

Presidential Address

19th MARCH, 1966

It is inevitable that a review of the advances in forestry or forestry knowledge during the year, by your current president, must be largely from a Northern point of view. This, however, once in a while, is not a bad thing and needs no apology.

Both our Forestry Divisions reached and passed their planting programmes of 25,000 and 5,000 acres respectively, a total of 30,000 acres, which compares favourably with the last published figure of 49,000 acres by the Forestry Commission in Great Britain.

However, there is a feeling in the North of Ireland that it may become increasingly difficult to maintain this figure. It is true that in the last published annual report, 6,000 acres had been acquired during the year and that the plantable reserve stood comfortably at 30,000 acres. Yet on all sides we hear of offers of land drying up and of land owners holding back at least for the time being.

Part of the reason may be the increasing value of land, but it is more likely that it is due to a reluctance on the part of owners to commit themselves at the present time of uncertainty following the publication of the Government White Paper on "The Development of Agriculture" in August, 1965.

This paper is mainly concerned with Farm Structure and Co-operation and sets out Government aims of encouraging the increase in the size of farms by amalgamation.

Part of the proposed scheme is the payment of grants to owners who wish to give up uncommercial holdings for amalgamation.

- (a) Farmers up to the age of 55 would receive £500 plus £15 per acre released and in addition would get, of course, the market value of their land;
- (b) Farmers of 65 years of age or over would receive an annuity for life of £100 per year plus £1 per year for each acre released;
- (c) Farmers between the ages of 55 and 65 would have the option of either grant.

Regional boards would be set up to control the scheme and would be able to decide on proper land use in their area. The boards could authorise the payment of grants to occupiers of uncommercial agricultural holdings within their area for afforestation approved by the board on the same basis as if the holdings had been sold for amalgamation.

No legislation has yet been passed to give authority to this scheme and for some time to come we will have a period of uncertainty.

It is, of course, vital that Forestry interests be properly represented on the Regional Rural Development Boards.

That we have reached a watershed in the progress of Forestry is evident from the publication only last month of the Report of the Land Use Study Group on "Forestry, Agriculture and the Multiple Use of Rural Land" under the chairmanship of Professor W. Ellison, who some years ago, addressed the Agricultural Science Association in Dublin on this subject. He must have been impressed by what he saw, for he states, "scenic changes need not detract from beauty as has been shown at Thetford Chase in England and the slopes of the Wicklow Hills in Eire".

This committee, while placing great stress on the importance of Forestry for social reasons, as a reserve against world shortages, for landscaping, recreation, wild life and tourism, considered it most important to know exactly what it was earning or costing the nation.

It states "This does not imply that all decisions must be based on financial criteria . . . Nevertheless by first applying financial criteria the cost of the non-financial objectives can be assessed in terms of income foregone by some alternative use of the land".

The method adopted of comparing the economics of agriculture and forestry is that of the Net Discounted Revenue which was well explained here two years ago by Mr. D. R. Johnston.

It found in the few typical examples taken that on extensively farmed marginal areas, agriculture earns a higher financial return to the nation and the private owner than does forestry unless the discount rate, ignoring the effect of possible inflation, is set as low as 3%-4%. In areas of better quality farm land, the profitability of agriculture is higher than forestry even at a discount rate as low as 3%.

On unreclaimed land, forestry was shown to earn more than agriculture at interest rates below $4\frac{1}{2}\%$.

In Argyll, forestry became unprofitable on unreclaimed land at interest rates above 3%, but agriculture remained unprofitable to the nation over the whole range of interest rates

The report states :—

"Theoretically it would be possible to find cases where the N.D.R.'s to both agriculture and forestry were negative at all rates of discount. In practice we have found no such case. This is because though agriculture may be practised on extremely inhospitable sites (for example mountain tops) it is highly unlikely that plantations would be established in places where the site conditions and market situations were so unfavourable that cash receipts would fall below cash expenses. So long as receipts (undiscounted) exceed expenses (undiscounted) there will be a positive rate of discount at which forestry will provide a positive N.D.R."

The reports ends on an encouraging note, and I quote:—

"One of the important effects of continuing afforestation would be that the important growth industries, which are looking to increasing future home supplies of wood to support necessary expansion, would gain confidence. To maintain confidence and to reinforce the success which these industries have already shown, it is desirable to pursue an expanding forestry programme."

These two reports indicate that there is a real danger that forestry will be relegated more and more from what used to be marginal land from the agricultural point of view to what is economically marginal and sub-marginal from the forestry point of view.

When that point is reached, the technical forester must call a halt as there is no other person qualified to decide on such issues. If it is decided by others that non-financial considerations must be paramount then the decision to proceed should be taken in full knowledge of the costs of such action.

It is now over 20 years since the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (F.A.O.) was founded in Quebec on 16th October, 1945, when 42 nations met under the chairmanship of Mr. Lester B. Pearson now Prime Minister of Canada.

In November last, no less than 114 member nations met at the F.A.O. headquarters in Rome with Mr. Sauv, the Minister of Forestry from Canada in the chair.

They set down certain considerations which must determine the scale and pattern of F.A.O.'s future activities.

1. The rapid acceleration of the demand for forest products;
2. Need for substantial expansion of forest-based industries in developing countries;
3. The importance of forestry and forest industries in overall economic growth in developing countries;
4. The need to increase forest productivity to meet world shortages;
5. The non-crop functions (erosion control, water yields, wild life management, amenities, recreation, tourism) of the forest are assuming increasing importance and already exceed in importance the timber production function in many countries;
6. The number of institutions for higher forestry education responding to these changing needs is as yet insufficient.

Two important steps were taken in the North during the year in line with the fifth of these points.

Firstly, on 31st March, 1965, the Amenity Lands Bill became law.

This Act will enable native reserves and national parks to be created and will protect areas of outstanding beauty. It will also finance the provision in forests of facilities for public recreation such as paths, car parks, picnic sites, caravan and camping grounds, etc.

The second step was the appointment for a provisional period of a wild life forester who has been engaged in planning to increase the game and wild life potential of our forests.

It is also interesting to note in the last annual report of the Forestry Commission the appointment of a landscape consultant and a Divisional Officer as Wild Life Officer.

I cannot omit from a review of forestry during the year the establishment on a formal basis of co-operation in research between both our Forestry Divisions. Dr. Jack and Mr. Parkin travelled to Dublin on 31st August, 1965, and were very hospitably entertained.

Mr. Mooney travelled North on 13th September, and a third meeting is to take place shortly.

Long may this spirit of co-operation and respect continue and spread.

We wish the Congress members every success in their deliberations and the implementation of the decisions taken.

I thank you all for your support during the year and hope others will not mind if I mention especially Miss Furlong for her valiant work as Tour Convenor; Fergal Molloy, who helped us so much at Cavan; Mr. Fitzpatrick, who has brought the Book almost to the point of publication; Mr. Macnamara, who has led the team of certificate examiners; Mr. O'Driscoll, our secretary, who never fails us and Mr. O. V. Mooney our Vice President, who has always been ready with advice and support and to step into the chair at short notice.

We are now much looking forward to welcoming as many of you as possible to the North in June 1966, and hope that the weather will be as kind as it was in Cavan.