

Bennachie access fears

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BENNACHIE'S planned £400,000 visitor centre could find itself ringfenced, it emerged yesterday.

The proposed privatisation of Forestry Commission land could leave the centre, sited on land leased from the authority, without an access way.

A working group has been looking into selling off Forestry Commission land. The group's report on options for the Government is due

New centre 'may be landlocked'

to go before the Scottish Secretary soon.

A forestry source yesterday confirmed there was "absolutely no guarantee" much of the vast area meantime open to walkers might not pass into private hands.

The £400,000-plus Bennachie Centre is due to be completed in the autumn.

The inaugural sod was cut this

week on the first major information centre on the Garioch landmark.

But the Bailies of Bennachie and others with an interest in the ancient site and its wildlife are concerned over access.

"There is no guarantee the new Bennachie Centre might not be landlocked in the forest," said Bailies of Bennachie founder member Algy Watson, of Oyne.

"No one will know until we finally hear the working group's report. We are all in the dark."

"If this land was sold with an access agreement then the asking price could be cut by 50%," said Mr Watson. "The implications of that fact are obvious. It is worrying."

Gordon MP Malcolm Bruce said around 100,000 people visited Bennachie annually. "The possibility that the future privatisation of

the Forestry Commission will stop people having access is totally unacceptable."

The MP vowed his support to the Bailies. He said he had written Scottish Office Minister for Agriculture and the Environment Sir Hector Monro seeking a firm pledge on continued "free and open access" across Bennachie.

"The Scottish Office seems quite happy to sell off parts of Scotland for a fast buck, and don't seem to care that people will be denied access to enjoy their own country."