

# Submission by the Society of Irish Foresters to the strategy for the development of the forestry sector to the year 2015

## 1. Background to the Society

The Society of Irish Foresters was founded in 1942 with the objective: "*to advance and spread in Ireland the knowledge of forestry in all its aspects*". Three years ago the Society added another objective: "*to promote professional standards in forestry and to promote the regulation of the forestry profession in Ireland*". Since its foundation the Society has been involved in the evolution of silvicultural policy and practice in Ireland.

The activities of the Society include the publication of *Irish Forestry*, the organisation of field days for members, the holding of an annual symposium on forestry related issues, the organisation of public meetings, the holding of national events such as Wood Ireland and Forestry '88, the holding of an annual Study Tour for members of the Society and the general promotion of forestry and the forestry profession in Ireland. There are over 650 members in the Society, spread throughout Ireland (including Northern Ireland) and the great majority are practising foresters.

## 2. Strategic plan for forestry

The Society welcomes the initiative of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry in undertaking a study to lead to a strategic plan for the

forestry sector to the year 2015. By its nature forestry is long-term and needs an overall direction to achieve its objectives as stated in the terms of reference.

## 3. Background to the forestry sector

The statistics on expansion of the supply of raw material and on the increase in planting in recent years are well known. Flowing from these facts there are several strategic issues such as the development of outlets for wood and non-wood products, environmental issues and the development of a resource base that will be in the best strategic interest of the industry. Overall there is the need to sustain the forest resource for future generations and to maximise its employment potential within the overall constraint of sustainability.

## 4. Issues

4.1. An active, well regulated forestry profession is fundamental to the development of the forestry sector over the coming two and a half decades. Foresters will provide the essential skills in:

- plant production
- silviculture
- forest management
- inventory and yield regulation

- forest harvesting
- forest environment
- recreation facilities

In order to sustain the forest resource over the period of the plan and to achieve the objectives listed it will be vital that these and other skills are available and are used wisely.

4.2 The forestry profession has long been committed to the concept of the sustainable management of the forest resource and forest lands. The principle was formally enunciated at the Ministerial Conference in Helsinki in June of 1993: *sustainable management means the stewardship and use of forest lands in a way, and at a rate that maintains their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality and their potential to fulfil now and into the future, relevant ecological, economic and social functions, at local, national and global levels, and that does not cause damage to other ecosystems.*

This principle should inform all decisions relating to the use of the forest resource in Ireland.

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4.3 The main value of Irish forests lies in their commercial potential. Within the forest resources of the World's Temperate Zones, Ireland is unique in regarding all her public and private forests as being of “high” value for

wood production. “Benefits and Functions of the Forest”, Volume 11, UN/ECE publication 1990). This is inconsistent with the aspirations contained in the Ministerial Conference. While wood production is important, and will remain important in the Irish context, our forests have non-wood benefits which must be given expression in their planning, constitution, management and harvesting.

4.4 The Society is at present involved in negotiations with the Institute of Chartered Foresters in Great Britain with the objective of forming closer linkages in the area of common recognition of qualifications and the self regulation of the profession. While

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these discussions are at an early stage it is envisaged that a common examination structure will emerge. The profession in Ireland, will almost certainly develop a European dimension which will facilitate the exchange of professionalism throughout Europe in line with EU policy.

The Society would urge the adaption of national recognition for the role of the professional forester, through either regulation or legislation, in order to protect the public and the resource from non-qualified individuals. This is particularly the case in

ensuring that the considerable state expenditure on private forestry is developed to its full potential.

4.5 Forestry graduates are well trained in silviculture and forest management. There is an increasing need however, for foresters to be skilled in business management, marketing and financial matters. It recommended that business skills be incorporated into the syllabus of the forestry undergraduate programme at University College Dublin and the new Wood Science degree course at the University of Limerick.

4.6 The sustainability of the forest resource is dependent on competent and experienced foresters to manage and regulate it. Given the long-term nature of forest growth there is a essential need for a continual recruitment in order to pass on experience and to introduce new skills. The state sector

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has recruited almost no new foresters in the past decade. Both Coillte and the Forest Service have only a handful of staff under forty years of age. This is not a sustainable position, apart from the need for all organisations to have a proportion of young, enthusiastic employees. It is recommended that recruitment by both organisations of foresters should recommence immediately.

4.7 The species range in current afforestation programmes is too narrow. This restricts the industry base that can develop and increases the potentially damaging effect of introduced pests and diseases. The range

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needs to be extended by including increased planting of Douglas fir, Norway spruce and western red cedar. As far as broadleaves are concerned the emphasis should be on the faster growing species particularly ash and sycamore, and oak and beech among the relatively slow growing species. In order to encourage such a strategic diversification of species there should be a grading of grants to encourage the planting of the more valuable conifers such as Douglas fir and western red cedar on suitable sites. However a radical change away from the core species, Sitka spruce could not be justified, particularly as the processing sector has grown around its use.

4.8 The quality of the Irish Sitka spruce timber restricts its use in some applications. In getting an increased share for this timber in Europe the industry will be faced with stiff competition from eastern Europe, Scandinavia and elsewhere. The quality of the existing resource can be improved by measures such as pruning and early thinning. These operations will involve a financial input from the grower who may be reluctant to com-

mit resources to an operation that does not result in an immediate return. Consideration should be given therefore, to providing incentives or switching a portion of existing incentives to encourage pruning and thinning.

For future plantations, quality can be maintained by strict adherence to planting densities of no less than 2,500 surviving plants per hectare. Consideration should also be given to wood quality issues in tree breeding programmes to select for characteristics such as high density and small branch sizes, which may not always be compatible with increased yield.

4.9 The Irish forest resource overwhelmingly comprises two exotic species, Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine. There is insufficient knowledge of the ecology of these species in Ireland. In order to safeguard the

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resource there is need to develop a full understanding of the ecological processes in plantations of both species. There is also a need to develop systems of regenerating these species that are sustainable. There is a need therefore to fund, at national level, basic research on the ecology of Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine in Ireland.

4.10 The ESRI study by Kearney *et al* (1992) has shown the local benefits

that arise from forestry activity. As forestry is a land use it follows that much of the employment in planting, thinning and clearfelling will be generated locally. In the processing area much of the employment resulting from forestry also arises locally. However, wood processing industries are generally large in size and need large inputs to derive the benefits from the associated economies of scale. Given the generally scattered nature of the Irish forest resource it is inevitable that such large scale production facilities will be remote from some of the sources of supply. It is likely that a new large scale wood and residue using industry will not be set up in Ireland until the new millennium. There will be considerable pressure to locate such a plant in the north-west of the country. That area has however, very considerable infrastructural problems and these would need to be addressed by capital investment in secondary and main roads during the coming decade and a half. However before embarking on any investment it is recommended that a cost benefit analysis of road improvement be undertaken and it should be compared with such alternatives as bulk forwarding to collection points.

Given the increasingly integrated nature of the processing industry it is likely that such a plant would be located close to an existing major sawmill.

There is also a need to decide if there should be a target proportion of the land area covered by forest. This would relate to the scale of proposed industries, the need to have a balance between forestry and agricultural use of land, and the impact on the visual and physical environment. It is currently estimated that there are over

400,000ha of poor agricultural land, suitable for forestry and that this area will be supplemented by better quality land which will be planted as a result of the grants that will be available for the next three to four years at least. By the end of the decade it is likely that the forest area will be about 10% of the land area: should this be increased to 15%, 20%?

4.11 The present trend in planting by the private sector and farmers in particular is welcomed by the Society. Many of the plantations established are however, located in areas that will be difficult to access with heavy timber lorries and they are generally small (less than 10ha). If this trend continues there is a danger that the Irish forest estate will become increasingly fragmented. Harvesting and transporting wood from such plantations will increase the cost of delivered roundwood. It is recommended that in order to overcome this potentially serious structural problem that incentives be put in place for forestry co-operatives, where increased grants would be available for areas above a certain size where a group of farmers had agreed a joint planting programme. Also consideration should be given at the planting stage regarding county road access and where this would be extremely costly to upgrade then consideration would be given to reducing the grant level. Such an approach by the state is justified as it reflects the level of return that can be expected from the investment and its ultimate social value.

4.12 Wood processing industries are becoming increasingly automated. Given the need to sell timber and other primary wood products in an open market this trend will have to continue

if the primary processing sector is to survive. Given the great national need to provide sustainable employment the strategy should be to put in place skill intensive secondary wood processing industries (in addition to a strong primary sector). These could include products such as SCT (structural composite timbers) and furniture. These industries would also use a high proportion of Irish wood. Competitiveness in this area is driven by innovation (including R&D, design and technology acquisition). There is, however, a high risk associated with such ventures. It is recommended that a well planned innovation programme should be put in place for the secondary processing sector that would be market led and funded by Government.

4.13 At present the Irish sawmilling industry is dependent on a small product range, and on the UK pallet market in particular. This is a particularly price sensitive commodity. New markets for the existing commodity products should be thoroughly investigated and the possibility of manufacturing other primary products that are in demand internationally should be costed and researched.

4.14 Forest regulation will become increasingly important for the period of the plan. The regulation of the annual cut is an important issue in terms of ensuring a steady supply of raw material for industry and in preventing the overexploitation of a national resource for short-term gain. It will be an important national issue especially given the large numbers of private growers now involved. It is essential therefore that the methodology to oversee and regulate the annual

harvest is put in place by the Forest Authority.

4.15 Government grants for planting are likely to continue to 1997. If grants are suddenly stopped or phased out at that time it could have a very damaging effect on activity in the growing sector in particular and will eventually work its way down the supply chain to the processing sector. It is recommended that a policy be put in place to examine the implications of such a change and to prepare strategic plans in the event of the grants being curtailed or stopped.

4.16 The harvesting of Ireland's forests will be one of the major challenges of the coming decade and in the period beyond. We must ensure that we are competitive in this regard and must strive to develop techniques and systems that ensure that this is so. Two areas in particular need attention. The first is the area low ground pressure extraction systems. The second is systems to access forests that are on poor county road networks or have poor internal access. It is recommended that Government R&D funding should be targeted in this area over the next five years in particular. Also there is a need to ensure that areas which are not accessible to forwarder extraction are thinned. The technology of cable logging needs to be re-examined and cost competitive systems brought forward. Also the environmental impact of harvesting on the physical and visual environment needs to be fully investigated.

4.17 The Irish taxpayer has made an investment of over £1 billion in Irish forestry since the foundation of the state. The advent of Coillte put most of this investment under commercial management. The Society was, and is, fully in favour of this development. However, there will be demands to privatise the whole or parts of the forest estate and its associated human and capital resources. The Society's view is that any such decision must first take into account the sustainability of the forest for present and future generations. In this regard the exclusion of areas that are relatively unprofitable from any new entities would represent a serious undermining of the sustainability of such areas and would not in general be welcomed by the Society.

4.18 Since the last rapid expansion of the forest estate in the late 1950s research has played a key role in the development of Irish forestry. In addition, work by the Forest Products Department of Forbairt has helped to achieve the recognition and widespread use of Irish timber. In recent years this effort has been scaled back, despite the rapid expansion of planting and processing to their current levels. Increased investment in research in all sectors of the industry, especially in the harvesting and processing sectors, is a key strategic need in order to develop an industry that is sustainable.

Eugene Hendrick  
President  
Society of Irish Foresters