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Forestry Commission brushing aside riders rights

Riders throughout the South East of England fear their rights to ride on Forestry Commission land have been brushed aside as the Government desperately tries to sell off thousands of acres of forest to help raise funds to help fight the country's current economic plans.

Riders representatives on organisations meant to be consulted, have not been consulted. Worse still, many feel that when they have tried to raise the issues involved, they have been ignored. Requests to have the subject discussed have been over-looked.

The result: When the whole issue was discussed at Government level, the views of riders in the South East was not even presented let alone considered.



The issue, they say, is vitally important for three reasons.

First, because if Forestry Commission land in the region is sold without any guarantees that riders will be allowed to continue to ride on the land, the new owners may install gates and barriers, charge for access or even ban riders altogether.

Second, if that happens and new owners ban riders from riding on land they have ridden on for generations then to fight to get those rights restored will cost time and, even worse, a lot of money.

Third, because if riders, with or without a fight, are allowed to continue to ride on what was once Forestry Commission land, they must be allowed to do so completely free of charge as at present.

Says Mareide Thomas, Chairman of Ashdown Forest Riding Association and a member of the East Sussex County Council Local Access Forum, which is composed of land owners and land users, "The Government are treating us with contempt. They are riding rough shod over the very consultation process they introduced when they wanted to set up their own Rights of Access legislation. What is obviously right for them, is not right for us.

"Three times I asked the Local Access Forum if we could discuss the matter. Three times, I was told there was no time to do so. No reason was given. Neither the fact that I asked for the matter to be discussed nor the fact that it was turned down was minuted. The matter is not being dealt with properly."

Jackie Rowlands, the British Horse Society County Access and Bridleways Officer for East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and a fellow-member of the Local Access Forum, agrees.

"What's the point of a Local Access Forum if we're not allowed to discuss something as important as riders rights on land being sold by the Forestry Commission?" she says.