

# Policy Statement on Irish Forestry by The Minister for Lands \*

## *Research.*

THE increase in Inspectorate staff includes a staff nucleus for the commencement of forestry research work. Up to the present the Forestry Service has had to rely, for research data, almost entirely upon the work carried out in other countries. In many aspects of Forestry there is a sufficient identity of conditions between this country and Great Britain to justify reliance on the research findings of the British Forestry Commission and the Commonwealth Forestry Bureau. There is, however, an urgent need for greater progress with practical field research by way, for example, of the careful control and documentation of experimental plots designed to ascertain the reactions of different species to specific treatments and management techniques over a representative range of soil and climatic conditions. It is intended that the initial research programme will be mainly directed towards such practical controlled experimentation, including tests specifically directed towards the determination of practical limits and optimum techniques for the afforestation of marginal land-types. The new staff also includes provision for a permanent system of assessment of growing stock. Such assessment based on a periodic scientific survey of the entire range of plantations, is essential to proper prognosis of future timber availabilities and will, at the same time, afford much valuable information in regard to the timber yields to be expected from different species under Irish conditions and, in regard to the thinning techniques, most likely to facilitate maximum production and high quality.

## *Acquisition of Land.*

The total area acquired in 1956/57 was 18,725 acres of which approximately 16,500 acres was productive. The total productive area acquired is not the highest figure so far attained in a single year—larger productive areas were acquired in 1952/53 and in 1953/54. An adequate intake of plantable land continues to be the most essential pre-requisite to enlargement of the annual planting programme and an intake of 16,500 acres of productive land in a year in which 17,500 acres were planted out of a comparatively small plantable reserve does not demonstrate the feasibility of a steady and rapid increase in the planting rate. Since the area planted in each year includes a proportion of land previously classified as unproductive but now considered capable of afforestation in consequence of new techniques and increasing

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\* Extracts from Mr. Erskine Childer's speech in the Dáil on the occasion of his introducing the Forestry Estimate on April 24, 1957.

experience and includes also some cleared woodland, there has not been any significant decrease in the plantable reserve from the level of 49,000 acres at which it stood a year ago despite the excess of the year's planting over the intake of productive land. A reserve of that level is not, however, comfortable enough in relation to the contemplated future rate of planting and a continuing increase in the planting rate could be viewed with greater equanimity if the plantable reserve were showing a steady and proportionate enlargement. The plantable reserve has, in fact, increased by only 4,000 acres since 1954 when the annual planting rate was 12,500 acres.

There appears, however, to be some cause for optimism in current figures relating to lands in course of acquisition or under consideration. As at the 1st April, 1957, the legal formalities had been cleared and possession was pending in the case of 42 properties totalling 2,852 acres. Bargains had been struck and title was under investigation in the case of 504 properties totalling 39,482 acres and negotiations on price were in hands in relation to 2,055 properties totalling 165,255 acres. The aggregate of these figures—a total of 207,589 acres—compares very favourably with the corresponding figure twelve months ago, 145,913 acres. It is anticipated that the total area acquired in the current year will approximate 25,000 acres.

Whether it will be possible to maintain the acquisition rate at that level in future years is, of course, more open to question. Apart from the properties of which I have already cited particulars, 1,230 more recent offers of lands totalling 110,000 acres were under preliminary investigation at the 1st April, 1957. Subject to some reservations to which I shall refer later in regard to continuance on the present scale of the acquisition and planting of some of the more dubious site-types which have been the subject of extensive planting experiments, it appears likely that the intake of plantable land can be maintained by continuance of the really energetic efforts which the Department has been devoting to this aspect of its work.

### *Planting Programmes.*

The Dáil was informed last year that 17,500 acres would be planted in that year, that it was intended to provide for a planting programme of 20,000 acres in 1957/58 and for two further increases of 2,500 acres each in the next two years.

The planning of a 20,000 acre planting programme for a year at the commencement of which the available plantable land was under 50,000 acres is not easy. A considerable portion of the reserve is comprised in large blocks at a comparatively small number of centres at which the existing plantations are all of recent date. An example of this is Meenirroy Forest with a productive area of 2,418 acres. Planting commenced in 1951/52. A total of 1,430 acres has already been planted,

the average annual planting programme being 238 acres. If the 988 acres still remaining to be planted is handled at too fast a rate, a really difficult problem of management will be presented in another fifteen years when the plantations reach the thinning stage. To avoid an excessive planting rate at such Forests as Meenirroy, we will have to rely on some of the areas actually acquired in the current year to make up about 1,000 acres of the total planting programme for this year. This year's planting programme will bring the total of State Plantations to 248,000 acres of which 142,500 acres represent the post-war plantings.

The high percentage of our total plantations laid down since the war is in large part attributable to the new mechanical aids to afforestation of peat areas which were developed post-war. My predecessors have informed the Dáil on numerous occasions that some of the additional planting rendered possible by these new techniques was on extremely unpromising areas and that some of this experimental work was far in advance of any similar experimentation in other countries. I have not yet had an opportunity of examining fully this whole question of experimental planting of doubtful sites. I understand that, so far, the young plantations have not suffered any serious checks and that there is an increasing probability that growth will continue unabated. There are still other problems associated with these areas, however, including the particular vulnerability to wind and snow damage of rapid-growing species in wet bog areas, and the whole question of the value and economics of this type of afforestation requires careful and constant examination.

#### *Influence of Forestry on The National Economy.*

The heavy annual capital investment liability of forestry and the long period which elapses before produce is obtained makes it imperative that the utmost possible revenue be derived from thinning produce. In any forest economy, thinning produce is assuming a rapidly-growing importance in present day financial conditions—an importance enhanced by the usability of thinning produce in the production of paper, wall-board and other timber derivatives which are fast replacing sawlog timber as the keynote to successful forest exploitation. Ours is a young forest economy and it will be some considerable time yet before our availability of material for pulp and similar processes approaches its maximum level but we are entering the phase in which thinning produce will rapidly increase and we are already at the stage at which we can plan ahead. We have, in our very newness to this field of industrial production, a magnificent opportunity of ensuring that the fullest value is obtained from modern experience elsewhere to develop an industry which will combine all the efficiency which up to date methods will give with the advantages to be derived from a proper blue-printing and co-ordination of its different aspects to give us the

maximum possible and most remunerative possible utilisation of our forest produce. This matter has for some time been engaging the active attention of my Department, the Department of Industry and Commerce and the Industrial Development Authority. We are most anxious that the development of this industry should be on lines which will contribute in significant degree not alone to the forest economy but also to the wider national economy by assisting the solution of balance of payments problems. The extent to which full utilisation of thinning produce can aid in rectifying balance of payments difficulties will be apparent when I say that the thinning produce of the 20,000 acres annual planting level operative this year, fully exploited for paper production, could alter our present position of importing £4 million worth of paper and cardboard more than we export to one of having an export excess of an order exceeding £5 million while our present imports of £6½ million worth of mature timber should be replaced by exports in value somewhere between £10 million and £20 million—assuming present world price levels and an increase in home consumption.

That is the attractive future gain to the country from a steady planting programme of the order now being undertaken. An annual turnover of 20,000 acres of forest could also provide permanent employment for 28,000 men in the forest apart from the many others who would find employment in the processing and transport of forest produce. But to-day we are still many years away from that situation. The planting of 20,000 acres of forest this year will, with the expansion of other forest work, bring total employment in the forests for the year up to an average level of over 6,000 men excluding persons engaged in transport or processing of timber. That itself is attractive as a contribution towards the immediate employment needs of the country. The figure I have just quoted includes a direct labour force for the current year averaging 5,550, the balance being estimated employment of labour in the forests by purchasers of timber. The average number employed on direct labour work in 1956/57 was 5,048 and the figure at the beginning of April was 4,937. This projected rise in forest employment for the year is reflective of the increase in the total of the gross estimate, 80% of which is for salaries, wages and payments to carters.

This singularly high proportion of expenditure which is directly devoted to the giving of employment is the only immediate gain from the heavy capital outlay which our afforestation progress entails. It is unfortunate—but inescapable—that the employment given in new planting gives no immediate return in terms of increased national production. In that respect, it is questionable whether this small country, with limited capital resources, with problems of a considerable excess of imports over exports and a plethora of other economic difficulties can really justify a steadily increasing annual capital investment

in afforestation which is already close to the level of £2 million a year. The capital being devoted to afforestation could, if wisely spent in other spheres of national economic development, produce almost immediate results in productivity gains. Devoted to afforestation its immediate economic effect is purely inflationary. Wealthier countries, countries with more highly developed economies and greater facility for long-term investment, have considered it prudent to steer a course of moderation in this matter of afforestation. Our inherited paucity of woodland has led us, however, to undertake afforestation on a scale which is quite phenomenal in relation to our resources and our needs.

The expenditure which we are incurring to-day in this afforestation drive is undoubtedly a tremendous contribution towards the economic and national wellbeing of future generations. Viewed thus as part of this generation's sacrifice for the ultimate good of the country, capital investment on the present scale in afforestation is eminently commendable but if there is to be a real ultimate gain we must be ever mindful of the interim harmful effects which this type of long-term development without immediate productive gain can have on the economy of the country. That mindfulness must be translated into a sensible determination that economic rather than social objectives must guide our forestry endeavours and that our forestry undertakings must be so managed as to give the maximum contribution towards economic wealth from the minimum practicable consumption of man-power and money. If the main need of this country to-day is an increase in production—or, in other words, more output from manpower and capital employment—in all sectors of our economy, we must especially make high output and cost limitation the basis of our approach to an aspect of our economy from which there is no immediate productive return.

I have referred already to the high labour content of forestry work. In forestry, output and economy desiderata call particularly for strict limitation of man-power consumption to operational activities directly contributing to ultimate timber yields, elimination of inefficient staff, sound costing control and full use of mechanisation techniques. I am glad to be able to say that I have found a ready responsiveness to these needs amongst those officials of the Forestry Division with whom I have already come in contact. I understand that certain steps have already been taken over the past few years to secure improved outputs and cost economy and that an even more intensive drive to step up labour outputs was initiated last year. The full benefit of new costing methods then introduced will not accrue immediately, but already substantial gains have been secured over a number of operational cost heads. I have assured the officials of the Department that their efforts in this sphere will have my full support and I want to take this opportunity of telling the House that I intend, in particular, to seek an adequate standard of work performance as a qualification for retention of any worker in forest employment. Incentive bonus schemes may be

a help towards securing good work outputs and their possibilities will be fully explored. In our present economic circumstances, any growth in our trade will place a tremendous demand on capital. This means that the retention of an inefficient worker will be preventing another efficient worker from securing employment elsewhere. I am sure that the whole staff, including the vast majority of the workers, will appreciate the truth of this statement.

### *Private Forestry.*

It is by this increasing cost-consciousness that I hope we can continue indefinitely the really excellent progress which is being made in the State afforestation programme. It seems to me, however, that it is a great pity that more is not being achieved by way of planting on privately-owned lands. Subhead D of the Estimate now before the House provides for an increase of almost 50% in expenditure on Grants for such planting. The increased sum to be devoted to this work is, however, a mere £5,000—a tiny fraction of our total forestry expenditure. It is small because there is still no real progress in this matter of private planting. In the year which has just ended, only 625 acres were planted. That is, I think, quite tragic. Privately-owned woodland rarely achieves the same level of overall productivity as State Forests and it is quite clear that in our own country the pattern of land tenure, the predominant importance of agriculture and the density of our rural population preclude reliance on privately-owned woodland as a main source of timber supplies. It is equally true, however, that there are patches of land of varying size all over the country which would give greater productivity if they were put under timber but which cannot readily be absorbed into the State Afforestation project. Some of this land is not, at the moment, being put to any use. Some of it is devoted to grazing but could be released from that use without loss of mutton or wool if increased recourse were had to fertilisers to step up the productivity of other grazing lands on the same holdings. An overall national plan aimed at maximum production from all the resources at our disposal demands that these potential woodlands be planted. I have been giving this matter quite a lot of thought since I became Minister for Lands a month ago. I am determined that there must be a really active campaign to secure more private planting. At the moment, I am still awaiting the results of some of my enquiries into the factors which may be deterring people from undertaking such planting, and I am reluctant to say anything as to the form which the campaign should take until I have completed my study of the matter, but the House may rest assured that one of my main objectives, as the Minister in charge of forestry, will be to secure a big increase in private planting.

Only if we can secure that measure of co-operation from private landowners will I, personally, feel convinced that our people want forestry and are prepared to share the task of fulfilling their desire.

To-day's position where we have an insistent clamour for more and more afforestation but no significant attempt at planting by the many hundreds of owners of suitable land is, to my mind, a symptom of our economic malaise. If we are to become a prosperous people, self-reliant in a well-balanced national economy, we must find the cure for that malaise in every form in which it is endemic amongst us.