



EDITORIAL

Protecting our forests

Ireland's forests are remarkably healthy and free of many insect pests and diseases that cause catastrophic damage abroad. Lodgepole pine, for example, is currently being devastated by mountain pine beetle attack in western Canada. Such is the level of attack that the decay of dead and dying trees is predicted to release 270 million tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere - four times Ireland's annual level of greenhouse gas emissions.

The healthy state of our forests is down to good species selection practice, allied to geographic isolation and the effective implementation of plant health regulations by the Forest Service.

Success in keeping out harmful insects and fungi has not however been matched in dealing with deer and grey squirrel, which have decimated significant areas of young forest, particularly broadleaves. Such is the level of damage that some stands have been reduced to firewood quality. And the problem is not going away; the paper on the Wicklow deer herd in this issue shows the fecundity of sika deer and its ability to expand almost at will. Recent work has also shown the grey squirrel population is rapidly expanding – as is the level of damage in young broadleaf stands.

What then is to be done? First of all the excellent work that the grey squirrel project, funded by the Forest Service, should be continued, particularly in raising awareness among the public and preparing the way for a concerted programme of control. Second, the two main agencies concerned with the issue: the Forest Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service should implement joint, long-term control programmes for deer and grey squirrel, in priority areas and in cooperation with landowners and hunters. Much can be done through mobilising and targeting existing resources, in the framework of an agreed plan. Third, landowners considering forestry should be made fully aware of the risks inherent in planting certain species and the likely need for future control measures.

Education of landowners and the public, allied to long-term national control programmes will go a long way towards dealing with the mammal problem. Developments in control systems, such as immunocontraception may also, in time, offer a sustainable solution, and there are signs that natural predators are impacting on grey squirrel numbers. In the meantime, there is an urgent need for concerted action at the national level to protect our forests from deer and grey squirrel damage.