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## **Submission on Draft Forestry Programme**

### **From: Laois Farm Forestry Group**

The Draft Forestry Programme 2014 - 2020 is a worthy development in the further progression of the forest sector in Ireland. Laois Farm Forestry Group would like to address a number of points in relation to the proposed programme which are set out below and generally follow the layout of the document.

#### 5.1.3.3 Annual Premium

Under this section it is proposed to reduce the number of annual premia to 15 when compared to previous afforestation schemes. This may deter those considering afforestation as it reduces the compensation for income foregone from conventional farming of the land during the years when there is no forest income. Extending the number of premia to 20 under the General de minimis regulation would relieve this deterrent and assist the Forest Service in achieving its overall targets for afforestation under the programme.

The proposal to have a single rate of premia (as distinct from the present farmer and non farmer rates of premia payment) will create an imbalance towards institutional investors in forestry and reinforce rural prejudice against forestry. One of the accepted reasons for the low overall forest cover in Ireland has been and remains the reluctance and at times hostility of farmers to consider forestry as a farm enterprise. Forestry remains widely perceived amongst large sections of the farming community as the domain of the state and of big business. The rural development imperative accorded to forestry and clearly set out in both EU and national policy justifies and indeed requires the maintenance of a premia differential in favour of farmers.

#### 5.1.6 Forestry for Fibre Scheme Details

The Forestry for Fibre proposal is welcome, however the classification of land planted under this scheme as forest land and the subsequent imposition of forest legislation on such land provides an obstacle to achieving the targeted planting of 3,300ha as outlined in section 5.1. In order to meet the forecasted supply-demand gap for fibre for energy and other wood product applications that will arise over the next two decades, planting under this scheme needs to be considered similar to the planting of conventional agricultural crops and allow farmers to incorporate forestry for fibre into their farming systems without the obligation of a permanent change in land use.

#### 5.7.2 Forest Knowledge Transfer Groups (KTGs) Scheme Details

It is evident that many farmers and landowners have become involved in forestry in the past 20 years or so simply because it was grant driven or because it was a convenient exit strategy from conventional farming. The longer-term view and worth of forestry was and is still often relegated to a secondary position. It is important to move away from such mindsets and to mainstream forestry as a farming enterprise.

Knowledge transfer in all its forms is vital to ensure that the investment that individual farmers and society have made in forestry is realised. The proposals outlined in this section are broadly welcomed. It is, however, important that there is a targeted approach to the eligibility of participants in KTGs in order to ensure that knowledge is dispensed to those who require it, and at the correct time. In addition, KTGs should aim

to have a sense of uniformity with regard to its participants to ensure that members of the same group are at a similar stage of development in relation to their forestry.

The completion of a KTG programme by individuals over a two year period is short and does not reflect the key management period of a typical forest (i.e. pre-first thinning to second thinning) which represents a period in excess of four years. The maximum period of funding for individual members should reflect this. In addition, the proposed funding for 1,000 members represents a low penetration rate into the existing number of forest owners and should be revised and increased.

5.8 Measure 8: Setting up of producer groups.

Existing producer groups at a tenuous stage and volunteer effort alone will not sustain these groups more than a few years. The financial supports outlined under this measure are limited to start up producer groups only. This measure discriminates against the innovative who have recently established producer groups without the support of the Forest Service. In order to ensure the viability of such groups which are in their infancy, eligibility of funding under this measure should be expanded to include existing producer groups.



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Eoin Phelan  
Secretary  
Laois Farm Forestry Group