

## EDITORIAL

### National research priorities

Irish forestry is in an awkward place when it comes to technology. We need it to be competitive, but it is often developed for situations that are not quite the same as we have here. At the same time, investment to make bespoke systems is limited by the scale of the sector itself, and by the level of state investment.

Take the paper on the harwarder in this *Irish Forestry*. It is a promising technology, which links harvesting and forwarding systems in one machine. It may be part of the solution to harvesting more privately-owned forests, many of which are too small to provide enough volume for conventional thinning systems. But the authors were not able to actually test the machine. Relying on models they have shown its promise. But one could ask, so what? Where is the machine?

A better question is: where is the investment, and the will to try-out and further develop the system and others like it? We frequently talk of the knowledge economy, of working smarter, of growing new business out of research and development investment. In that vein, at the end of 2008 the government published *Building Ireland's Smart Economy – A Framework for Sustainable Economic Development*. There are useful things in the report, including a recommendation to: “invest heavily in research and development, incentivise multinational companies to locate more R&D capacity in Ireland, and ensure the commercialisation and retaining of ideas that flow from that investment”. Most of the investment is coming from Science Foundation Ireland. The emphasis to date has been on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Biotech, with partnerships developed between third level research and multinational companies. More recently, renewable energy has been added to the list of priority areas. It remains to be seen how well the investment will translate into sustainable jobs in the Irish economy.

By comparison with ICT and Biotech, the level of funding for land-based activities such as forestry or agriculture has been lamentably small. Yet Ireland has a huge competitive advantage in dairying and forestry, as well as an established core of world class investigators in both areas. We need to play to those strengths, and drive forward the development of areas where we are already winners. In other words, the harwarder needs to be tested and further developed in Ireland in co-operation with the Scandinavian manufacturers and scientists who developed the current versions, and then used (or discarded if its performance is not up to scratch). Investment risk needs to be borne by both the state and the private sectors. Other systems, such as laser scanning, are also out there, showing promise, but are suffering from a lack of risk capital and investment to take them to widespread use, not only in Ireland, but abroad.

It is time to refocus and use a larger part of national R&D funding on what we are good at, to use successful sectors such as forestry, not simply as test-beds for answers awaiting questions, but as sectors that need answers to real questions, and which will repay investment.