Report of the Minister for Lands on Forestry for the Period 1st April, 1938 to 31st March, 1943

The report, which covers the activities of the Forestry Division for the five years from April 1, 1938, to March 31, 1943, is by far the largest report yet issued, running as it does to 65 pages. This increase in bulk is an indication not only of the steady growth of the Forestry Division, but also of the ever-widening scope of the activities of this important service. The format is the same as that followed in previous reports. On page 1 we find a map of Ireland, and here it is heartening to see the increase in the number of tiny circles which dot the map. The new circles have a very important significance indicating the opening of new areas for forestry work. These new nuclei have a snowball-like habit of growing as the years go by, as can be seen by reference to pages 10 and 11, showing the propaganda value of new centres on land acquisition in the locality.

The material in the report, in spite of the absence of a table of contents, is easy of reference and is presented under thirteen major headings. Under I, Legislation, no fundamental changes are reported. Important amendments and improvements in the Forestry Act, 1928, are foreshadowed and, if the recent press announcement that the "Planting Grant" is to be raised from £4 to £10 per acre and is to apply to areas of 1 acre and over, is a foretaste of the provisions embodied in the new Bill, it bodes well for the future of private forestry in the country.

Under II, Forest Policy, the report states: "It has been estimated that the national objective of both State and private woodlands should be 700,000 acres of afforested land, including 100,000 acres of protection forest and 600,000 of fully productive forest." It would be interesting to have the data on which this forecast of our future forest requirement is based. The future per capita consumption cannot be accurately foretold and will, to a large extent, depend on the cheapness and availability of supplies. With increased industrialisation and development, timber consumption is likely to increase. At the same time it would be unwise to calculate on replacing more than 70 per cent. of our imports of softwoods by home-grown timber. Denmark with a population of 3,386,274 and a forest area of approximately 900,000 acres still imports almost 50 per cent. of its timber requirements. The transference to forestry of land from the older methods of utilisation, namely, grazing or agriculture, cannot be speeded up unduly without causing hardship and friction and, perhaps, 10,000 acres per annum is the maximum rate of transference possible at the moment. There are other aspects of national forest policy which might deserve mention in a report of this kind. Many look to forestry to provide, in the future, in addition to supplies of an essential commodity, employment for a considerable body of rural labour, new industries, a means of using certain lands more effectively, etc. There is little in this report to indicate the Minister's views on these aspects of Forest Policy.

The average planting rate of 6,000 acres per annum (State and private) appears to be insufficient to produce the calculated acreage of 700,000 acres. In fact, the total area of 60,499 acres planted over the period 1933-'43 falls short of the fixed objective for the period by 40,000 acres. The period under review was, of course, exceptional and the Forestry Division is to be congratulated on maintaining a fine planting effort in face of every difficulty. It is also heartening and somewhat surprising to see how well land acquisition has been maintained in the emergency period, 48,926 acres having been acquired. That the State planting programme is largely one of reafforestation can be seen by a study of the tables given on page

7. Fully 43 per cent. of the land acquired for planting is old woodland, stocked or unstocked. The remainder is bare land, of which 14 per cent. is unproductive.

The record of weather conditions illustrates clearly the vagaries of a climate which, on the whole, is not unkind to the forester in his main task of afforestation. The regular occurrence of spring droughts and May frosts is a factor of some importance. The utility of weather records in relation to successful forestry practice needs stressing. We know very little about the general climatic conditions which prevail above the 800' contour in this country and any observations or records dealing with mean summer temperatures, rainfall, wind veolcity, frost, etc., help in assessing the value of sites for afforestation. The failure of Scots pine, Sitka, Douglas fir and Japanese larch (page 24) at high elevations gives some cause for alarm and shows how important it is to have an understanding of the effects of soil and climate on the various tree species used in large scale afforestation work. Co-operation with the meteorological service (page 54) is, therefore, a step in the right direction.

There are some interesting notes on the tree species in common use (page 24 et seq.). Broadleaved trees are more than maintaining their 10 per cent. representation in the planting programme, but are apparently troublesome to establish. It is desirable that more information on the technique of establishing broadleaved trees be made available. They will, it is to be hoped, figure large in the post-war planting programme especially on private lands and hints on their establishment might be made available in leaflet form.

Scots pine, in spite of its poor showing in many areas, appears to be still in favour, 25 per cent. of the total trees planted being of this species. It is being replaced on high ground by Contorta and Austrian pine. The pines, especially the latter two, are ideal pioneer trees and nurses and they figure largely in the plant list (45 per cent.).

Sitka spruce seems to be falling from favour (27 per cent. in 1933, 14 per cent. in 1943). It is not truly a pioneer species and any disappointment that has been experienced is due to the ignoring of that fact. Sitka does best as a successor species or on mature soils. On immature or degraded soils it requires nurses like pine, larch, alder or birch. It is good to see a revival of interest in such, of late totally neglected, trees as abies pectinata, Thuja plicata and Douglas (page 23).

Thinning operations "which must ultimately greatly exceed the annual planting programme" in area and in demands on labour, reached a new high level (2,085½ acres) in 1942-43 and the disposal of a rapidly increasing body of material will give many a problem in the years to come.

A serious increase for the period in the number of fires (265) as compared with the 1933-38 period (49) is recorded. The damage is estimated at £27,169 13s. 1d.; the figure for the 1933-38 period is given as £2,085 0s. 7d. The fires "are undoubtedly most often caused by mountain burnings getting out of hand, by careless picnic parties or careless individuals, especially people lighting dinner fires in turf bogs and smokers. . . . One appears to have been malicious." It thus appears that this great wastage of national wealth is the result of sheer carelessness, particularly by that part of the community (rural population) most likely to benefit by a successful afforestation scheme. Every effort should be made by propaganda in the Press, by means of the radio and in the schools to arrest this serious trend of affairs.

The space devoted to Utilisation, VI, has had to be increased many times over and this, in itself, is a sign of the times. One can get in these pages some idea of the part which Forestry in general and the

Forestry Department in particular have played in helping the nation throughout the emergency. Timber of all kinds soared in prices because it was in short supply. The many "emergency control orders" relating to timber and which appear under legislation show one side of the picture, namely, the efforts made to make the most of the little we had. On the other hand, the huge increase in the output of material of every kind, large timber, telegraph poles, pitwood, fencing material, firewood, charcoal, shows the response of the Forestry Division to the nation's call in time of need. It only remains to say in this connection that had the present State forestry organisation been in existence over the last 60 years or so, there would have been less need for "emergency timber orders."

To those interested in the labour content of Forestry, figures given in the table on page 46 are very interesting. One would expect greater fluctuations in the number employed throughout the year in such a seasonal occupation as Forestry. From the table it would appear that (expressed in terms of wooded area) the employment given in State Forestry work here is at the rate of 1 man full time per 60 acres. As most of the plantations are in the pre-thinning stage the employment rate may be said to be at its minimum and may be expected to rise steadily as the thinning programme expands. The expected shrinkage of employment on emergency fuel schemes after the war may, however, affect this tendency.

The work involved in the Forestry Act has been greatly increased. The total number of felling notices lodged during the period under review was 32,898 compared with 13,159 in the period 1933-38, and involved 2,695,287 trees. This, at the usual rate of stocking of mature woods here, would be equivalent to the clearing of 20,000 acres of mature timber. The number of trees to be planted as replacements is given at 14,057,909 or sufficient for the adequate replanting of about 7,000 acres. The table on page 51 which gives the species to be replanted, should indeed be very helpful to nurserymen in planting to meet the increased demand for forest trees which is bound to arise after the emergency. The planting of broadleaved trees should receive more encouragement. The prejudice of people in favour of conifers may be due to the policy of the nursery trade or to the Department's own policy of favouring conifers, and could be changed by propaganda and by giving preferential treatment to hardwoods in the planting grant scheme.

An analysis of the table of Expenditure on Forestry given under the heading XII, Forestry Vote, shows that over 75 per cent. of the Forestry Vote is spent on labour alone. This is important in that it shows the high labour content and relief value of forestry work. The amount expended on Forestry Education over the period averages about 0.5 per cent. of the total expenditure as compared with 1.7 per cent. spent by the British Forestry Commission under the same heading.

The heading of the first table on page 57 seems to be somewhat misleading. If the figures given are indeed Nursery and Planting costs it would appear that for 1942-43 the cost of planting (including plants) done was over £28 per acre, a truly alarming figure. These costs probably cover all cultural operations such as nursery work, planting, fencing, drainage, thinning, pruning, preparation and sale of produce, etc. It might be less misleading if these various costs were given under special sub-heads.

A spectacular increase in sales and receipts over those of the previous period is recorded. This is attributed to the abnormal economic conditions prevailing. While the next report will, it may be hoped, record a return to more normal conditions, we trust the promised slump in native timber prices will not materialise.