

EDITORIAL

For over a decade now afforestation by the private sector, mainly by farmers, has exceeded state planting. Today, close on 10,000 farmers are forest owners. These new forests are scattered over the length and breadth of the country, some in locations that will be difficult and expensive to harvest. Despite the best efforts of agencies such as the Forest Service and Teagasc, and growers groups such as the IFA and the Irish Timber Growers Association, many new forest owners are only vaguely aware of the most basic management requirements. Once a plantation has been established and is growing reasonably well and, of course, there is an annual premium, many growers will be content to leave things as they are. The wake up call will come when the annual premium stops or is about to stop. Growers will be forced to seek ways to generate alternative income. At present Coillte and the small number of growers with older plantations rely mainly on conifer thinnings to provide income before the crop matures. However in most cases they are forced to delay thinning until the pole size is sufficient to at least cover harvesting costs and overheads. The beneficial effects of early thinning, combined with pruning, on wood quality and financial return, in the long run, are well known from extensive research but these are rarely justified if one makes a loss on first thinning.

Looking at the market situation there is general agreement that the increase in wood supply that is forecast to come on stream over the next decade, from both the public and private sectors, will, in the main, have to be processed and sold in export markets, mainly the UK, and mainly as commodity products. Price sells as far as commodity products are concerned. There is an obvious need therefore for cost competitiveness and innovation to control the delivered-in price of wood for processing, as well as a need for streamlining and scaling-up on the processing side. Harvesting and transport are significant factors affecting wood price; innovation in systems and sales methods will lead to significant savings, given Ireland's disperse private forest resource. The harvest scheduling approach outlined in this issue of the journal is one such area - it needs to be seriously considered by processors and growers' organisations.

However not all wood will be processed and sold as commodity products. We loose sight of wood quality at our peril. Flexibility to respond to new standards, markets and market demands will be greatly facilitated by maintaining and improving resource quality. With increasing supply it is likely that processors will be more discerning and demanding. But to grow quality wood in the private sector we need a radical review of where we are going. Broadleaf crops are now rapidly entering the stage where they require tending (removal of poor quality stems). How many growers are aware of this need? Very few, one suspects. For conifers the issues are also quite immediate. Many crops are now reaching a stage where they could and should be thinned. Again the indications are that many private forest owners are at best, very faintly aware of the need for, and benefit of thinning. We should immediately look to ways of encouraging early thinning, and pruning by growers. There are grants for pruning and these should be vigorously promoted by state agencies, as should the concept of thinning. Supply contracts between growers-groups and processors should now be considered to facilitate thinning and wood flow from private forests. These will have to be supported by harvest scheduling and related informatics to maintain competitiveness. There is no doubt that the use of these approaches will result in the necessary economies of scale that will allow growers to thin early, at a profit and develop resource quality.

Submissions to *Irish Forestry* are welcomed and will be considered for publication. The attention of contributors is drawn to "Guidelines for Submissions".

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