

EDITORIAL

Species Diversification

Species selection has been governed by silvicultural factors for most of this century in Ireland. Simply put, foresters believed that if the right trees were planted in the right places and properly managed, economic and other benefits would automatically follow. It's against this background that Sitka spruce, our main species has proved an outstanding success. For much of post 1950s planting the limited choice of species reflected the limited choice of land available for afforestation.

Now, for the first time this century, diversification is possible. This is due to the availability of better quality land and grant incentives which favour diversity. However, the silvicultural and financial reasons for diversification have not been clearly defined. There are a number of obvious reasons why we should diversify. The threat of insect pest or disease attack to Sitka is one such reason, but to date much of the debate has been generated by media and environmentalist hostility towards Sitka domination. Today, if one was to ask for a checklist of factors which influence species selection it is likely that silvicultural factors would be joined – and in some instances superseded – by environmental and aesthetic considerations.

All these factors quite rightly play a role in forest planning and species selection but policy makers, planners and foresters must prioritise. Forestry, like any other industry, needs clear objectives. The Society of Irish Foresters advocates a controlled policy of species diversification but takes it a step further: "Planting incentives should be regionally and site directed for an initially narrow range of selected species in order to ensure an adequate scale of planting in relation to markets." Species diversification should be based on site suitability and a production strategy which is focused; clearly aimed at likely developments in the market place such as engineered wood products and the potential establishment of an indigenous paper industry. These developments justify growing high yielding versatile crops such as Sitka spruce with the objective of producing low cost quality fibre.

Achieving the right balance in a planned diversification programme will require further research and education particularly in the rapidly expanding private sector. Foresters need to play a central role in this programme: they need to maximise the wide range of expertise within their own profession and to embrace a number of related disciplines especially in technological, economic and environmental areas.

The forestry profession cannot afford to be reticent about its place in shaping the forests of the future. It is the only profession which has the expertise to develop an imaginative diversification programme which is sustainable and in tune with the environmental, economic and social needs of the community.

Submissions to *Irish Forestry* are welcome and will be considered for publication. News items, general articles and letters are particularly welcome. These should be addressed to:

**The Editor
The Society of
Irish Foresters
2 Lower Kilmacud
Road, Stillorgan,
Co. Dublin.
The attention of
contributors is drawn to
"Notes to Assist
Contributors".**

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