



## **Introduction**

Irish Rural Link – the national network representing the interest of rural communities welcomes the opportunity to make the following submission on the Forestry Programme 2014-2020. As a nation, Ireland has a reputation for its green landscape which forestry is the central element. Forestry is a growing asset with a moderate to low capital investment requirement and is not subject to economic cycles experienced in the commercial property sector. Some 12,000 people are employed in forestry and downstream timber processing at saw mills, furniture companies and increasingly in the wood energy sector. The capitalist nature of modern day society means that our natural resources have never been in too much danger. The protection of these nature resources is not only needed for the well being of our economy but also for our environment and health. With this in mind Irish Rural Link acknowledges the role of the government and state bodies such as Teagasc in promoting forestry by providing start up grants, annual premium and support schemes for forest improvements.

Forestry has the potential to affect many elements of Irish society in particular rural residents. Irish Rural Link believes that forestry can have a positive impact on some of the negative elements of living in Rural Ireland such as poverty, fuel poverty, unemployment etc.

### **Poverty:**

Rural Poverty as has been stated by numerous studies is often invisible in comparison to obvious urban decay, which can demonstrate obvious signs of the effects of low income. The cost of living in rural households is generally €100 per week higher than their urban counterparts (Vincentian partnership and Irish Rural Link Study 2010). The Teagasc farm income survey continuously shows that average farm income which ranges from as low as €8k for sheep farmers and €25,639 for farmers in 2013 is a long way behind the average industrial income of €34k. It is obvious that many farms depend on outside income to subsidise

the family farm. According to research done by Social Justice Ireland<sup>1</sup>, there are twice as many people at risk of poverty in rural areas compared to their urban counterparts. This research is reinforced by the CEDRA report<sup>2</sup> which also states there is twice the number of rural residents at risk of poverty.

### **Rural Energy Poverty**

Rural households are at greater risk of fuel poverty due to the nature of the rural housing stock, the types of fuels available, limited opportunities to switch to cheaper fuels such as gas. As fuel costs continue to increase due to demand it is important that we as a nation look at alternative home heating such as wood pellets which are a renewable source of energy.

Government must honour its promise to compensate poorer people suffering the increase in fuel costs as a result of the carbon tax, and take action on the rising level of fuel poverty in the State. A detailed breakdown of how all revenue raised through Carbon Tax is being used to tackle energy poverty as part of an Energy Poverty Strategy is required to ensure feasible alternatives to fossil fuel consumption are available for all households subjected to a carbon tax.

### **Sector Bias**

Agriculture remains the biggest employer in rural areas, for many people living in rural areas; the opportunities to switch to different forms of employment are limited. It is the view of Irish Rural Link that rural residents that are not directly involved within agriculture are unfairly been excluded from support aimed at rural areas and communities. The significances of rural areas have never been so evident but its significance does not solely rely on agriculture. Irish Rural Link appreciates the government's continued funding on forestry and sees it as an area with potential to create employment. Unlike agriculture, forestry has greater social and economic benefit to the local community as it can create a spin of employment such as adventure tourism.

### **Environmental Importance.**

Indeed the recognition by all institutions that the protection of the environment is now of paramount importance is evidence that supports for all job creation opportunities in rural

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<sup>1</sup> Social Justice Ireland (2014) National Social Monitor 2014, [www.socialjustice.ie/content/publications/national-social-monitor-2014](http://www.socialjustice.ie/content/publications/national-social-monitor-2014)

<sup>2</sup> Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (2014) "Energising Ireland's Rural Economy."

areas are properly organised and that skills essential to the promotion of environmental measures are retained in rural areas.

Future forestry policy must emphasise how to address the issue of climate change. It is also believed for environmental protection to be achieved; environmental education needs to become a priority. It is only through education that environmental protection be understood at a larger scale.

### **Advisory Services**

As a nation, Ireland has a complex relationship with land. There is a perception that forestry is merely for land of a low production value that is unviable in terms of agriculture. It is only through education that this perception can be altered. There is a clear lack of knowledge among the farming community of the benefits forestry can provide to their income and lifestyle. Uncertainty over income is the leading reason for the delay in retirement among the farming community, the income from forestry can provide farmers with a secure income for their retirement allowing them to retire at the appropriate age. Advisory service such as Teagasc should alter their approach to forestry by marketing as a method to provide security income for farmers. Older farmers in Ireland are twice as likely to be at risk of poverty forcing them to rely on their children to support them in their later years, putting increasing financial strain on their children. In many cases this can mean that two generations of farm families are living off one income. Irish Rural Link proposes that advisory services organise seminars in every county around the issue of forestry but focus them around retirement planning.

### **Conclusion**

Irish Rural Link believes that forestry in comparison to agriculture is undervalued as an industry and also has the potential to greatly contribute to the national recovery. Like agriculture, forestry cannot just be considered as an isolated industry. Forestry impacts on a range of issues such as fuel poverty, multifunctionality, retirement income, tourism, etc. Renewable energy remains a national and global issue that needs addressing, forestry has a major role to play here. Irish Rural Link is calling on future forestry policy to have a social inclusion dimension. No longer can forestry policy be focused on inside the farm gate. As stated throughout IRL feel that forestry can contribute to the natural recovery by providing employment and help address poverty levels among the elderly farming community as they

approach retirement age. What is clear is that it is an exciting time for the forestry industry but its policy strategy is vital to its success.

## **Irish Rural Link the Organisation**

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 300 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

***'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'***

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

***'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'***