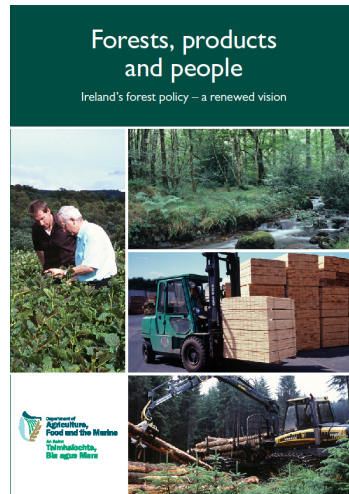


Forests, Products and People – Ireland’s Forest Policy – A Renewed Vision

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Almost 20 years have passed since the last major forest policy statement from the Government, *Growing for the Future* was published, so this document is timely, given, as it points out the total value of the sector to the economy is now ca. €2 billion with direct and indirect employment of 12,000 and an estate of over 730,000 ha. The report is the result of a process initiated in 2009 involving three groups: overall policy, forestry schemes and the future of Coillte. The policy group met on 15 occasions and accepted submissions from concerned individuals and organisations. While this publication is relatively compact, it deals with the whole range of issues likely to impact on the forestry sector into the future and as such merits a careful analysis of its content. It begins with a foreword by the Minister of State for Forestry.

The booklet is well designed and to some extent follows the format of *Growing for the Future*, outlining the current position, policy considerations and proposed actions, perhaps to allow comparison. There is an analysis of the earlier report, though perhaps an opportunity was missed here to comment on the successes and failures of that policy as a prelude to each of the revised policies and actions. Some useful background papers are also included. To get a minor caveat out of the way and knowing something about the vagaries of printing, a misprint on the front cover seems, surprisingly, to have eluded all editorial barriers and will no doubt be rectified in a later print.

As is indicated in the summary, the broad objectives of *Growing for the Future* stand, though goals have changed due to changes in the sector, especially a shortfall in planting and the many new areas of regulation. As the new strategy “to develop an internationally competitive and sustainable forest sector that provides a full range of economic, environmental and social benefits to society which accords with the Forest Europe definition of forest management” indicates, the tenor of the document reflects the positive impacts of sustainability and environmental factors on forest policy as expressed in the Oslo Decision on European Forests 2020, but tends also to lean, in parts, towards a cautionary view of forestry development.

Fourteen areas of policy are dealt with in detail. The first, and one of the key policies, is expanding the resource, as much of what is aspired to arises from the implementation of a viable afforestation programme. No one can argue with the goal of 10,000 rising to 15,000 ha of new planting per annum. However, the experience of *Growing for the Future* indicates that in reality, this will be enormously difficult to achieve and setting unrealistic targets may question their credibility. Already the impact of shortfalls on the previous goals is a much reduced timber harvest forecast and the graphs shown in Appendix 5 indicate how heavily wood production is influenced by variations in the planting programme. It is surprising, in this context, that the work of the COFORD working group established in 2012 on land availability (CCLAWG) – which is very different to *suitability* only – was not referred to. This looked in detail at the barriers to expanding the sector such as farming developments, conservation constraints and land classification and ways in which they might overcome such limitations. In this part of *Forests, Products and People* 18 actions are proposed, and while these are laudable, questions arise as to how feasible to implement they may be. For example, the desire to increase the size of afforestation projects will be countered by the impacts of planning and environmental impact assessment, and persuading other agencies to allocate their land resource to forestry can be difficult. Neither will providing sufficient and consistent funding be an easy task. On the positive side, a more flexible approach to premium differentials and the classification by yield class of lands suitable and available for forestry, presumably irrespective of enclosed/unenclosed status, is to be welcomed, as is targeting more non-farmer landowners. Incentives to increase planting native riparian woodlands and short-rotation forestry may go a modest way to achieving targets and carbon incentives may also help. Time will shortly tell if these strategic actions can be put into effect.

Policy on best forest management is less fraught with controversy. The recognition, understanding and application of sustainable forest management (SFM) principles, the establishment of a national forest inventory, one of the successes of *Growing for the Future*, a Code of Practice and the evolution of owner groups have meant that forest management can keep pace with developments. The need for an inventory

unit regularly updating, with better planning and forecasting, is self-evident and not really new to Irish forestry and was one of the strengths of the Forest Service prior to the establishment of Coillte. Many of the measurement and planning tools already exist and managers are familiar with them. One area which will require attention is a coordination as to how these tools should be used, such as GROWFOR, PractiSFM or iFORIS, to allow for monitoring, management and review of private forests nationally. Action on forest road construction and access to public roads will be helpful. The continuation of long-term research as a backup to management, is essential and is dealt with further on in the document.

Forestry has become a highly regulated sector and this is quite evident in the section on the environment and public goods. The cautionary tone of much of this section could well be replaced by a more focussed recognition of the real and tangible public benefits which forests provide such as biodiversity, recreation with its attendant health benefits, rural contribution, greenhouse gas sequestration and replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy. This is especially relevant given that upward of two million ha of land are now reserved for conservation or restricted in their use for environmental reasons. Many of the recommended actions relate to implementing, refining and reporting on potential environmental constraints and even identifying areas to be taken out of forestry, though some concession is made to water values and native woodland establishment and the quantification of non-woodland benefits. It is surprising that the National Forest Standard, based on the Lisbon forest principles, has been little used as a measure of sustainable management in Irish forests. Bringing the forest inspectorate into the ecological site assessment procedure is to be welcomed. More emphasis in speeding up the resolution of outstanding issues such as that of the hen harrier would have been desirable.

The sections on the supply chain and the processing industry in the main reflect market conditions. It is somewhat disturbing that the harvesting fleet built up in the 1990s has run down to a noticeable extent and a new and positive input by the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) is welcome. Support measures to help develop haulage and small-scale harvesting and residue energy initiatives are proposed and are timely. Some of the supply difficulties arise due to the scattered nature and small size of many forests. These form barriers to the development of more efficient and larger-scale forestry enterprises. Coillte, DAFM and the industry need to cooperate in this area, as will Local Authorities in the area of access to public roads. Again the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Clarity on Coillte's future will be a key to the interim supply of timber to industry and indeed to the future of the panel industries, as also will be the continued growth of wood supplies. With the expected drop in wood supply from the 2030s on, Government will need to monitor how this scenario develops especially in the context of present sawmill overcapacity.

Obviously the support for a fragile broadleaf market will require state input. While the establishment of the Wood Marketing Federation has provided a fillip to forest products, the requirement to establish an agency similar to Bord Bia, as referred to in Section 9, seems most obvious.

Since the 1990s, threats to forests have grown significantly. The most serious of these are deer, *Phytophthora ramorum*, *Chalara fraxinea* and the invasion of *Rhododendron ponticum* and policy actions address these in the document. A national deer management unit is to be set up, which will also undertake surveys. Hopefully we will be provided with more information on this initiative in the next annual programme. Details are not given of special measures to be implemented concerning major tree infections, but perhaps DAFM already have enough supports in this respect. Outwardly there appears to have been a rather fatalistic attitude to the spread of rhododendron, a threat to both forests and conserved habitats. It would seem that we should be advanced enough with remote sensing techniques to monitor and to take specific action to check or avoid the spread or colonisation of such new areas.

It is appropriate that the next section relates to research, training and education though research, which is basic to understanding future challenges receives fairly modest attention. Research activity has reduced in recent years with the winding down of Coillte's involvement and the absorption of COFORD and its budget into DAFM. The commitment to the maintenance of current levels of funding and continued consultation with stakeholders is encouraging, but a clear policy on long-term and project-based research and how these will be structured staffed, administered and financed, would be appropriate here, accepting the fact that some progress on supporting long-term research has been made recently. Getting the industry to fund research has proved difficult in the past but it is worth trying again. Much consultation is planned but in the end this must translate into an operating structure. Funding for training has significantly reduced and the document seems to rely on the industry for more investment. Forestry operations require skill and the support of Teagasc, the HSA and the industry makes sense. Foresters should be well able to acquire environmental expertise, which is a component of SFM, and is routinely taught in 3rd level forestry courses. Model-farm forests are also a good idea. Product and process certification has become established successfully since the early 2000s and a number of bodies now undertake this work. The Code of Best Forest Practice has been instrumental in this and a revised edition is to be welcomed and will hopefully maintain its focus on sustainable forestry as an established activity. An addendum – the report might have given credit to the Society of Irish Foresters, which has helped research survive as a major publisher of peer-reviewed forest research papers in this Journal.

The remaining policies relate to implementation and review, cost appraisal, legislation, institutional arrangements and Coillte. These are clearly the concern of

Government and will direct the development of other actions into the future. They have already been the source of much discussion and debate has taken place up to Oireachtas Committee level. The recent history of response to policy reviews has not been encouraging. No follow-up to three major studies, the Timber Industry Development Group, the Bacon and Malone Reports took place. Perhaps *Forests, Products and People* may prove more effective with actions proposed for a forest council on research and development, forestry schemes and the environment, albeit with monitoring, reporting and advisory powers only. A more significant action would be the establishment of a Forestry Board as mentioned earlier, but again we are only at another task force stage. Forest Service five-year business plans would be welcome. The long awaited Forestry Act is almost on the statute books and will no doubt be subject to a final review. Many concerns at drafting and Bill stage, especially regarding conflicting elements appear to have been taken on board, but the final document will clarify this. There is now of course, as is shown in this report, an enormous amount of other primary and secondary legislation and regulation impacting on this Act and therefore, on the practice of forestry. Some gesture is made therein to recognise the sustainable nature of good forestry management enabling some flexibility for the sector within those parameters. While a less rigid approach to restocking is welcome, this reviewer believes that caution is needed to avoid deforestation on any excuse.

The heavy reliance of development of the sector on state funding which was opted for in the programme just ending is addressed in the report. The actions of looking at taxation, carbon funding, institutional investment, co-funding through the CAP rural development programme and multi-annual budgeting, while admirable, will require significant support from the Dept. of Finance which has not been very forthcoming, e.g. following the 2006 review on forestry taxation. Multi-annual funding would be particularly valuable in providing predictability to the nursery and forestry establishment sectors. Finally, it is encouraging to see that the Forest Service is aware that efficiencies must be achieved and that an Annual Report needs to be reinstated. The fragmenting of the Forest Service responsibility with regard to, for example research, to the overall DAFM research function is to be regretted. Interestingly the title Forest Service appears only four times within all the Strategic Actions.

Coillte has been subject to scrutiny over the last number of years and its final structure is still not clear. The appendix on the Coillte recommendations makes rather chilling reading. The proposal to sell off forestry assets has been abandoned but the proposed link with Bord na Mona was too recent for inclusion in this report which is confined to general observations on the need for the company to work along with the private sector, especially on roading and supply and transparent pricing. The need for recreation and biodiversity to be recognised (financially?) under a new management regime is accepted. However, the many changes that could take place will impact

across the sector. This has been signposted in the many submissions already made by stakeholders, including the Society, at Oireachtas Committees and elsewhere with the view of the Society that a state forestry company, refocused on its core activities, would be best.

The papers in the appendices are useful, particularly those on costs/benefits and the sensitivity analysis on the impact of different planting policies. While the cost study shows that benefits outweigh costs for wood and non-wood products, the fragility of the sector to its past and predicted planting policies is demonstrated. Fluctuations in afforestation mean that there will be reductions in wood supply in mid-century, and to a serious degree if planting rates cannot be increased. This could well cause disruption and lack of confidence in the sector. The lessons of this report are that realistic achievable targets must be set, with structural reforms and regular transparent policy reviews, to allow the sector continue to grow and survive as a significant economic and environmental contributor to Irish society.

I recommend reading this report to anyone with an involvement or interest in Irish forestry for an informed view of a wide and complex area and an insight into current official thinking and intention. Events in Irish forestry are, at time of writing, moving fairly rapidly, which may bring further insights on issues such as the finally agreed forestry programme to 2020 with its accompanying Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and a new relationship between Coillte and Bord na Mona, so readers should assess *Forests, Products and People* in that context.

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