

British forests

More trees flourish now

THE myth that Britain's tree cover is rapidly disappearing has taken a knock. A census has now shown that land area under woodland in England and Wales has increased substantially since 1947. Furthermore, the total area of broadleaved woodland — a major concern of wildlife conservationists — has remained virtually unchanged over the same period.

The reference date for the census, carried out by the Forestry Commission, is March 1980. The percentage of land area under woodland in England is now 7.3 per cent, while the corresponding figure for Wales is 11.6 per cent. In 1947 the figures

Protection of Rural England, has similar worries about the way mixed stands were classified in the census. But Mr John Kennedy of the Forestry Commission estimates that the classification scheme will if anything tend to underestimate the amount of broadleaved woodland, because conifers in mixed stands that will eventually be entirely broadleaved are removed over a period of time. He also says that many of the conifer plantations managed by the commission, which are

vilified by some conservation groups, are in areas that would otherwise remain as unproductive moorland.

The Forestry Commission's primary aim is to manage timber resources, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that it does not always see eye to eye with conservationists. But there is a general recognition that ancient seminatural and coppiced woodland is being lost in Britain at the expense of habitats supporting fewer species. The Nature Conservancy Council is undertaking a survey of the problem and a Forestry Commission working party will report shortly on a policy for broadleaved woodland.

Tim Beardsley

Soviet agriculture

US sees signs of improvement

Washington

THE Soviet Union's "Food Programme" appears to be making small but real progress towards reducing the country's dependence on imported grains and increasing domestic production of meat, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

USDA estimates that the Soviet grain crop this year will reach 200 million tonnes, which, together with substantial increases in forage production, is expected to push total agricultural output above the record 1978 level. The greatest gains are reported to be in non-grain animal feeds — pasture, silage and hay — as part of the Soviet effort to boost chronically short supplies of meat. The Soviets also appear to be putting a new effort into production of pulses — peas and beans — which are needed to balance the protein content of animal feeds. Of the 6.6 million tonnes of soybean meal or equivalents now used for this purpose, roughly half is imported.

The Food Programme, which was officially adopted in May 1982, is intended to increase *per capita* consumption of meat, dairy products and fruit. Soviet leader Yuri Andropov this summer reaffirmed the Food Programme's goal of providing these high-quality foods with the "greatest possible self-sufficiency".

The Soviet press has been quick to attribute this year's gains to the success of Food Programme policies, although in fact it may be too early for these policies to have had a real effect. Some Western analysts also question the viability of some of the key components of the programme that appear to run counter to prevailing ideology. These include decentralizing control of agriculture management through the establishment of county-level planning associations (RAPOs is the Russian acronym) and the encouragement of private plots, which currently produce 30 per cent of the country's meat, milk and eggs, and 50 per cent of its fruits on less than two per cent of the farm land. According to USDA, another obstacle appears to be the 1981-85 five-year plan,

which calls for sharp cuts in investment in agriculture-related industries, such as fertilizer manufacturing.

The five-year plan notwithstanding, production of fertilizer in the first nine months of this year was reported to be 9 per cent higher than in the same period last year; production of machinery and pesticides was up 6 per cent. And according to the Soviet Agriculture Minister, a "collective contract" wage system, designed to provide incentives for real increases in farm production, is rapidly being introduced. Under this system, teams of workers are supplied with land, equipment and supplies, and are paid wages as an advance against the final harvest, rather than on a piece-work basis



US agricultural exports to the Soviet Union (\$million). *Partial embargo imposed; + projected.

(for example, according to the number of acres ploughed by a tractor operator). The number of collective contract teams has reportedly doubled since May, and now farm 40 million hectares, some 18 per cent of agricultural land in the country.

USDA is projecting a generally declining demand for grain imports by the Soviet Union as the domestic production of forages increases. Soybean meal will still be in demand to balance feeds, however, with imports expected to grow to 5 million tonnes by 1990. Meat imports are expected to fall by a half.

At the same time, USDA foresees a possible new market in the Soviet Union for imported agricultural technology in the form of machinery, pesticides and herbicides, hybrids and breeding stock if the commitment to increased domestic production continues. **Stephen Budiansky**

IMAGE
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REASONS

Flourishing elms

were 6.2 per cent and 6.8 per cent respectively. Broadleaves account for 57 per cent of woodland area in England and 30 per cent in Wales.

Conservation and amenity groups were quick to argue last week that figures were not able to convey the change in character of much of Britain's woodland. According to the census, there has been a considerable loss of oak woodland in England and Wales. Dr George Peterken of the Nature Conservancy Council, while welcoming the census results, points out that much of the new broadleaved woodland replacing it consists of pioneering species such as ash, sycamore and birch, as well as scrubby species like hawthorn and willow. Some of these undergrown conifer stands planted by the Forestry Commission but, owing to the way mixed stands are classified, are nevertheless recorded as broadleaved woodland. Peterken also says that differences of definition between the present census and the 1947 study make detailed comparisons difficult.

In 1947 there was a large area of "felled woodland" which was broadleaved in character, while in 1980 felled woodland was largely coniferous: Peterken estimates that, if this is taken into account, an additional 57,000 hectares of broadleaved habitat has been lost beyond that visible in the census figures.

Mr David Conder, of the Council for the

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