


EDITORIAL**Afforestation - never more relevant to national policy**

Expanding the forest cover of the country has been a cornerstone of forest policy since the establishment of the state. The rapid pace of expansion over the past two decades has led to a forest estate that now covers well over 10% of the area of the Republic. Moving to the 17% forest cover target may be difficult to achieve in the timeframe envisaged, but it is nonetheless critical that afforestation continues at a level of at least 10,000 ha per annum. Current indications are however that afforestation is running at well below that level, and heading downwards. Already there have been knock-on effects for nurseries and contractors. In the longer term, reduced afforestation will seriously impact on competitiveness and sustained wood supply, and the provision of environmental services.

One of the main environmental services that Irish forests provide is mitigating climate change through uptake of carbon dioxide. Their ability to fulfil this role into the future, while at the same time providing raw material for sawnwood, panel production and energy, depends on sustained afforestation to compensate for harvest. Here is a classic application of the sustained yield principle, allied to the concept of the normal forest – the production of goods and services in perpetuity. Analysis of the afforestation programme since 1985 in terms of future wood harvest and carbon sequestration shows that a further 20 years of afforestation, at a minimum of 10,000 ha per annum, is needed for forests to fulfil the multifunctional role that national policies now demand. Otherwise it will not be possible to satisfy both climate change and raw material demands.

Energy wood will be the first assortment that will suffer from reduced afforestation, given that it is sourced mainly from first thinnings. Ambitious targets for the use of wood derived energy have been set in the recent government Energy White Paper and in the Bioenergy Action Plan. These policies foresee wood fuel making a significant contribution to renewable energy generation, leading to reduced fossil fuel use. While these developments offer exciting prospects for the next decade, projections indicate that the supply of energy wood will gradually tail off as the current reduced afforestation levels begin to impact. How will the gap be made up? Already there is a growing import of wood pellets for domestic heating. Will this extend to wood chip for commercial applications, or even for power generation? The

answer to these questions will depend on price and availability, and on government policy.

One of the main reasons for the reduction in afforestation has been the impact of the REPS scheme. While REPS may be contributing to biodiversity conservation and water quality, there has been little appraisal of its effectiveness. Given this fact and the need to prevent the collapse of the afforestation programme, the time has come for a fundamental reappraisal of agricultural grant aid policy to bring it more into line with future energy and climate change needs. Will it make economic sense to have boatloads of woodchip and pellets coming into the country, while at same time having a significant part of the country being farmed at well below its productive and bio-economic potential, as a direct consequence of national policies? Biodiversity conservation and enhancement are laudable policy objectives but need to be balanced by catering to future energy needs, securing reliable energy on the island, and by the need to address the greatest environmental threat facing mankind - climate change.

Afforestation can provide a significant part of the answer to these challenges, and has never been more relevant to national policy.