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From the Minister of State's Desk

News from Andrew Doyle TD



June 2017

I am delighted to have this opportunity to update you on developments within my area of responsibility, which includes Food Safety, Forestry, Horticulture, the organic sector and the Greyhound industry. It is a very interesting portfolio which has kept me busy over the last few months.

The first tranche of annual tax-free forestry premium payments for 2017

I announced in January, the first tranche of annual tax-free forestry premium payments for 2017. The payments issued to those forest owners who applied on-line through the Department's online services portal www.agfood.ie.

To date, a total of €63.18 million has been paid in respect of forest premium applications. My Department will continue to process on-line applications for 2017 forest premiums as they are received, with payments being issued on a weekly basis. I would encourage forest owners to avail of the on-line facility because of the obvious benefits for them in terms of early premium payment.

A total of €111.6m (including a capital carryover) has been provided by the Government for the continued development of Ireland's forestry sector in 2017. This level of funding is further evidence of the Government's ongoing commitment to the sector as set out in the Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020.

The grants available under the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme cover the cost of establishing the forest plantation and the Scheme also provides for payment of annual forestry premium of up to €635 per hectare for 15 years.

Commencement of Forestry Act, 2014

At the end of May, I announced the commencement of the Forestry Act 2014. New forestry regulations, which provide the regulatory basis for a number of forestry activities including the licensing of felling, aerial fertilisation, afforestation and forest road construction, will also come into effect on that date.

The Forestry Act 2014 is an important piece of legislation, which will make a significant contribution to the development of forestry by providing a more flexible system for regulating forestry activities, in general, and the felling of trees in particular. The Forestry Act, 1946, while it has endured and served us well for seventy years, was in need of an overhaul. I am confident that the new Forestry Act, which provides for the making of regulations

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over the whole spectrum of forestry activity, will facilitate the development of our national forest resource and industry both at a local level which is primarily rural-based, and at a national level in terms of its contribution to the economy.

One of the main changes introduced by the Act and its associated regulations is the streamlining of the felling licensing system. From 24th May 2017, there will be a single licence process for tree felling, extended duration of felling licences and an increased list of exempted trees which will not require a felling licence. The Act also introduces tougher penalties for illegal felling of trees with the aim of maintaining the area of existing forest and helping to prevent future deforestation.

It is important that the regulatory framework for forestry facilitates the development of the industry in a manner which is consistent with the objectives of environmental protection. While the State already derives significant benefits from our forest resource, I believe that our forestry sector still has enormous potential in terms of the economic, environmental, climate change, recreational and tourism benefits that it can deliver. I have confidence in the industry's capacity to make the most of the opportunities that continued Government funding of the sector provides. I look forward to co-operating in the continued success of this multi-faceted sector.

Wildfires and Fire Damage

These fires can and have caused catastrophic damage to land, with some areas being particularly affected. Much more serious, of course, is the potential for serious injury or loss of life to the people tasked with dealing with such outbreaks.

Officials in my Department are currently analysing a wide range of satellite imagery to identify land which was burnt illegally during the specified closed season for burning (1 March to 31 August.). Historic satellite imagery is also being examined as part of this process. Agricultural and eligible forestry land identified as burnt illegally as part of this investigation will be deemed ineligible for payment under the 2017 Basic Payment and other area-based schemes. and that a variety of detection systems, including satellite based systems, were now in place to detect fire hotspots and trigger more detailed eligibility inspections where required.

My Department will not tolerate incidences of illegal burning of land and will take all necessary actions to ensure compliance with the conditions of the various EU funded area-based schemes, including reducing payments and penalties where applicable.

I recently visited the site of the wildfire in Cloosh Valley, Co. Galway, to see first-hand the extent of the damage and to meet the personnel involved in the fire-fighting effort.

An extensive wildfire raged in Cloosh Valley from the weekend of 6th May 2017 until it was eventually brought under control on Thursday 11th May 2017, resulting in the estimated loss of some 1,500 hectares of forestry and 1,000 hectares of bogland.

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Andrew Doyle T.D., Minister of State visited the site of the recent wildfire in Cloosh Valley, Co. Galway, to see first-hand the extent of the damage and to meet the personnel involved in the fire-fighting effort. Pictured with L-R Mark Carlin, Director of Operations Coillte, & Frank Flanagan, Forest Manager, Coillte

I was appalled at the devastation here caused by the wildfire. Not long ago, this was a green, vibrant forest environment but it is now totally destroyed. Fire poses a serious risk to life, homes, and property. Forestry and wildlife habitats are also destroyed as is particularly evident here today. I understand that, while a wildfire risk can quickly develop following dry weather patterns in all areas where flammable vegetation such as grasses, gorse and heather are present, especially in proximity to forests and other assets, most fires may have been started deliberately. To set a fire at this time of the year is not only illegal but also totally irresponsible.

Such fires, as seen at various locations throughout the country, including May and Sligo, can cause enormous damage and result in huge costs – including loss of property, in the case of forests there is the loss of the crop and the reconstitution costs, and there are also the costs incurred in fighting fires. It is also impossible to quantify the cost of disruption to normal emergency services (including Garda Síochána) operations, and the impact of diverting these vital services away from other serious emergency calls. Deliberate or uncontrolled fires also destroy habitats, wildlife, farm land, farm structures and threaten homes and lives. It behoves us all to act responsibly. I urge all forest owners, farmers, rural dwellers and other countryside users to be vigilant to the threat of fire, to report any suspicious activity to An Garda Síochána, and to report any uncontrolled or unattended fires immediately to the Fire and Emergency Services via 112/999 service.

I urge all forest owners and forest managers to check their fire plans and to ensure that fire-breaks are clear of flammable vegetation and forest access routes are clear of obstructions.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank again all those who were involved in the fire fighting and control efforts, including Coillte and its staff, the Galway Fire Services, the Air Corps, An Garda Síochána and all of the volunteers.

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Department Grant Aid Funding to NUIG

I recently announced DAFM grant aid funding of €477,000 for a 3-year programme of work at the College of Engineering and Informatics, NUIG. This programme will support the structural use of Irish timber for added value, input to the development of European timber standards, and provide technical expertise to Irish regulatory bodies and industry in relation to timber buildings. Dr Annette Harte of NUIG, in collaboration with the Centre for Wood Science and Technology, Edinburgh Napier University, will lead the work.

Changes in growth patterns in forests and harvesting practices can affect wood properties. It is essential that we have a forest resource that is fit for purpose and can continue to supply quality roundwood of our main species Sitka spruce for the manufacture of structural timber for home and export markets. This award and other project related funding from the Department is towards that end. We are also seeking to extend the use of other conifers such as Douglas fir and Norway spruce in the afforestation programme.

Recently published work by the European Forest Institute suggests that for each tonne of wood products used instead of non-wood products, there is an emissions reduction of approximately 2 tonnes of carbon dioxide. There other advantages to using wood construction including speed of build, ability to prefabricate walls and floors and crane into place. NUIG and Dr Harte and colleagues have taken a leading role in elaborating the opportunities that timber construction provides. Their work will be further supported by the funding I have provided.



Minister of State for Forestry Andrew Doyle TD announced DAFM grant aid funding of €477,000 for a 3-year programme of work at the College of Engineering and Informatics, NUIG. Pictured with the Minister is Prof. Pól Ó Dochartaigh, Registrar & Deputy President, NUI Galway Dr Annette Harte

Council of the European Forest Institute (EFI)

In April, I addressed the Council of the European Forest Institute in its meeting at Dublin Castle. In welcoming the delegates from 16 Member States of the Institute, as well as Director Marc Palahi, and Chairman Professor Ted Farrell (University College Dublin), I referred to the association that the Department has had with EFI since its inception in 1993.

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One of the focuses of the EFI's work has been its close engagement and interaction with European policy decision-makers, stakeholders, policy institutions and EFI's member organisations. In this regard the EFI is moving forward the positive agenda around Europe's forests and the contribution they make to society and the economy. It brings valuable science-based knowledge and information to the attention of stakeholders in a format which is readily usable in areas such as forests and climate change, forest biomass and carbon neutrality and other topical areas into the policy arena.

In more recent years we have had a closer association with the EFIATLANTIC, and this has now led to the EFIATLANTIC Summer School on Forest Planning and Management, which will take place over a number of days in June at Waterford Institute of Technology. It will feature training in the state-of-the-art tools and techniques, many of them developed in Ireland over the past decade on foot of national and company-led research and innovation investments. It has attracted over 40 persons from 17 countries.

We have ambitious plans that Ireland increase forest area from the current figure of close on 11% to 18% by later this century on foot of my Department's afforestation programme, which provides grant aid to encourage land owners to plant forests. National investment in forest roads needs to mobilise the increasing supply of roundwood forecast to come on stream, with a forecasted doubling of harvest from 3.3 million cubic metres per annum to over 7 million cubic metres in 2035.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Programme for Foresters

I was delighted to launch the new Continuous Professional Development Programme (CPD) at the Society of Irish Foresters (SIF) AGM in the Wicklow Mountains National Park HQ Office, Trooperstown, Laragh, Co Wicklow in April.

The advantages to professional foresters of engaging in such a comprehensive CPD programme are numerous and they include the maintenance of professional competence; enhancement of existing knowledge and skills and the opportunity to develop new ones; the creation of a structure of accreditation for training/information events organised by third parties; and lastly will help to identify emerging issues in terms of knowledge and skills that need to be addressed.

The establishment of this CPD structure will upgrade the SIF's current system and is included in the Knowledge Transfer and Information Action measure of the Forestry Programme 2014 – 2020.

From my Department's perspective, one of the most important contributions of the Society has been its Continuous Professional Development programme.

During the launch I outlined the clear justification for this initiative, given the proposed investment of approx €482m of exchequer funds in new forestry development over the period of the Programme. This includes planting of 44,000ha of new forests and building almost 700km of forest roads; there are also schemes and measures for thinning, conservation of native woodlands, agro-forestry and growing timber for energy.

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In order to ensure that such expenditure represents good value for money and that State funds are spent in the most appropriate and efficient manner, it is vital that work receiving grant aid is undertaken to the highest standard possible.



Andrew Doyle TD, Minister for State launching the new Continuous Professional Development Programme (CPD) at the Society of Irish Foresters (SIF) AGM in the Wicklow Mountains. Pictured L to R : Niall Farrelly, President, Society of Irish Foresters (SIF) Minister Doyle and Fergus Moore Forestry division (DAFM)

Public consultation on new National Strategy and Environmental Framework for Producer Organisations in the Fruit & Vegetable

In March, I co-chaired a meeting of the Horticulture Industry Forum with Mr. Brian O'Reilly. At the meeting I launched a public consultation to assist the development of a new National Strategy & Environmental Framework for Producer Organisations in the fruit and vegetable sector.

Producer Organisations have a key role to play in strengthening the bargaining position of growers with the retail sector and the National Strategy and Environmental Framework will set out the priorities through which improving the competitiveness of the fruit and vegetable sector and increasing sustainability of production can be achieved.

I encouraged all stakeholders and all those interested to respond to the public consultation and I look forward to future engagement towards the development of this important Strategy for Producers Organisations operating in Fruit and Vegetable sector.

I also informed industry stakeholders at the Forum that two new regulations concerning the potato pest Epitrix were recently signed into law by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Michael Creed T.D. These regulations were necessary to introduce increased levels of national controls relating to the requirements placed on importers of potatoes, originating in Member States in which Epitrix has been detected, and to address the significant risk to the indigenous potato sector arising from a possible outbreak of Epitrix.

National measures will be temporary and my Department will review the decision regularly to reflect decisions made at EU level in relation to the harmful organism and the spread of the pest.

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Pilot Forestry Knowledge Transfer Group

I launched a pilot Knowledge Transfer Group scheme for forestry at the AGM of Limerick and Tipperary Woodland Owners Ltd., in Hollyford, Co. Tipperary, in March.

Management of forest assets enhances one's ability to derive a good return. While there are a number of support schemes available from my Department such as the Forest Roads Scheme, we are also seeking to assist forest owners in other ways. One way is the development of a Knowledge Transfer Group for forestry, the pilot scheme of which we have launched. By removing the knowledge gap that exists amongst some forest owners, my Department hopes to assist forest owners to become forest 'managers'. Forests managed pro-actively by their owners will, I believe, result in more productive and more sustainable forests.

The pilot project is to test the feasibility of a Knowledge Transfer Group (KTG) scheme for forestry, the focus of which will be on mobilisation of timber and biomass and will be modelled closely on my Department's existing Knowledge Transfer Groups for beef, sheep and other sectors of agriculture. The aim of the KTG scheme is to increase the level of forest management activity amongst participating forest owners, and to increase awareness amongst participants of the value of their forest and, in particular, the potential value of biomass. Three existing forestry groups are taking part in the pilot and there will be multiple KTGs within each group; these forestry groups cover counties Limerick, Tipperary, Clare and Donegal. It is intended that the pilot will have up to 300 forest owners participating across 15 KTGs.

My Department had done extensive research on the feasibility of KTGs for forestry during 2015 but it was a result of a meeting between the Limerick and Tipperary Woodland Owners group and the Department back in June last year that the idea of a KTG for forestry started to take shape. I understand that this group along with the other forestry groups involved in the pilot, with the assistance of Teagasc, have been contributing to the development of the scheme.

We currently have forest cover of 10.5% of Ireland's land area, compared to the EU average of 34%. We are working together to expand this forest area in a sustainable way so that the many benefits that it brings can be realised to the full extent possible. The forest owners, and this Knowledge Transfer Group make a huge contribution to achieving this objective and I am sure that our efforts, combined with those of others in the sector, will assist in the ongoing development of forestry in Ireland.



Launching the pilot Knowledge Transfer Group scheme for forestry in Hollyford, Co. Tipperary

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New Improved Town Park in Balla Opened

An Taoiseach Enda Kenny, T.D. and myself, opened the new improved 'NeighbourWood' at Balla, Co. Mayo on the 21st March.

The project to develop the woodland was undertaken by the Balla Town Park group, with funding from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine under the NeighbourWood Scheme. The Scheme, administered by the Department is designed to provide accessible opportunities for recreation and regular exercise while creating and developing woodlands for the benefit of current and future generations, thereby highlighting the social benefits of forestry to local communities.

The NeighbourWood scheme allows for young and old to experience nature and the environment, to see and enjoy forests and the rich variety of plants and wildlife that exist in these rich habitats. In all cases, what makes a woodland a 'NeighbourWood' is the way in which it is perceived by local people. NeighbourWoods are an invaluable community resource and part of the local fabric of life and sense of place.

The aim of the Balla NeighbourWood Project was to bring the existing woodland to a better standard for recreational use through resurfacing the paths, putting in place informative signage and carrying out maintenance programmes once dead trees and undergrowth had been cleared. The project will also raise awareness of the woods as an important natural heritage and landscape amenity area for residents and visitors.

During the opening I outlined the economic importance of forestry to Co. Mayo, stating that production in Co. Mayo is expected to reach 113,000m³ this year, an increase of approximately 8% over the previous year's figure. In 2017 the total value of timber extracted from Mayo forests is estimated to some €3.5m. It is also estimated that forestry in the county supports some 700 jobs.

I wish to congratulate the Balla



Opening the new improved 'NeighbourWood' at Balla, Co. Mayo

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New Felling Guidance Tool Launched to help maximize returns from Forestry

In January, I launched the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine's Felling Decision Tool for conifers. The tool provides guidance to forest owners on when to fell their forest to obtain the best return from their forest asset.

The importance of deciding when to clear-fell and its impact on returns should not be underestimated. This tool will assist forest owners in making a more informed decision on clear-felling. The tool clearly shows that rotation length has a very significant impact on the return a grower will get from his or her crop. It is vital that landowners have a positive experience from their forestry investments and that revenue from the first rotation facilitates reforestation to continue the forest cycle.

It is also important at a national level, from a roundwood supply and wood quality perspective that rotation lengths are of ample length to allow the production of sufficient quantities of valuable sawlog-sized material to support an expanding sawmill sector. By launching this tool today we are endeavouring to underpin this level of production in a sustainable way, by providing the best available information, to all those involved in managing forests and in providing advice to owners.

Launching the Official Start to Strawberry Season

I visited Pat Clarke's strawberry farm, in Co. Meath this week to launch National Strawberry week, which in its 7th year, runs from the 5th to 12th June. This year, more than 7,700 tonnes of top quality strawberries will be picked by Irish strawberry growers, with the vast majority of these being picked between now and the end of August, supporting over 1000 jobs.

Strawberry production is one of the real success stories in Irish horticulture with a very strong market for the high quality fruit produced by Irish growers. Irish growers have reacted positively to this demand and have expanded production and improved technical efficiency delivering a top quality product.

I also took the opportunity to urge the public to check Country of Origin and look for the Bord Bia Quality Assurance logo each time they purchase strawberries, or any other fresh fruit and vegetables. By seeking Irish quality assured produce we are supporting Irish producers, Irish jobs and making the strongest contribution to the Irish economy while also getting excellent value for money through purchase of high quality food that has been produced and delivered to the highest standards with minimal impact on the environment.



Attending the launch of National Strawberry Week which was hosted by Pat and Mary Clarke.

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Consent for the Sale of Harold's Cross Greyhound Stadium

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Michael Creed TD, and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Paschal Donohoe TD, have both provided the necessary Ministerial consents for the sale of Harold's Cross Greyhound Stadium to the Department of Education and Skills following a request from Bord na gCon/ Irish Greyhound Board. It is intended to use the site for the construction of a school or schools.

I recognise that this has been a difficult decision for the Board and for greyhound people who have built a proud tradition of racing in Harold's Cross over many years. However I look forward to the enhanced development of the sport in Shelbourne Park, and in other stadiums around the country, on foot of the new circumstances arising from this sale. Along with the new legislation going through pre legislative scrutiny in the Oireachtas at present, the resolution of the significant debt problem will mark a new beginning for a sector which makes a strong economic contribution and provides vital employment across Ireland.

Important Dates

15 July:	Carnew & District Agricultural Show
7 August:	Tinahely Agricultural Show
20 August:	Tullow Agricultural Show
19-21 September:	National Ploughing Championships

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