

FORESTRY PROGRAMME 2014-2020  
RESPONSE from the DONEGAL WOODLAND OWNERS SOCIETY LIMITED

## **Welcome**

Ireland has achieved a remarkable transformation in raising our forest cover from near zero at the foundation of the state, to over 10% today. We have more recently established a diverse model of forestry, which values landscape, amenity, wildlife, a vibrant processing and wood energy sector, and a whole range of unseen environmental services, alongside the traditional production of timber. All this is an essential part of preparing Ireland to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing and increasingly unstable world. So we welcome the new Forestry Programme 2014-2020 as a positive contribution to helping our society and economy to face these changes.

## **Increasing Area**

DWOSL believes that forestry has a vital role to play in mitigating climate change, and with such low forest cover, a strategic funded plan to double Ireland's forest cover has to be put in place. Unfortunately, the earlier aspiration to increase our forest cover which brought about the rise to 10%, seems to have now faded from sight.

The draft proposals in the new Forest Programme are a disservice to farm forestry, which has delivered the vast majority of the new planting in the last 20 years. More broadleaves, more diverse forest, more open space and greater recognition to the hidden environmental services which forests provide, has become the accepted norm. But only farmers are in a position to drive this radically transformed industry forward without fragmenting and destroying the fabric of rural Ireland. Handing the baton over to private companies will lead to the same dismantling of the warp and weft of landscape and community that already characterises the wind power programme and the motorway network. Only farmer control can bring about the scale of planting needed without further disruption of landscape and communities in rural Ireland.

## **Controls**

In environmentally sensitive areas, forestry also has a positive role to play. But the blanket ban on forestry in wide categories of land should be more nuanced and flexible, and should allow the appropriate type of forestry to be encouraged.

The draft Forestry Programme devotes 17 pages to penalties – surely the wrong spin on what should be a warm welcome to a new generation of farm foresters. Farmers react negatively to new controls, guidelines or restrictions. But to the degree that these are necessary and inevitable, they should be implemented in a manner that will help farmers to respond positively. For this there would need to be more active support to help farmers meet these challenges.

## **Premiums**

We regret the reduction in the premium from 20 to 15 years, as the majority of farm foresters will have no sustained income from their plantations until they are mature.

The removal of the distinction between farmers and non-farmers is not as generous as it might appear. The distinction between the two categories was originally introduced in acknowledgement of farmers planting with no prospects for having any income until their trees were due for their second thinning. This did not apply to Coillte and other commercial interests, as they have a sustained income stream from multiple forest properties at all stages of growth. So opening up the premiums to any non-farming individuals or companies will undermine farmers' confidence in their ability to compete in the sector. This will only further erode the resilience of rural life in Ireland.

### **Empowering Farmers**

With a forest cover of under 11%, it is vital that Ireland increases our cover to the 18% already agreed. We need to greatly increase our cover for timber, energy, amenity and environmental reasons - those relating to climate change being mandatory, some being essential to reduce our demand on imported forest products, while others are essential for the wise development of our own social, environmental and economic capital

But the only hope of reaching the target of 18% of land cover afforested will be if the farming community is encouraged to participate enthusiastically in the forestry programme. The measures proposed will not do this. And the State's historic dithering in its support for farmers has already made any long term commitment to forestry very unattractive.

Farmers need to be further empowered to take their involvement in forestry forward, and to overcome their initial unfamiliarity with the industry and with forest culture in general. This has been made more difficult by the dominant roles of forestry companies and Coillte. With farmers in control of their own forestry enterprises, the timing of operations can be optimised, and the long-term interests of the forest maximised, in a way that is not possible for contractors. For example, felling by chain saws can minimise much of the damage associated with the use of heavy harvesting machinery. But contractors will always want to use the technology that speeds and eases their work. So new measures need to be devised to favour farmers taking control of their own forests, rather than favouring the large companies which already have the scales tipped in their favour.

### **Conclusion**

Forestry in Ireland is today at a cross-roads. Some of the proposals in this new Forestry Programme are leading us down the wrong path.