

*EDITORIAL*

## Timber Farms

When I was a boy an uncle of mine had a car which required a hand start to turn the motor over. Private forestry in Ireland is at the stage of the hand-start engine.

A fine stand of spruce on a high field does not make a farmer. Put a bullock in the same field and the owner can talk of hoose and scarpie in sheep and sit on a high stool with the best of them. The bullock may not give him an income but it gives him a sense of belonging. In any country pub let a man talk earnestly of yield class and forwarders and pine beauty moth — and watch the eyes peer at him from that transition zone that lies just above the rims of pint glasses and below the projecting peaks of cloth caps. When he has quite finished and regained his self-control the conversation rolls itself back up to the real world of mastitis and intervention and precision sowing. Sitting there, hunched up among his own, the thoughts of putting the 'Long Field' down to spruce fades in the man. Trees are not a crop to a farmer. This attitude must change.

Many farmers see themselves as having a right to a traditional way of life on farms that are now clearly uneconomic. That is fine provided the taxpayer is not expected to carry the cost. This country cannot any longer afford parasitic farming. This is not to criticise farmers who find themselves in this predicament. It is simply stating a hard fact.

The EEC is no longer enthusiastic to subsidise production of crops that are already in over-supply. It can only be a matter of time before EEC grants are adjusted to force production of commodities that the Community needs — clearly one of these is timber.

The Minister for Tourism, Fisheries and Forestry, Mr. Liam Kavanagh, T.D., is arranging that farmers in receipt of headage payments in respect of livestock on their holdings will receive their payments if they afforest all or part of their land; headage payments to run for a period of 15 years from first planting. The scheme will be joint funded by the Irish Government and the EEC under Community Regulation 797/85.

With majority voting power shifting towards the towns and cities the political and social arguments for state support of uneconomic wet-land farms must weaken. If logic is to have its day these farms must become the new forests of Ireland.

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Under this new reality, if farmers intend to retain their holdings, three factors need to be confronted and resolved.

Agricultural grants and schemes that underpin production of crops now in surplus on lands more suitable to tree production do this nation a disservice. Such grants must be replaced with financial inducements to switch to growing timber crops. If a man wishes to continue to grow cattle where only trees will show a profit — that is his right — but it is not his right to demand of the state to subsidise his folly.

Scale is a reality in the profitability of a forest venture. The odd awkward corner put down to trees might be useful for fence post production as well as providing cover for pheasants and foxes but such cannot be argued as worthwhile examples to farmers to switch to timber as a farm crop. Large tracts of forests, not scattered fields of trees, is what is needed.

There is too a psychological barrier to be overcome. Farmers must clearly see trees as an alternative crop. At the moment most do not. There is work to be done to sell the idea of trees as just another type of farm crop. 'Timber Farmer' and 'Timber Farm' are not such bad titles to call a man and his place of work!