

EDITORIAL

Seeing the wood and the trees

Ireland's afforestation programme and national investment in forestry have been mainly predicated on the basis that the primary objective is the production of roundwood for industrial-scale processing. By and large this objective has been achieved in the period up to the present day.

Naturally the mix of wood products produced by sawmills and board mills reflects the raw material base – largely lodgepole pine and Sitka spruce. The product mix has, with some notable exceptions, remained fairly constant over the past twenty years and more. The building boom of the past decade has created robust demand for traditional carcassing timbers, such as floor joists. But times are changing and the use of systems approaches to domestic construction is beginning to take hold, and not just in the timber frame area. Engineered wood products such as I beams are impacting on the traditional building market in the UK. It is only a matter of time before this and similar systems begin to make inroads in Ireland.

Opportunities to diversify the product mix and to respond more fully to market trends do exist. For example the work reported in this issue relating to wood treatment shows that Irish wood can be modified to improve not only decay resistance but also overall dimensional performance. This offers the possibility of making inroads in markets such as cladding, which have traditionally been the preserve of the more durable species. In other areas such as structural applications Irish wood can be graded to higher strength classes to penetrate markets such as truss rafters.

As well as diversifying the product range at the higher end there is huge potential for wood energy. Many wood-using sectors face difficulties in disposing of waste wood or co-products such as sawdust. Forest operations such as clearfelling generate considerable quantities of residues that are mostly pushed into windrows and left to decay on the site. These materials can provide a ready source of biomass to fuel heat-only or combined heat and power installations. Ireland is almost alone in the developed countries in not exploiting these resources. Instead of being perceived as problem they should be regarded as a positive asset that can make a significant contribution to green energy and security of supply.

Present government supports and incentives for wood energy are clearly not sufficient to encourage new projects. A concerted programme is necessary at all levels to put such a package in place. The time is ripe for such a programme in view of the increasing importance of energy and climate change issues.

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

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