

Forestry – The Social Dimension

Opening Address by Mr Liam Hyland TD, Minister for Forestry & Rural Development

The theme of this symposium is an interesting and timely one, as we face into a new forestry programme. Under this programme, we are set to reach 10% forest cover by the turn of the century, and to make a major investment in the forestry sector. We must ensure that this investment is of maximum benefit and that our forests will be a valuable basis for industry, an element in rural development and agricultural restructuring, and as an asset to our environment.

In the last few years we have started moving away from the idea of single-use forests based solely on commercial conifer species. While conifers are likely to remain the basis for commercial wood production in the foreseeable future - and indeed their commercial value is beyond question - we cannot ignore the other functions of the forest.

On a very basic level, the forest is such a visible element in the countryside that we cannot avoid the public's response to it, in terms of its appearance, its effect, real or imagined, on their homes and farms, its effect on wildlife, watercourses, local cultural or historical areas, its availability for amenity and recreation, and not least its success in bringing sustainable employment in the area.

We must work with and accommodate these concerns if we are to have good public support for our forests, and if our forests are to be accepted as

a benefit and enhancement to the lives of people throughout the country, particularly in the light of increased planting and indeed the new emphasis on farm forests.

Forestry and the environment

The immediate impact of forestry can be managed in a positive way to ensure compatibility with the environment. The increased planting of broadleaves, which is a specific element of the programme, will have a positive effect as well as increasing the amount of hardwood timber produced. A number of environmental guidelines are already in place, relating to the landscape and areas of scientific archaeological and fisheries interest. In addition, the environmental impact assessment procedure applies to planting of over 200 hectares. You may also be aware that I recently announced a review of the controls relating to the scale of forestry development and the effectiveness of planning controls, to be carried out in conjunction with the Department of the Environment. It is my intention that those involved in afforestation would be consulted as part of this process.

Public access to forests

Because of the long association of the State with forestry development, the public is accustomed to the idea of access to forests for recreation. The growing urbanisation of our population

increases the importance of, and indeed the demand for, this aspect of forestry development. As it can often be combined with commercial forestry, local tourism, education, amenity and leisure activities, I hope to be able to continue the recreational forestry scheme under the structural funds programme.

Forestry and farmers

The involvement of farmers in forestry is a major element in the new programme, which also ties in with CAP reform through developing forestry as an alternative land use and a source of farm income. The incentives under the afforestation and forest premium schemes, and particularly their structure in favour of diversification and broadleaves, should have a very positive effect, on farmers incomes, on overall planting levels, on the environment and on the quality of timber which can be produced.

The basic matter of the use of agricultural land for forestry is a particular issue very much to the fore in recent weeks. I think this may reflect the fact that forestry is not completely accepted as a serious alternative land use. The sale of land for forestry is sometimes an emotive issue, which can overlook the landowners right to use or sell land to his or her best advantage. Forestry is a viable option for farmers, not alone on marginal land, but also on good quality land which can produce high quality timber, particularly from broadleaved species.

Industry and employment

As I mentioned earlier, the potential of forestry to create jobs and earnings is the most important social dimension of all. Planting trees is not

an end in itself, but the basis for an industry, which can range from pulpwood, to high quality furniture, and from small local wood-based crafts to high technology sawmills. Naturally enough, areas such as Wicklow with a long forestry tradition and established industries are particularly well disposed towards forestry, while other areas with as yet no obvious immediate benefits might be less enthusiastic. Some recent comments which have been carried by the media would suggest that the Government is favouring forestry at the expense of, and to the detriment of other forms of agriculture. That is simply not true. Afforestation is a land use and income option for those who own agricultural land, and my Department battled hard, as the farming organisations urged, to ensure that the forestry option was available on the best possible terms to Irish farmers. Indeed the fact that the highest levels of support will be available to those who derive their livelihood from farming is evidence of the thrust of our efforts in this regard. Any comments critical of supports for forestry *vis-à-vis* other forms of agriculture must have regard to the specific characteristics of that support. Government support for afforestation is given in the form of grants and premiums. Grants are cost based and as such cannot offer comparative financial advantage in relation to other farm enterprises. Premiums are specifically designed to make good the farm income lost by farmers opting for forestry, and as such are very deliberately set at levels which approximate to what a farmer could expect to earn from alternative farm enterprises on the same land. It is clear therefore that these supports are designed to make farm forestry a viable option rather

than a dominant competitor to other forms of agricultural land use. We must be very clear, however, that in circumstances of CAP reform and of a timber supply deficit in the EU, a country with only 7% of its land under forest and large areas of marginal land available, must see and seize the opportunity which forestry offers to create jobs and generate wealth.

We cannot hope to get the jobs and wealth which forestry and forest-based industry can generate without planting trees. Nor can we gain access to the full range of potential benefits, in areas such as maximum added-value products, if we do not ensure diversity in our planting policies, to the extent of ensuring a good proportion of broadleaf planting, which necessarily requires better quality land. In time, when the trees being planted now can be harvested and we can realise the potential of increased production of indigenous timber, I would expect that many of the misgivings being expressed today about using agricultural land for forestry will be laid to rest, just as they have been in areas such as Wicklow which already reap the employment and local economic benefits of forestry.

Forestry strategy

The many facets of modern forestry call for a multi-faceted forestry policy. While this has been developing in recent years under the EU-supported forestry programmes, it is important to develop a long-term framework for the

integrated development of the entire sector, from forest nurseries, through growing and processing to timber end-uses and woodcrafts.

With this in mind, I recently announced the preparation of a strategy for the forestry sector to the year 2015. This will emphasise the creation of sustainable employment, the achievement of a balance of regional benefit throughout Ireland, and the generation of added-value. Special attention will also be paid to areas of export potential, the development in Ireland of new competences and market-oriented skills, the generation of a 'multiple benefit' return from investment in forestry, the maximisation of 'non-timber' benefits during the forest rotation, and environmental compatibility and enhancement. I might add that this strategic analysis will of course encompass issues such as land use, and the impact of forestry development in rural areas.

As part of the process of preparation, interested parties including many here today, and the public generally were invited to make submissions, and this will provide an important input into the strategy. So far I have received over 100 submissions including one from the Society of Irish Foresters, all of which will be taken into account.

The topics on today's programme take up some of the aspects which will undoubtedly form part of the strategy, and it should be interesting to hear the speakers and the panel discussion later in the day.