

## Book Reviews

### *IRISH FORESTRY POLICY*

National Economic and Social Council Report No. 46.

Government Publications £2.25.

After reading the NESC Report one must come to the conclusion that Irish Forestry has reached a watershed and, indeed, that the commissioning of this Report was timely. However, if there is a crisis in the industry the solutions are coming at forest pace; this Report was commissioned by the Minister for Economic Planning and Development in 1977 and, presumably, is now, in 1980 being considered by the Government.

The terms of reference for the Report were to study and advise on the potential and implications of forestry for social and economic development in Ireland. To an outsider it seems that Professor Convery over-reacts; certain sections of the Report read like an apologia for economic investment in Irish forestry. Such reaction may have been necessary in the early days of a national forestry programme, when capital investment was high and the prospect of financial return was distant. Nowadays, forestry in Ireland has proved that it is viable due, in no small way to a well organised approach to afforestation. What is now needed is a sensible approach to the management and utilisation of the forest product, as the endeavours of the early years bear fruit and come on-stream.

The Report sees an ongoing market for forest products, mainly in the United Kingdom and data is given to show that Irish wood products have a current price advantage over Swedish. One wonders if the author is too inclined to optimism, as the same chapter deals with the serious financial problems encountered by the two Irish particle-board factories, when the European market went through a recessionary phase. Here, as elsewhere in the Report, there is little mention of the future of the domestic market, which in 1977, imported wood and wood products to the value of £148 millions. How far can we go to replace these expensive imports?

To a non-forest person reading the Report, the most immediate and most urgent problem in forestry would appear to be an incapacity in this country to process the timber coming from our forests in the next twenty-five years, or indeed, in the next five years. Reading between the lines, one can sense a reluctance on the part of the State bodies to become involved in what must be high-risk enterprises. As an agriculturalist reading this Report a sound case seems to have been made for (a) an integration of the growing and processing of timber and (b) for this integration to be carried out on a scale which will allow the native industry to be competitive on a unit cost basis. Clearly, the stumbling block to this desirable solution would be the very considerable capital outlay which would be required. It is surprising that neither the consultant nor the NESC have commented on the possibility of seeking EEC funding for such a project; the location of our forest in the Disadvantaged Areas must add weight to such a proposal.

As it fell within the brief given to him, Professor Convery looks at the employment generated by forestry. Again, one is conscious of the need to justify forestry policy, this time in terms of the employment it generates. Although in-forest employment will fall, the deficiency is more than covered by the substantial increase in downstream employment and by the enormous social benefits accruing in the infrastructure in the areas where afforestation is in progress. Likewise, it is easy to make a case for the advantages of amenity forestry and the area seems to be adequately

covered by both legislation and motivation.

The sections dealing with the private forest estate are comprehensive and logical. A very adequate case is made for support for all aspects of the private forest industry, and suggestions are made as to how private forestry can be improved by grant aid, information service and taxation rationalisation. The interesting proposals for afforestation of the drumlin soils are reviewed. How much support such proposals will receive from Government sources is questionable if one accepts the much-reiterated philosophy that the Government does not desire to acquire for afforestation land fit for agricultural purposes. Likewise, the approach to afforestation on the cutaway bogs is vague and this is obviously another area where clearcut policies need to be spelled out.

The most controversial area in the Report, from the point of view of the professional forester, is likely to be that concerned with the various institutional changes suggested by the consultant. One can see the need for regulatory boards, as the industry matures and develops. One can appreciate his concern to eliminate the two-tier system in the Forest and Wildlife Service and, thus, to streamline the general approach to forest policy. However, this arrangement holds throughout the Civil Service and it is difficult to see it being changed in one relatively small section. A more radical approach might be taken at this critical stage of the forest industry in Ireland by setting up a body equivalent to the Irish Sugar Company (CSET), which would be responsible for all aspects of forest production, processing and marketing. The Irish Sugar Company can be claimed to have been successful; an equivalent company for forestry would have the additional advantage that it would exercise relatively greater control over the supply of its raw material. Is there a 'general' in the forest service or industry who could undertake this task or must we look to some other sector for someone with a marshall's baton (hardwood!) in his briefcase.

In general this is a useful and interesting report, crystallising the problems of the forest industry in Ireland and suggesting reasonable solutions for them. If one would fault it in any fashion it is that Professor Convery is, at times, too moderate in the proposals he puts forward; more incisive suggestions might serve to highlight the urgency of the problems. However, this is a small fault. A more serious consideration is that, in the current period of Government change and economic depression, the importance of the issues raised in the Report may be overlooked or their resolution postponed. There is an onus on the people, who have developed Irish forestry and who are concerned with its future, to make sure that the content of the Report remains a live issue.

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