



Recommendations for Ireland's Forest Strategy Implementation Plan

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The approach of the previous forestry policies and afforestation schemes have not worked as evidenced by its failure to achieve targets. Instead of learning from past mistakes, the proposed new strategy is again investor-led, anti-farmer and anti-community. It will again pit farmer against forester and communities against conifers.

Current Irish forestry policy and practice is a failure on all fronts, it is a failure in social terms – it displaces farm families and adds nothing positive to local communities. It is a failure in environmental terms - amazingly for woodland, Ireland's forestry reduces biodiversity, releases carbon and pollutes our waterways. And it is a failure in economic terms as forestry policy artificially inflates land prices, threatens the family farm model of agriculture and has a lower return per hectare than middle-efficiency sheep farming. It decimates rural communities rather than helping them to prosper and rather than providing communities with a quality-of-life asset it creates a barren impenetrable landscape.

The proposed new strategy appears to follow the same path:

1. It will continue to use Irish exchequer funds to enable what are often non-Irish, and indeed non-European, investment funds to outbid young farmers for agricultural land and plant it with Sitka Spruce dominated forestry. The grants from this scheme will be used by these investment funds to pay over twice the agricultural value of marginal land thus displacing local farmers and farm families. It is wrong that this money is leaving our economy when it could instead be used to fund a farmer-centred afforestation scheme. A simple change to the proposed Afforestation Scheme would address this problem grant aid under the

scheme should be limited to genuine farmers who have owned the land in question for say 5 years.

2. The proposed Afforestation Scheme is such that broadleaf forestry is not an option for younger farmers. For example, a 25-year farmer who plants a portion of his/her farm with broadleaf trees will have practically no income from that land from the age of 45 onwards once the afforestation premium ends. To overcome this anomaly, a 35-year premium should be put in place for native woodlands and commercial broadleaves. This would create a tremendous incentive for all farmers to plant a portion of their farms with broadleaf trees.

Such an approach would create a culture where forestry is seen as a desirable farm practice, resulting in an exponential increase in the level of afforestation and the consequential sequestration of carbon and other environmental benefits.

3. Most of Ireland's forest cover consists of monoculture plantations of Sitka Spruce. This tree is alien to the Irish environment being a native of western Canada. The resulting artificial forests are devoid of an understory and result in a forest floor covered in Spruce needles with little or no biodiversity. These forests have been, and continue to be, planted on high nature value lands (including peatlands) resulting in the removal of biodiversity of both flora and fauna. This is in stark contrast to the beneficial impact of native woodlands and commercial hardwoods on biodiversity and on the environment generally.
4. In addition to the destruction of biodiversity, the short lifecycle of Sitka Spruce forests (as little as thirty years), causes huge carbon release during felling and replanting. As a result, a Sitka Spruce forest is an emitter of carbon. On this basis the use of Sitka Spruce should be banned immediately. It should be replaced by hardwoods or high-



quality conifers such as Norway Spruce on both new and clear-felled sites both in State and privately forests. Lands in State ownership which are unsuitable for these species either due to location or soil type would be ideal locations for nature restoration. Such an approach would have no impact on supply to the processing industry. The current stock of Sitka Spruce forests with its varying levels of maturity will provide over 30 years supply of timber at the current level of extraction. This would provide more than enough time for the processing industry to adjust to the higher quality which would result from such a strategy. This approach would also allow for the establishment of Strictly Protected areas without any adverse impact on farming and rural communities.

5. In addition to the environmental benefits, the establishment of a broadleaf forest landbank would provide tremendous opportunities for woodland farming, woodland tourism and community-based quality of life initiatives such as walks and nature trails.
6. The current agro-forestry scheme also needs to be redesigned particularly since it was mainly predicated on the planting of ash trees which is no longer an option. The current five limit for premiums needs to be increased to match the timeframe of other broadleaf measures within the Afforestation Scheme.
7. All new and existing forests should be deer fenced to prevent deer encroaching onto farmland, spreading bovine tuberculosis and damaging pastures.
8. The minimum of 30% hardwoods in the proposed Afforestation scheme is not enough. It will again result in a perimeter of hardwoods with hidden inside, a conifer plantation devoid of biodiversity, releasing carbon and polluting our waterways. A minimum of 50% hardwoods, dispersed throughout the plantation should be required.

9. The planting and replanting trees on peatlands and carbon-rich soils should be prohibited. This prohibition should apply to all forest owners including Coillte. Instead, clear-felled peatlands and carbon rich soils should be rehabilitated to nature reserves with an emphasis on enhanced biodiversity, carbon sequestration and water quality. A similar strategy should be adopted in relation to Bord na Mona's land bank. Such an approach would enable Ireland to pilot nature restoration and the establishment of strictly protected areas without impacting on the level of agricultural output.
10. Instead of the current investor-led approach, every Irish farmer should be encouraged to plant a portion of the farm with environmentally friendly native woodlands or commercial hardwoods through a scheme that recognises the long-term investment such an approach requires.
11. A new national afforestation policy should be developed focusing on trees on the farm instead of trees replacing the farm. In such a scenario, planting a woodland would be seen as farm diversification with a view to providing another income source for the farmer.

In summary, Ireland's current forestry policy and Ireland's Afforestation Scheme are impediments to improving biodiversity, carbon sequestration and water quality. This must change. The State cannot credibly ask farmers, enterprise and the general public to address environmental issues while it participates in and promotes environmental degradation through the planting of Sitka Spruce, in particular, on peat and carbon-rich soils.

INHFA wants to see these failures addressed through the development of sustainable, farmer-centred forestry enterprises which deliver environmental enhancement, viable farm diversification, rural tourism opportunities and more vibrant rural communities



It is possible to have a forest strategy/programme that is farmer centred, delivers good quality timber, is a major source of carbon sequestration, increases biodiversity, improves water quality and enhances the lives of local communities by providing quality of life and tourism opportunities. A strategy that has investor-led afforestation with Sitka Spruce at its core does none of these things whereas a strategy based on farmers planting native woodlands and commercial hardwoods does all of these things.

In short, if Ireland's new afforestation strategy is to succeed it needs to have at its core:

Trees on the Farm instead of Trees replacing the Farm