


EDITORIAL**Rural Ireland and afforestation in the twenty-first century**

Recent months have seen a number of reports on the status and future of Irish agriculture. Among them is *Foresight Perspectives*. Along with the other reports, it is saying essentially the same thing: agriculture in Ireland, as a contributor to rural development and the overall economy, is in serious decline. The report provides a suite of policies of how to address rural development in the face of declining of declining agriculture, among them an increased role for environmental services and knowledge-based land use – roles the forestry is well placed to play a significant role in delivering.

The picture painted by *Rural Ireland 2025* is of a greatly reduced number of full-time farmers, just 10,000 by 2025 - a number that was hotly contested when the report was issued at the end of 2005, but which many commentators agreed was a realistic estimate. Currently, there are about 130,000 farms in Ireland. Many are already being run on part-time basis – a substantial number, somewhere in the region of 15,000, are part of the afforestation scheme. Many more have joined the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS). All face an uncertain future: farm subsidies, whether direct payments – such as the single farm premium, or those under the accompanying measures to CAP reform - such as the forestry scheme and REPS, are by no means assured post 2012.

Two sentences on page 41 of *Rural Ireland 2025*, under a heading *Elimination of agricultural subsidies*, sum up a lot of thinking on the future of subsidy regimes, and send out a stark message: *The low levels of market-based income in farming have been concealed by farm subsidies. These will be much reduced in scale in future reforms of the CAP and under WTO rules, because of their unsustainability without clear and measurable public good benefits.* The message is clear: post 2012, farm subsidies are under very serious threat.

Post 2012, therefore, land-owners' minds will be far more concentrated on ways to compensate for reduced direct payments, and, if they are around, afforestation subsidies, will be more attractive. In the period up to 2012, as Jasmina Behan and Kieran McQuinn point out in their paper in this issue, there is likely to be an overall reduction in afforestation. Their analysis was, however, undertaken before the draft EC Rural Development Regulation (post 2006) was available.

Therein lies a significant opportunity for the forestry sector: getting due recognition for the environmental benefit of tree planting in the post 2006 EC rural development package, and specifically in REPS. If this is achieved, levels of woodland establishment on farms will almost certainly increase above the levels envisaged by Behan and McQuinn. And investment in tree planting, unlike some of

the more ephemeral aspects of REPS, will have continuing benefits for the environment, provided of course that tree cover is maintained.

Apart from devising ways of aligning forestry more closely with REPS there are good arguments, from a rural development perspective, for the state to now reinvigorate public and private non-farming investment in the afforestation programme. Over time one could envisage a twin-track approach of commercial and non-commercial forestry to provide for economic development, environmental benefits and societal demands. The current, one-size-fits-all approach of trying to deliver both public goods and economic roundwood from small plantations scattered over a wide area, must be questioned. An alternative approach by the state, of encouraging farmers to provide environmental goods and services through tree planting and native woodland establishment, while at the same time encouraging commercial afforestation at a larger scale, makes more sense from both the rural development and national perspectives.