



Frans Timmermans
Executive Vice-President of the European Commission

Virginijus Sinkevičius
Member of the European Commission

Brussels, 12 04 2021

Dear Minister,

We thank you for your letter of 20 January 2021 updating us on Ireland's current Programme for Government and on delivery of environmental commitments in the area of forestry.

We are pleased that you place the role of forestry in the context of the European Green Deal and the effort to decarbonise our economies. The Green Deal also recognises the need to combine actions which are good for both climate and biodiversity if we are to tackle the current crises effectively. The development of Ireland's next Forestry Programme post-2020 provides an opportunity to do this and we welcome your initiative to consult the European Commission. We will be happy to liaise further with you on this.

As you indicate, the new Programme will build on the success of earlier programmes that have seen an increase in Irish forest cover from very low levels. You have also highlighted some of the latest achievements. Of particular note in the context of biodiversity are the recent improvement in broadleaved planting rates to over 34% (something we trust will be maintained over the final two years of the current Programme) and the now solid annual rate of establishment of native woodlands. Ireland's native woodland cover remains small and there are strong biodiversity arguments for significantly increasing its extent, so the accumulated experience is very encouraging. We note other promising forms of afforestation still at an early stage, including community woodlands, agro-forestry and protection forests to improve water quality – and would strongly support your efforts to ensure that these yield results.

Turning to carbon sequestration, we note that Ireland is stepping up climate action across a broad front, and that there is an emerging – and welcome – recognition that peatland restoration has an important role to play (including under the Just Transition). While positively noting this, we think there is significant scope to improve the coherence and co-ordination between forestry policy and peatland conservation and restoration. The potential of many valuable blanket and raised bogs to sequester and store carbon remains compromised by previous misguided planting decisions, and the overall conservation status of Ireland's peatland resources remains unsatisfactory.

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Senator Pippa Hackett
Minister of State for Land use, Biodiversity and Forestry
Ireland

The bulk of Ireland's current afforestation is still focused on fast-growing conifers, and you draw attention to recruitment of specialist staff, new decision-making structures and updated measures to screen individual forestry proposals for their environmental impacts.

As you will be aware, the current State aid conditions highlight the importance of protecting peatlands, High Nature Value Areas, and of addressing the needs of two endangered species, the Hen Harrier and the Freshwater Pearl Mussel. We hope you will agree that the expansion of plantation forestry should not be at the expense of a number of species such as breeding waders now close to extinction in Ireland, or of increasingly rare habitats such as unimproved, species-rich grasslands. Our services are looking forward to detailed responses to concerns expressed about these interests during the last part of 2020¹.

You draw attention to recent steps to improve the transparency and accessibility of forestry decision-making for the benefit of the public. Once again, we look forward to responses to a number of specific concerns that were raised by our services in 2020.

Finally, we welcome the envisaged cross-cutting strategy of the next Irish Forestry Programme as well as its intended alignment with the Green Deal. You can be assured that the Commission services stand ready to help.

We would like to conclude by reciprocating your best wishes for success.

Yours sincerely,



Frans Timmermans



Virginijus Sinkevičius

¹ Letter ref. ARES (2020) 7124320 – 26.11.2020.