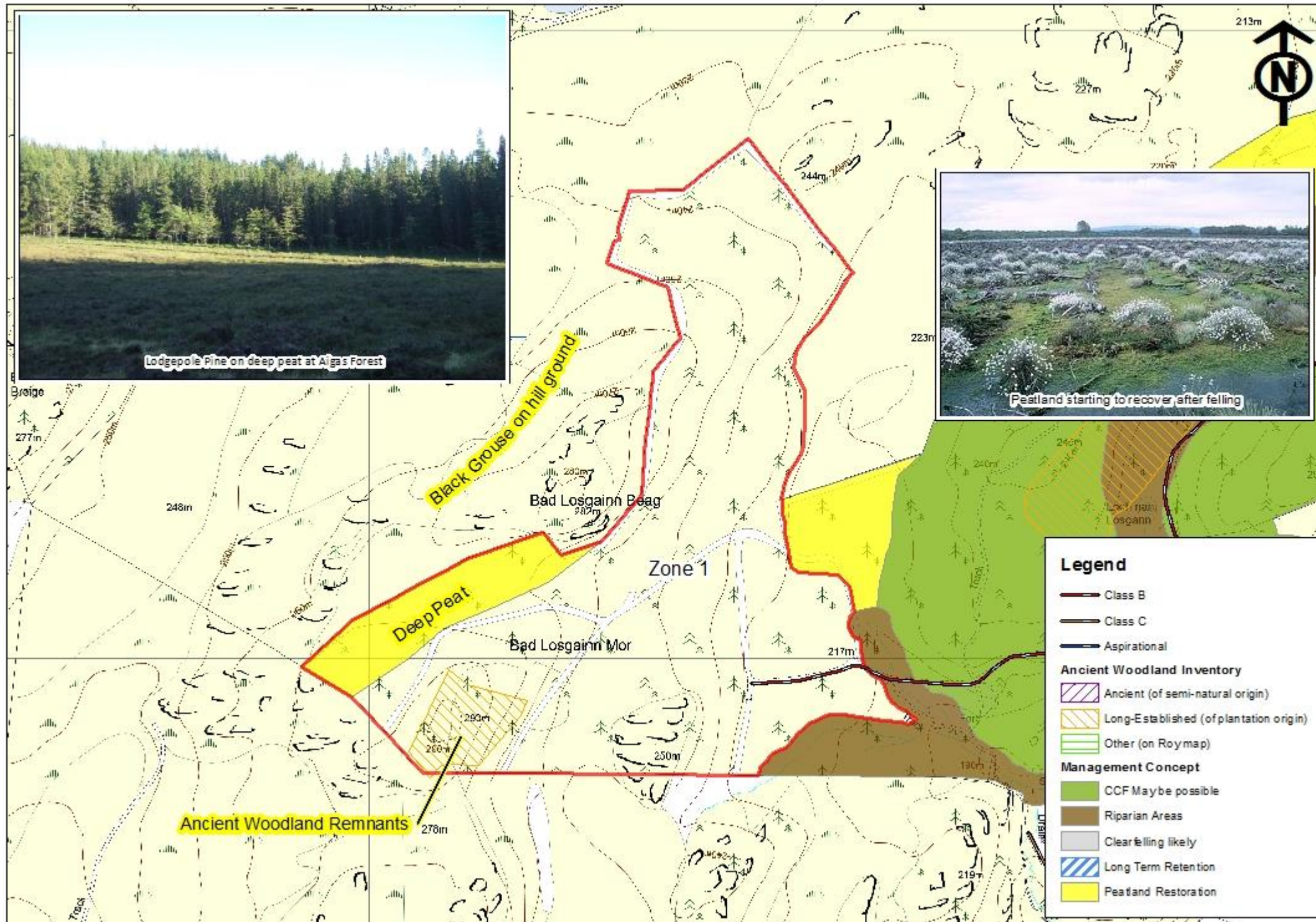
**Aigas Community Forest  
Long Term Forest Plan  
Concept Zones 2015**

Initial: DC Date: 10/09/2015  
Revision: D Scale: 1:15,000@ A3

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## Zone 1 - Bad Losgainn



### Priorities

Our priority in this area is to improve biodiversity, removing tree cover from deep peat and to convert to CCF where possible.

- Increasing biodiversity.
- Removal of tree cover from deep peat.
- Firewood production.
- Future conversion to Continuous Cover Forestry in better areas.

### Opportunities & Constraints

- Although not of great value in terms of timber this zone would provide a lot in terms of biodiversity.
- Deep peat areas pose problems for harvesting and should not be replanted under current guidance; peatland restoration would be a good option.
- Most exposed to prevailing Westerly winds and provides protection to rest of forest.
- The Scots Pine has been thinned allowing a greater range of management options.
- Black Grouse present on adjacent moorland.

### Actions

- Peatland restoration (tree removal and drain blocking).
- Thinning of Scots Pine for future conversion.
- Felling Lodgepole Pine and Sitka Spruce, restocking with suitable native species where appropriate.
- Soften edges to favour Black Grouse through scattered planting in restocked areas, or by feathering the existing crop.
- Reduce deer numbers to aid natural regeneration.

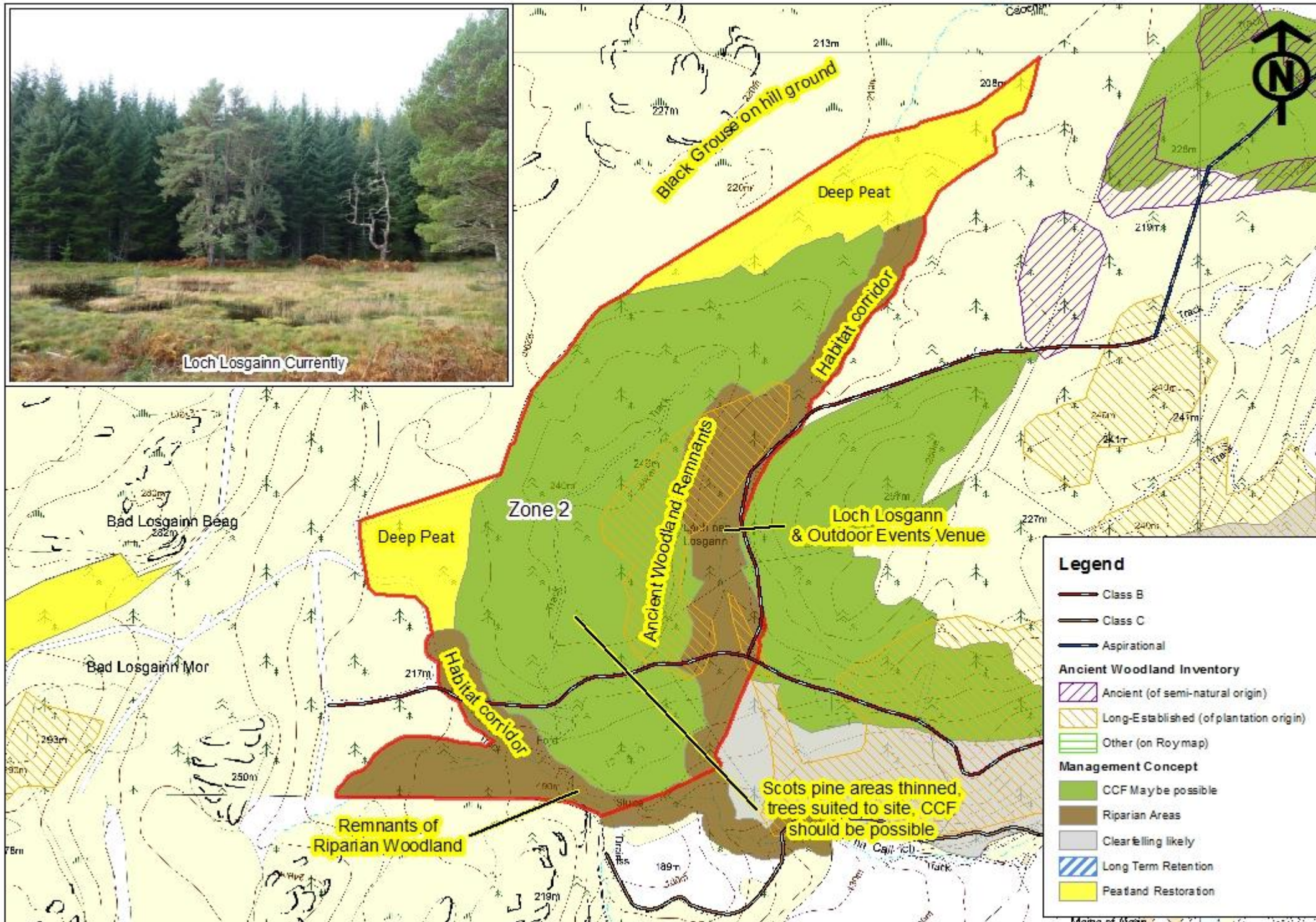
### Description

Zone 1 is the least accessible area within the forest and lies at the top of the hill abutting areas of open moorland. It is not visible from within Strathglass. The terrain in this zone is quite gently undulating or flat, the flattest areas tending to be deep peat (>45cm deep). This Zone is also on the poorest soils; as a consequence the trees have not grown very fast.

The main tree species present are Scots Pine and Lodgepole Pine on the wetter areas, some of which have started to blow over. There are also a few patches of Sitka Spruce and Japanese Larch around some of the edges.



## Zone 2 – Loch nan Losgann



### Description

Zone 2 mainly consists of elevated ground towards the back of the site and is not readily viewed from within Strathglass although visible from across the Glen. It consists of free draining soils, with a fringe of wetter areas, ranging from deep peats to water logged soils. The main tree species present are Scots Pine on the elevated ground, again with some Lodgepole Pine on the wetter areas. There are still some remnants of riparian woodland along the watercourses and lochside, as well as some remnants of Ancient woodland. The main forest track extends through much of this area and is well used for recreational purposes.

### Priorities

The priority for this area is to retain as much of the Scots Pine as possible converting it to CCF and facilitating public use of the current track while providing other facilities particularly around Loch nan Losgann. There is scope for increasing biodiversity along watercourses and of the loch itself which has been drained and is gradually infilling.

- Increasing biodiversity, ancient woodland and riparian restoration.
- Restoration of loch. Habitat and species surveying to be carried out first. Work to be guided by Aigas Field Centre.
- Recreation provision – paths, events venue by Loch nan Losgann.
- Future conversion to Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF) in better areas.
- Timber and firewood production.

### Opportunities & Constraints

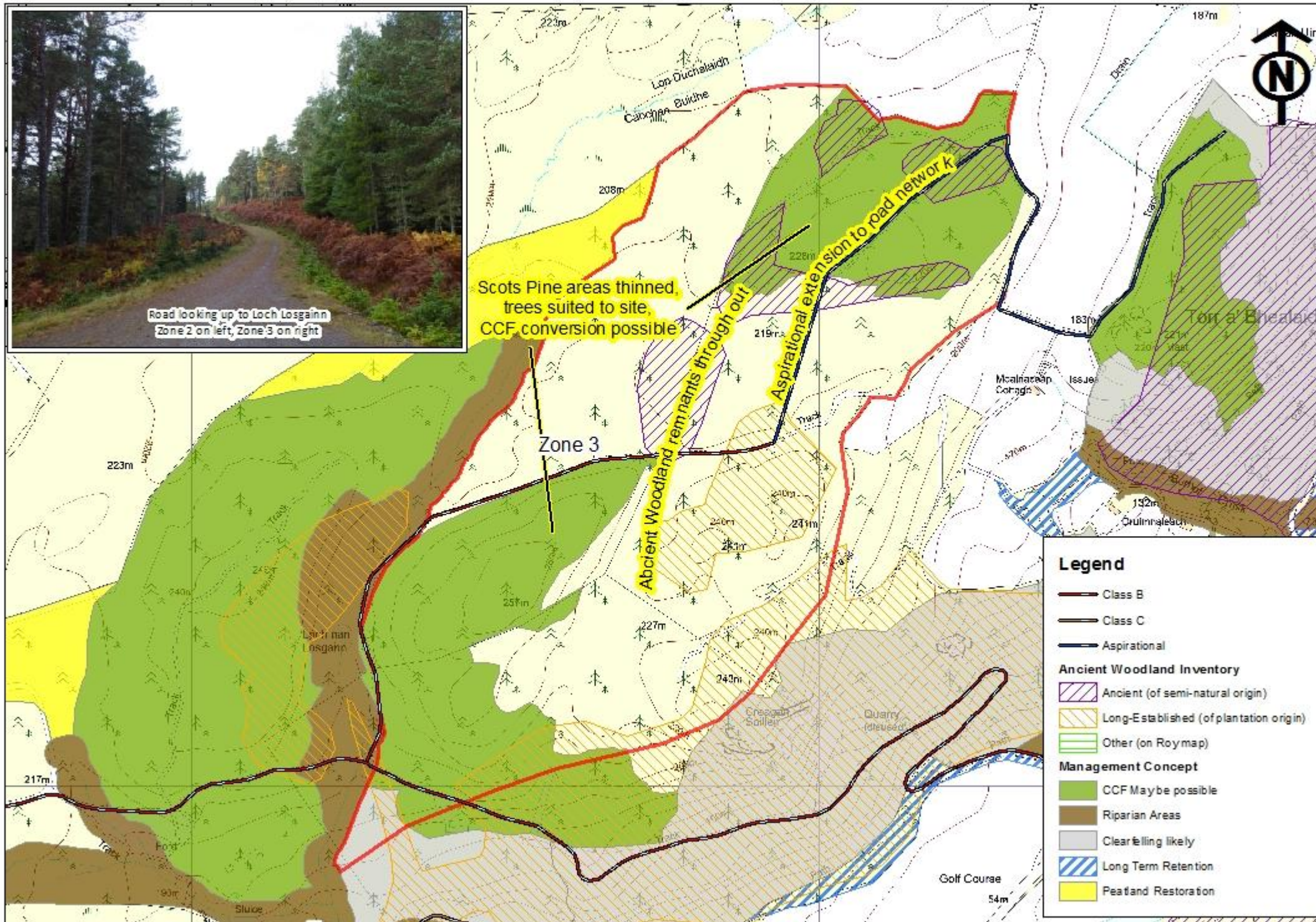
- The Scots Pine in this Zone has been thinned; conversion to CCF in this rotation should be possible. Poor provenance is an issue, limiting end use.
- Riparian restoration would create habitat corridors through the forest.
- Existing amphitheatre created by borrow pits, adjacent to loch makes good outdoor venue.
- Peatland restoration would be a good option for deep peat areas.
- Black Grouse present on adjacent moorland.

### Actions

- Thinning of Scots Pine for future conversion also to favour ancient woodland remnants.
- Improve provenance of Scots Pine through planting as part of CCF management.
- Peatland and riparian restoration.
- Restoration of loch and surrounding area with creation of an outdoor venue.
- Develop and maintain appropriate access facilities, as identified in access plan.
- Soften edges to favour Black Grouse through scattered planting in restocked areas, or by feathering the existing crop.
- Reduce deer numbers to aid natural regeneration.



## Zone 3 – Top of the Hill



### Description

Zone 3 lies at the top of the hill face that is visible from Strathglass and Kilmorack. It has two small hills in it with a broad peaty flat between. There is a little steep ground on the edges of the hills. The main tree species are Scots Pine, Lodgepole Pine, Sitka Spruce and Douglas Fir. The Scots Pine has previously been thinned however there are also small areas of windblow appearing. The other tree species have not been subject to thinning and are mature / over mature. There are some remnants of ancient woodland in this zone. This zone is also being used for a number of studies on Pine Tree Lappet Moth. Recreation and access take place in this zone linked to the main forest track and a number of informal paths. It is also used by local mountain bikers. The main forest track currently terminates in this block.

### Priorities

The priority for this area is to retain as much of the Scots Pine as possible converting it to CCF and managing informal access. There is scope for increasing biodiversity in line with restoration of ancient woodland and sympathetic management along watercourses. Informal access will be provided for and agreement reached with local mountain bikers over management of their trails.

- Increasing biodiversity, ancient woodland restoration.
- Recreation provision – paths, MTB trails.
- Conversion to Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF) in better areas, starting with some of the areas that have already blown.
- Timber and firewood production.
- Continue co-operation with Forest Research PTLM studies.

### Opportunities & Constraints

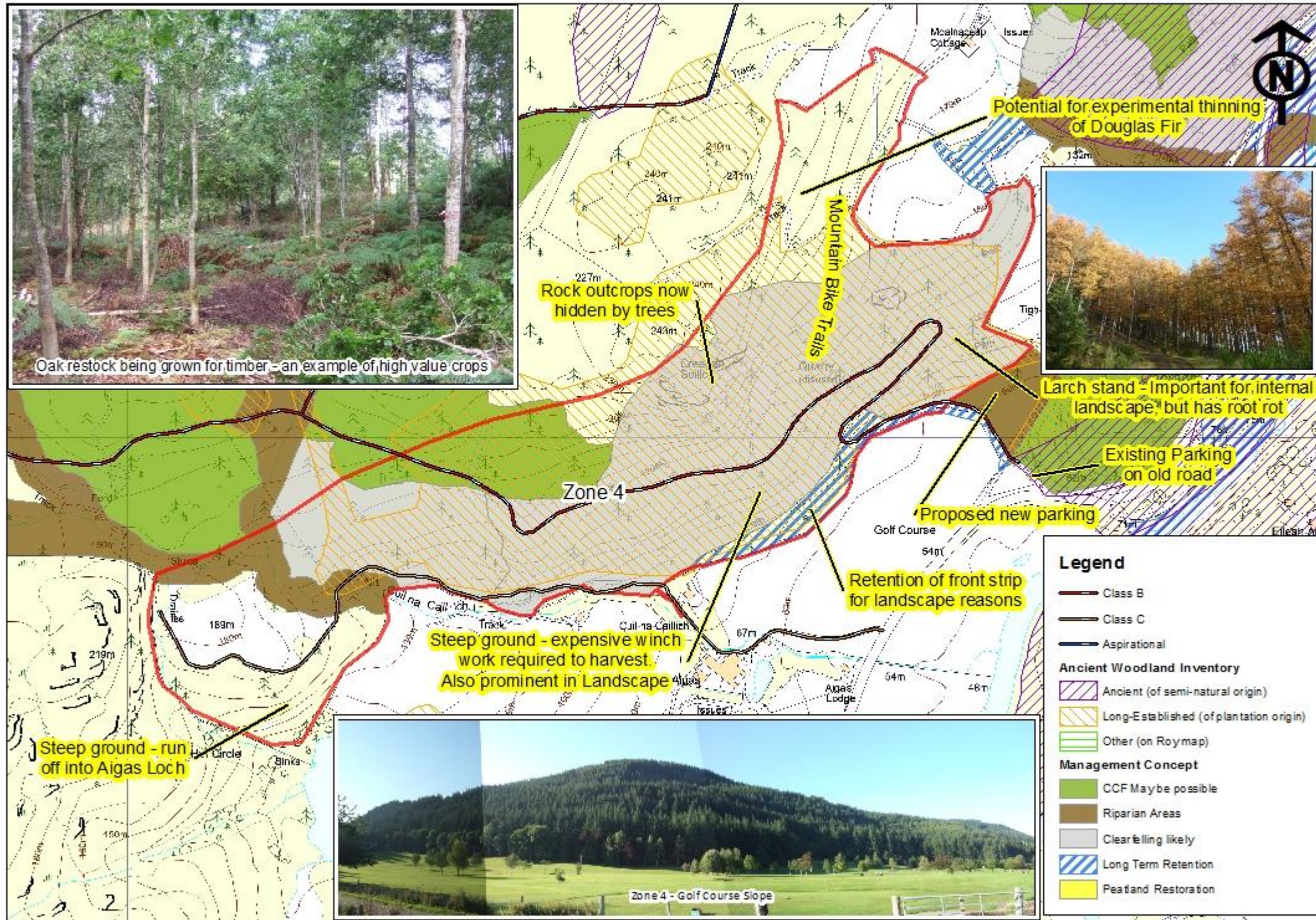
- The Scots Pine in this Zone has been thinned; conversion to CCF in this rotation should be possible.
- Windblow appearing which will require management.
- Poor provenance of Scots Pine as well as past thinnings not managing to produce good branching habits have produced poor quality timber in this rotation. Poor provenance also makes natural regeneration less viable for the next rotation.
- Black Grouse present on adjacent moorland.
- Area favoured by mountain bikers.
- Scope to extend forest track to provide access to Zone 6.

### Actions

- Thinning of Scots Pine for future conversion; also to favour ancient woodland remnants.
- Thinning to favour ancient woodland features.
- Restoration of wet woodland areas where appropriate in hollows.
- Species diversification and improvement of provenance through planting as part of CCF management.
- Soften edges to favour Black Grouse.
- Reduce deer numbers to aid natural regeneration.
- Develop and maintain appropriate access facilities, as identified in access plan.
- Work with local mountain bikers to manage trails.



## Zone 4 – Golf Course Slope



### Description

Zone 4 comprises the steep afforested slope which provides the backdrop to the A831, Aigas Golf Course and Aigas Field Centre so is very prominent in the landscape. The main tree species are Douglas Fir, Norway Spruce, Sitka Spruce, Scots Pine and Larch. Very little in this zone has been thinned and some areas of windblow have already appeared. The Norway Spruce shows considerable signs of deer damage and the Larch is suffering from a form of rot which weakens the roots and lower stem. Most of this zone appears in the Ancient Woodland Inventory. Soils are good, though not stable on the slopes.

### Priorities

The priority for this area is to manage the conversion to CCF while being sensitive to both landscape and soil stability issues. This area has the greatest potential to generate high quality timber for income generation but this needs to be done in a way that is compatible with remnant ancient woodland and the interests of neighbouring businesses and residents. This Zone also provides the key public access point to the main forest block.

- Landscape.
- Keep soils stable.
- Increasing biodiversity, ancient woodland restoration.
- Future high value timber production, in the next rotation, under CCF management.
- Recreation provision – paths, MTB trails.

### Opportunities & Constraints

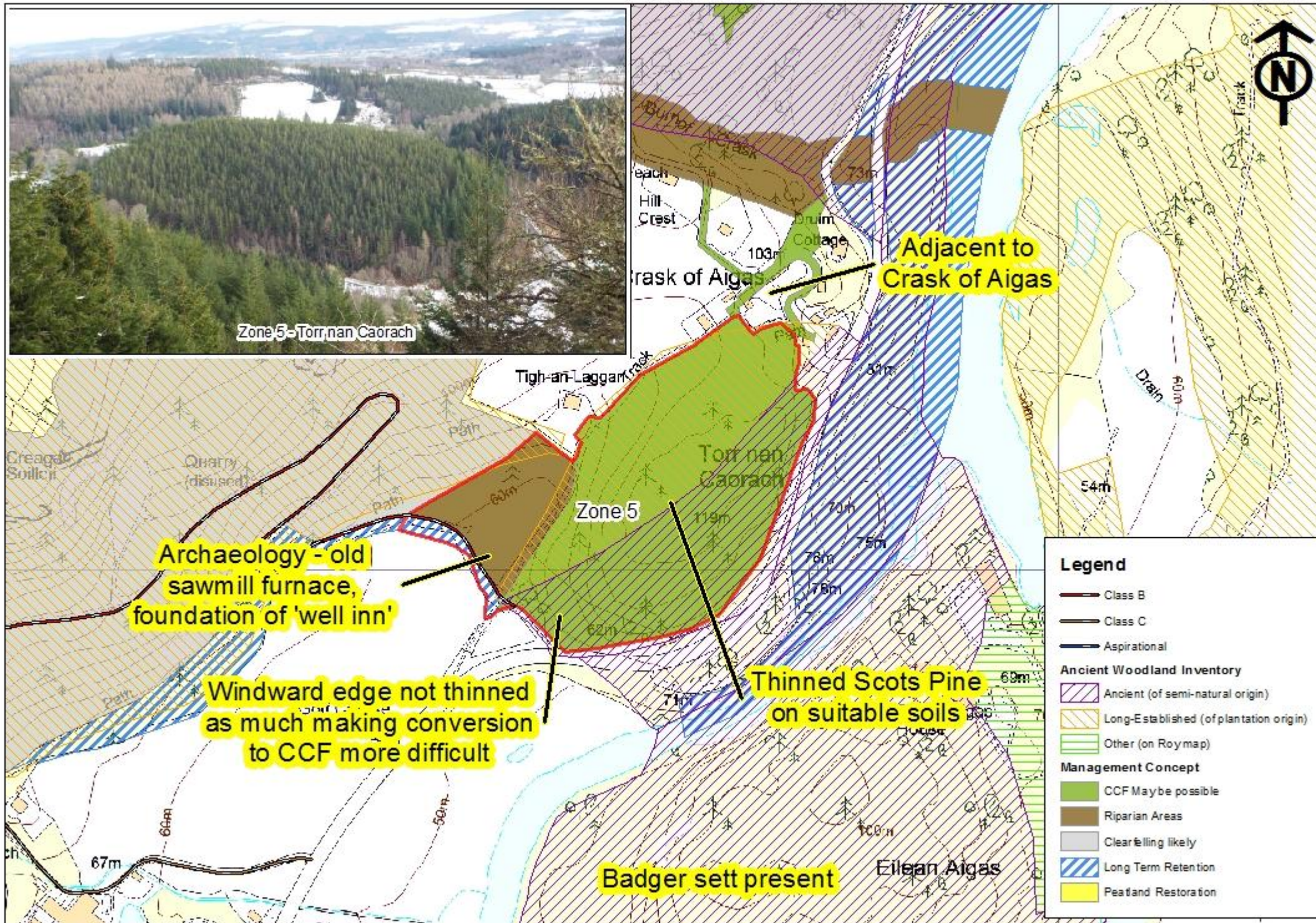
- Much of the ground will require expensive winch work during harvesting.
- Due to a lack of thinning CCF management will not be possible in most of this zone, with the exception of one small area where experimental thinning could be carried out as part of the Ancient Woodland restoration.
- Any harvesting on slopes above Aigas Loch would have to be carefully managed to prevent run off into loch.
- Unstable soils and prominence in the landscape mean that large clearfells would be less advisable.
- Good quality soils mean that this zone has the greatest potential for income generating timber crops.
- Area favoured by mountain bikers.

### Actions

- Retain woodland fringe adjacent to Aigas Golf Course.
- Small scale clearfelling and restocking program to address mature/ over mature timber.
- Restock with high value crops to help make future harvesting more viable.
- Actively manage future crops to produce better quality timber; CCF management as well as pruning main crop, thinning nurse crop, future under planting, etc.
- Thinning to favour ancient woodland features.
- Provision of paths and MTB trails.



## Zone 5 - Torr nan Caorach



### Priorities

The priority for this Zone is to convert to CCF but to undertake little intervention. A car park and interpretation will be provided adjacent to the main access road attracting visitors away from the Crask to minimise disruption to local residents.

- Conversion to CCF management with consideration of landscape issues.
- Increasing biodiversity, ancient woodland restoration.
- Facilities to support recreation provision.
- Protection and interpretation of archaeology.

### Opportunities & Constraints

- Being next to the Road and Crask makes it prominent in the landscape.
- Potential for significant disruption to local residents during operations.
- Windward edge has different species and has not been thinned as much. Stability still good so conversion to CCF possible.

- Badger sett present.
- This zone also contains some prominent archaeology.

### Actions

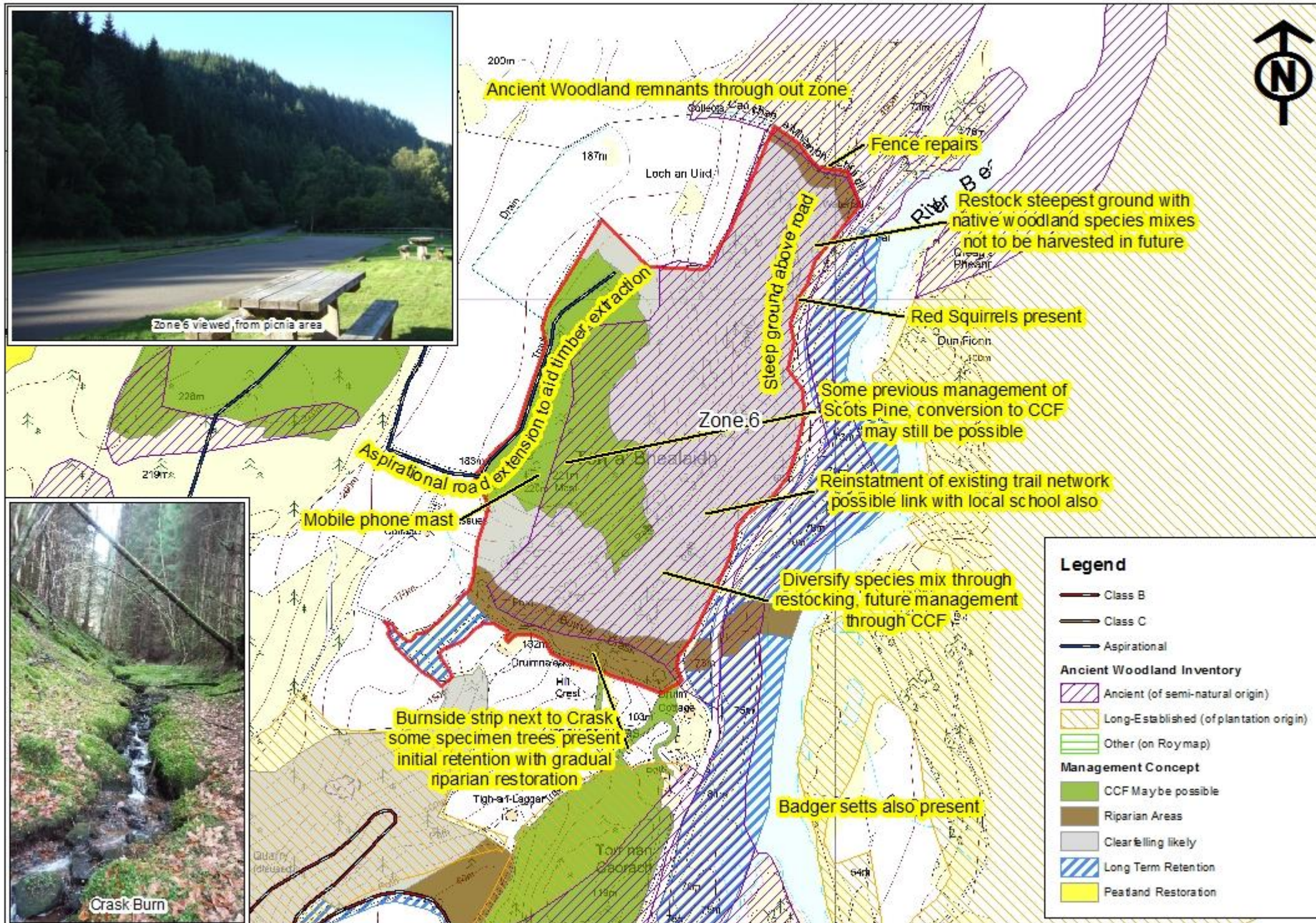
- Conversion to CCF management.
- Use small scale harvesting operation to minimise impact to local residents.
- Create car park adjacent to forest road, signing people into main forest block and away from Crask.

### Description

Zone 5 is a rocky knoll that lies between the Crask of Aigas and the A831. It is prominent in the landscape and important to residents of the Crask of Aigas. The main access road to the forest is to the West of this block. This zone mainly consists of thinned Scots Pine on a small hill with good soils. The Pine is well suited to this site, but again is of poor provenance. Despite high deer numbers natural regeneration of some broadleaved species is establishing in the zone. Most of this zone appears in the Ancient Woodland Inventory and is in a secure condition. There is a small area of wet open ground where there are a number of archaeological features.



## Zone 6 – Torr a' Bhealaidh



### Description

Zone 6 is a steep hillside North of the Crask of Aigas and is adjacent to the A831 with Scots Pine on top and a mixture of Spruces and Douglas Fir on the slopes leading down to the road, some of which are precipitous. Although soils are generally rich on these slopes they are not stable. The forestry in this area is very mature and overdue for harvesting. Most of this zone holds the highest designation for Ancient Woodland but is in a critical state. This zone has an existing trail network and is regularly used by local residents. The mobile phone mast is also in this zone.

### Priorities

The priorities for this zone are to fell and restock with native broadleaves to meet Ancient Woodland and soil stability objectives and to provide appropriate access and educational facilities.

- Increase biodiversity, ancient woodland restoration and sensitive management of riparian zone.
- Recreation and view point provision to provide access to visitors from roadside and to enhance local residents' access provision.
- Restock without losing soils on steep slopes and manage for long term slope stability.
- Future conversion to CCF where possible in this rotation, where not in next.
- Develop connection with local school.

### Opportunities & Constraints

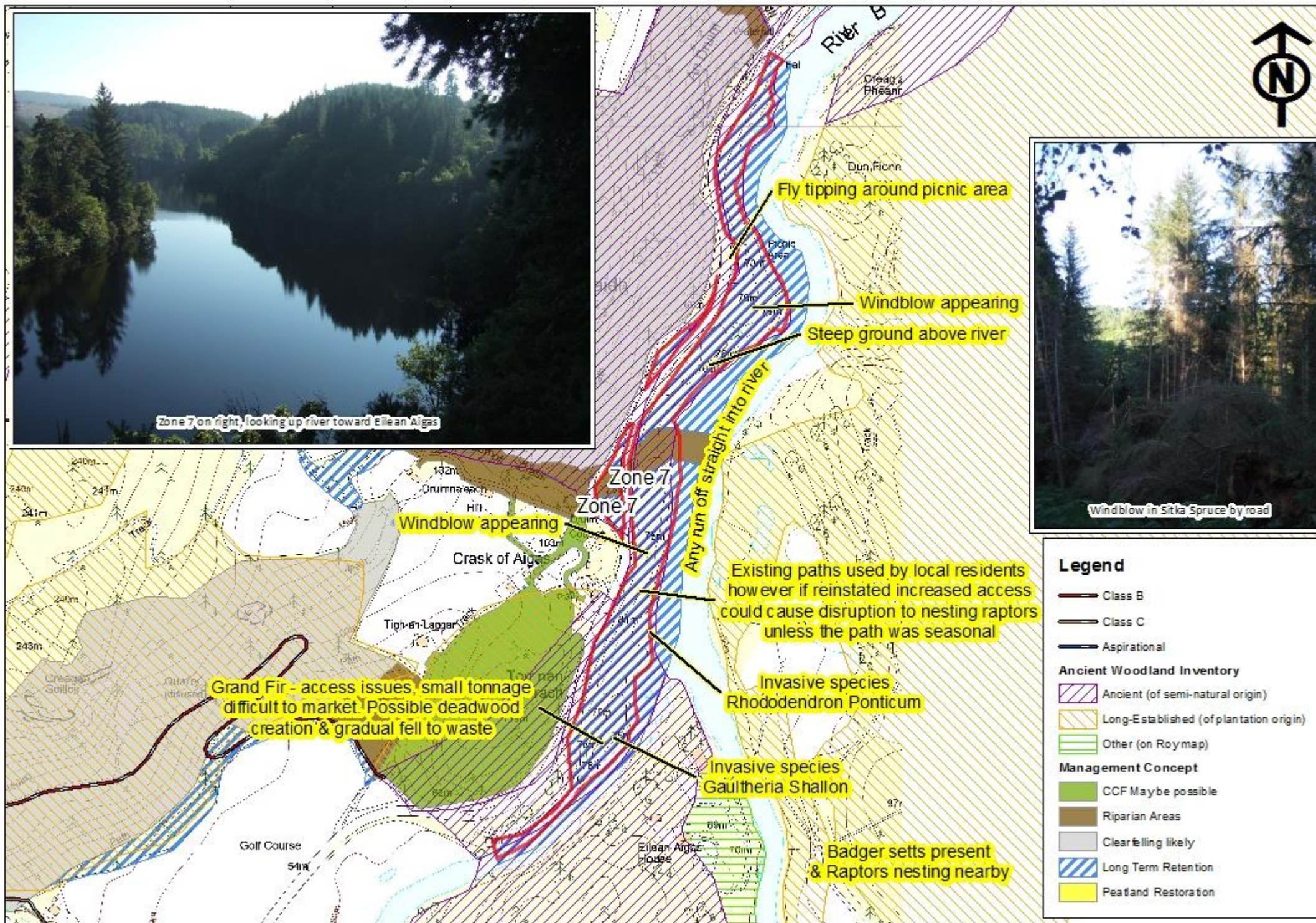
- Steep slopes above main road, the most challenging ground to harvest at Aigas. Likely to be expensive and loss making.
- Potential for significant disruption during operations not just to locals and traffic but to raptors nesting nearby.
- Unstable soils on slopes above road.
- Lack of road access to top of slope an issue for harvesting.
- Significant access opportunities as good viewpoints and scope for linking to local primary school.
- There is a stream running from top to bottom at the West of this zone which could be turned into a nice feature and would also screen clearfell behind.
- Ready access to services enable opportunity for tourism accommodation (glamping) facilities to generate income.

### Actions

- Considered felling and restocking of steep slopes with broadleaves to manage for long term slope stability.
- Consult with Aigas Field Centre on operations to minimise disruption to raptors.
- Improve habitat for Red Squirrels.
- Reinstatement paths network and appropriate viewpoints/ interpretation.
- Investigate and create path link and outdoor classroom with local school.
- Manage income generation potential through mast lease and possible visitor accommodation provision.



## Zone 7 - Riverside



### Description

Zone 7 comprises the strip between the main road (A831) and the Beaulieu river. It mainly consists of Broadleaved species with two small stands of mixed Spruce and Douglas Fir and another small stand of Grand Fir. There are a number of specimen trees present as well. There are invasive species present in this zone (Rhododendron ponticum & Gaultheria Shallon). All of this zone holds the highest designation for Ancient Woodland and is threatened. There is a locally maintained parking and picnic area adjacent to the forest within this area which is extensively used by visitors for viewing the Beaulieu river and a range of breeding bird species.

### Priorities

The priorities for this area are to manage for Ancient Woodland and biodiversity priorities providing improved access to viewpoints and short walks without increasing disturbance to wildlife.

- Removal of invasive species.
- Clear and restock stands of Spruce before more windblow occurs.
- Restock without losing soils on steep slopes, bearing in mind run off into river.
- Conserve the ground flora present.
- Develop interpretation and sensitive access to river viewpoints (may be site for all abilities access).
- Minimise disruption to nesting raptors nearby.

### Opportunities & Constraints

- Steep slopes above river, harvesting will have to be carefully managed to prevent run off into river.
- Potential for significant disruption during operations not just to locals and traffic but to raptors nesting nearby.
- Lack of access an issue for harvesting.
- The most intact woodland ground flora in the forest is in this zone.
- Good parking facilities but public experience limited by lack of footpaths etc.

### Actions

- Remove invasive species.
- Consult with Aigas Field Centre on operations to minimise disruption to raptors.
- Harvest what can be reached of conifers and restock with native woodland species.
- Deadwood creation followed by gradual felling to waste of conifers that cannot be reached.
- Investigate and develop options for improving access provision sensitive to potential for wildlife disturbance.