



EDITORIAL

A forest centenary

A centenary is a time for celebration and reflection, particularly where we are marking a national forestry project that set a vision that looked forward almost to the present day. For ten decades since 1904 the project has engaged several generations of politicians and professionals in creating a forest resource in which we all take pride for the contribution it makes to the economy and society of our country.

No official record remains of the event we are celebrating; that first day of forestry training at Avondale back in 1904 can only be imagined, but it was the beginning of the forestry profession in Ireland, and even more importantly, the start of the reversal of the deforestation trend that had continued, almost unbroken, since man's first arrival on the island. By the beginning of the twentieth century Ireland was virtually denuded of forest cover, the remaining bits and pieces were islands of trees surrounded by intensive agriculture, mountain grazing or peatland. Society at large placed little or no value on forest: livelihoods depended on farming; woodland was the preserve of the estate, and added little or nothing to the local, or indeed the general economy. As a result the only realistic option for recovering forest cover was for the state to step in, and although a role for local authorities was also envisaged, it largely came to nothing. At first, the rate of afforestation was modest, but we must be careful not to judge the achievements of the 1900s today's standards, when forestry is a well-established land use: the fact is a deforestation trend was reversed and a momentum was established.

Over the century the area of forest has increased almost ten fold, a compound rate of about 2.3% per year - a number that would have us today planting close on 17,000 ha of new forest a year, not far off the target 20,000 ha of government policy. The policy makers of the 1900s would be well pleased at the achievement, and in the contribution of forestry to employment and the general economy – about €700 million in 2004 – time for celebration indeed. But times change, and today there are ambitious targets to achieve a forest cover of 17% by 2035, for a greater range of goods and services to be provided by forests, and a new momentum for change in land-use.

The fundamental changes underway in land-use policy arise from the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, and the move to area-based aid for farmers. Overall, the objective is to move farming to a market-based enterprise that will reward competitiveness and quality. At the same time land-derived public goods such as carbon capture, biodiversity conservation and water quality are receiving increased recognition and reward from the EU and the state, in part it must be said as a means of topping-up aid. Of more immediate significance for the forestry sector will be advent, from 2006 onwards, of the new EU Rural Development Regulation. This is likely to begin a fundamental reorientation and widening of forest policy supports to include specific measures in support of public goods provision, in parallel with changes in the agricultural sector.

In all policy shifts, as the last 100 years have shown, there is danger of jumping headlong into fashions, without sufficient foresight. The new emphasis on public goods

provision is indeed welcome, as they have too much been taken for granted in recent decades, but moving in this direction we should not neglect Ireland's significant advantage in growing quality wood, nor the industry it supports. Many European countries have shown it is possible to maintain competitive production, while at the same time providing an ever-increasing range and level of service of public goods. Managing change in forest practice and composition, and carefully planning new woodland location and type will be necessary to achieve these goals, as will continued and increasing investment in innovation, and in knowledge generation and use.

Some of these issues were familiar to the small minority who advocated a national forest policy a century ago. Indeed, a century is short time from a forestry perspective – it is less than a rotation of oak. At the beginning of the second century of Irish forestry we need to renew and bring the pioneer's vision up to date. Our forest resource is still well below what is needed to provide the raw material we will increasingly need for product and energy provision, and we have hardly begun to explore providing woodland specifically geared for public goods such as water, carbon capture, biodiversity, or indeed for recreation and well-being. These are the significant challenges ahead for forestry and forestry profession in the 21st century. No doubt there will be many twists and turns in meeting these challenges, but if our successors can in 2104 celebrate a similar level of achievement over the preceding century, as we do in 2004, we will have done well.