

EDITORIAL

Bring on the Sociologists

Almost half of our land is classified as marginal and it is generally agreed that it would make good sense to convert much of this to forest. The Western Package incorporated an afforestation programme with this objective, yet after 3 years in operation it has scarcely created an arboreal ripple on our landscape. What has gone wrong?

Many people blame the Forest and Wildlife Service for their failure to promote the scheme with more vigour. The Land Commission could be accused of positive obstruction. Many would fault the University for its failure to provide integrated courses in land-use to undergraduates. Some would point to the blindness of politicians, and local community leaders and few would excuse landowners on the grounds of ignorance or inertia.

The real reason for the lack of progress with the scheme may be a mixture of all of the above, but one fact is now obvious. Most landowners are indifferent to afforestation and many are clearly antagonistic to forestry, irrespective of the incentives offered. This reaction in itself should not be regarded as unique. Many farmers are indifferent to the incentives offered in their own sphere of activity. Only 25% of farmers were classified as development farmers under the very generous incentive package known as the Farm Modernisation Scheme. Similar figures are available for all of the incentive schemes offered to landowners in Ireland over the past ten years. It is also known that the vast bulk of landowners who do not take up these incentive schemes occupy small-holdings of marginal land. Thus, the Western Package in its present form may have been illconceived and doomed to failure since its birth.

Is it too late to salvage something? Perhaps not. If we knew and understood the reasons which underlie this resistance to incentive schemes perhaps private forestry in Ireland might still progress under the provisions of the Western Package. Perhaps now is the time to bring on the Sociologists.