

Bailies express privatisation fears

THE Bailies of Bennachie have expressed their concerns about the Government's controversial forest privatisation programme.

The group, who have over 4000 members and were set up to care for the Garioch hill and its environment, have written to Scots Secretary Ian Lang outlining their worries over future public access to the country's forests.

James MacKay, deputy senior Bailie, told the *Herald*: "We have become very concerned about public access to forests, Bennachie

in particular.

"The Government's plans for privatisation were mentioned at our agm and the Forestry Commission are, I think, are equally concerned.

"We have told the Secretary of State how important Bennachie is to the area."

The group will also meet north region director of Forest Enterprise Graham Hamilton soon to discuss the Government-set target of selling off 100 hectares by the year 2000.

However, Mr MacKay said he did not think

Bennachie would be one of the areas sold off and public access perhaps denied.

He said: "I don't really see that happening.

"First of all there is so many approaches to Bennachie.

"I don't think public would accept that access would be denied.

"There would probably be confrontation and it is confrontation that we want to avoid.

"Landowners in this area are very sympathetic to the requirements of groups such as walkers and in fact most welcome walkers on

to their land.

"I can think of a number of estates where this applies.

"The worry is that it maybe bought by somebody who does not realise just how important Bennachie is to the life and the perceptions of the people of Aberdeenshire.

"In the various areas that have already been sold off I think only around 15 per cent have satisfactory rights of access.

"Because of the sell-off target, the Forestry Commission have therefore got to investigate sites where

they think could be suitable for selling off.

"We have been given an assurance by Mr Hamilton that there is no wish or plan to sell off Bennachie.

"But we would still like to meet him to express just important the hill is to the life of the people of Garioch and beyond.

"It's probably the most frequently climbed hill in the North East of Scotland and we just want to make sure that he is aware of this."

Mr Hamilton confirmed to the *Herald* this week that there were no plans to sell the land.