

EDITORIAL

Lodgepole pine – time to think again?

Almost twenty years ago a task force was set up by Eolas (now Enterprise Ireland) to examine the end-use potential of lodgepole pine. This was against the background of considerable planting of the species from the 1950s right through to the early 80s, when it rivalled Sitka spruce as the main exotic conifer used in Irish forestry. After much research and testing, the task force reported and concluded that lodgepole pine could be successfully used in the manufacture of joinery, and more than matched imported red deal (Scots pine) in several important properties, including gluing and screw holding. While some sawmills showed interest in developing added-value products this failed to develop any significant scale.

Why then has the species failed to live up to its potential? First and foremost it is a question of poor stem form, resulting from a combination of provenance choice, site and incorrect soil preparation. These factors also predispose crops to lean and windthrow, and add to harvesting and conversion costs. But of all the factors that have disfavoured the continued planting of lodgepole pine, incorrect provenance choice is the one that stands out. The abysmal performance of Lulu Island and inland provenances is well known. They were followed by their geographic cousins from the south coast of Washington and northern Oregon. These gave good growth rates, considering the inhospitable sites crops were established on, but they had poor stem form, with a great deal of basal sweep.

Times have moved on since the heydays of lodgepole pine. Today farmer planting predominates, with the result that better sites, more suited to Sitka spruce and broadleaves, are being planted. Certainly lodgepole pine will not do well on wet gley sites, the home of Sitka spruce. Marginal lands of low fertility continue to be planted however, and Coillte has a considerable reforestation programme on blanket peat and old red sandstone sites. On many of these sites fertiliser application is needed for crop establishment and growth, particularly when demanding species are used.

Yes, it is time to think again about lodgepole pine. An increase in planting is justified using improved hybrids that combine vigour and stem form, and in pure plantations, not just in mixture with Sitka spruce. Seed of the hybrids is now available in sufficient quantities to support a planting programme. Sites where lodgepole pine is the best choice are still coming-on-stream. Its timber is suitable for a range of value-added end-uses, such as panelling and flooring - the conclusions of the task force are still true and valid today – and most importantly the end-use profile of lodgepole pine complements that of Sitka spruce. There is potential to increase such uses over time, particularly if straight-grained, knot-free (pruned) timber from the new hybrids comes on-stream.

It is time to dust off the old reports and listen to our geneticists. We should learn from the mistakes of the past, but not to throw the improved provenances and hybrids out with the south coastal bathwater. Lodgepole pine has a clear role in the future of Irish forestry.

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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