

EDITORIAL

Funding the Scouts

Money spent on research pays dividends in the longer term, ensuring that the best decisions are made and reduces the likelihood that costly errors will occur. Fergal Mulloy, the first director of COFORD, likened forestry researchers to military scouts, sent out in advance to identify potential problems and then suggest possible solutions. For example, the research trials into species and provenance performance have provided (and in some cases continue to provide) invaluable information to Irish forestry – an excellent return from investing in the scouts. Unfortunately however, forest research in Ireland has been in some disarray in recent times, exacerbated by the loss of key expertise through retirements. The low level of investment in forest research is also a worry, at only 0.63% of the sector's contribution to the economy, compared with an average spend of 1.68% in other sectors.

COFORD was established in 1993 to develop a strategic direction for forest research and provide funding for competitive research programmes. This stimulated the involvement of the third-level institutions, which greatly expanded the scope, expertise and capacity of forestry research and development. In addition, collaboration between research and industry was fostered through participation in joint projects. This investment also helped to build research capacity, facilitating involvement in other research (e.g. EU) programmes. In response to rationalisation during the recession period, COFORD was subsumed in 2010 into the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM). The COFORD research programme (now known as the Competitive Forest Research for Development programme) is currently the responsibility of the Research Division of DAFM and is one of its three main R&D funding programmes. Most of the research funding is short term in nature, which is an ideal approach for addressing some forestry problems. However, long-term studies are needed to address many other problems. Field trials, sometimes involving data collection over decades, are the backbone of many long-term research projects. Field trials are expensive and require on-going maintenance. A mechanism to fund long-term research is needed. In addition, extension activities declined greatly following the demise of COFORD in 2010.

The recent policy document (see Book Reviews section) calls for the setting up of “an overarching forest sector body” to guide and coordinate forest research and development, which appears to be an attempt to reincarnate the old COFORD. This document also calls for the development and maintenance of research competence, without specifying how this might be done. In addition, the document recommends that the feasibility of setting up a long-term research programme should be examined.

The 2014 DAFM research call is interesting, showing that DAFM has followed up with actions to address some of the policy recommendations, which is a very welcome development. The Long Term Forestry Research Initiative has been unveiled as part of this research call, which could involve the establishment of a virtual centre for research (partnership among a number of forest research providers led by one institute) or a structured and coordinated programme for long-term research (set of inter-dependent projects each led by one existing research institution, but also involving strong cross-institution collaboration). The first option may be the better one since it is more likely to ensure more effective coordination and implementation of research strategies. The Food for Health Ireland (FHI) research centre, a multi-location, multi-partnered, multi-disciplinary research centre may be a model for the development of such a centre. It is recognised that no single institution in Ireland has the capacity to deliver a comprehensive long-term programme of forest research without the input of other institutions. Therefore, it makes sense to harness the capacity of this scattered expertise into a virtual centre. In addition to the older more experienced researchers, there are already many very talented young researchers working in forestry, so this bodes well for the future. However, most of these young researchers work on short-term contracts and see little prospect of a career in forest research. The DAFM goal of developing and maintaining research competence is unlikely to be achieved in the absence of measures to address this issue. Many of the sentiments expressed above have been echoed in the Society's Policy Position Paper *A Revised Structure for Forest Research*, published in 2013. The Long Term Forestry Research Initiative may have been, at least in part, a response to that document.

This year's issue of *Irish Forestry* contains the usual broad diversity or mix of papers that perhaps readers are beginning to get accustomed to (since many of the papers are research ones, this also reflects well on past investment in research). However, there is also a bumper Book Review section, which indicates that interest in forestry books has not waned despite the more widespread reliance these days on information obtained over the internet. However, the centenary celebration of Forestry education in UCD must be mentioned. The 2013 Sean Mac Bride lecture on this topic was given by Prof. (Emeritus) Gardiner on 26th November, 2013 at UCD. The lecture was both entertaining and enlightening, but in particular for those who missed it, the main contents of the talk are published in this issue (with Prof. Maarten Nieuwenhuis as co-author). The historical and political background to the origins of the programme at UCD are fascinating. The paper mentions research, stating: "It is only in relatively recent decades that Forestry as a scientific/commercial activity has begun to be recognised as a subject worthy of serious research and study." Let's hope that this research philosophy is maintained, but this cannot be done in the absence of investment.