

Mixed reaction to forestry programme approval

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The European Commission last week granted State aid approval for Ireland's €308m afforestation scheme, which will run until December 2027.

The approval covers 12 afforestation schemes, with grant aid up to €6,744/ha and annual tax-free premiums up to €1,142/ha over 20 years for farmers and 15 years for non-farmers.

"The Commission's approval of our afforestation programme is a hugely significant milestone in our longer-term vision out to 2050 to increase

our forest cover as a critical part of the State's climate action plan," said minister with responsibility for forestry Pippa Hackett.

Reserved judgement

The announcement of the new programme has been welcomed by forestry companies and foresters, but they have reserved judgement until they see the conditions attached.

"It's important to analyse the detail of the various schemes, which may have changed from the original programme submitted to Brussels last year," said Pat O'Sullivan of the Society of Irish Foresters.



The approval covers 12 afforestation schemes, including mixed high forests, native woodlands, agroforestry and continuous cover forestry.

"However, society members broadly welcome the announcement and we will actively promote it."

"There needs to be clarity on the allocation of €1.3 billion," said Jason Fleming, chair of the IFA farm forestry committee. "If some of this is provided by way of realistic compensation for farmers with ash dieback it would do much to restore confidence in the sector," he said.

Fleming, along with a number of forestry companies and organisations were disappointed that the forestry support measures, such as forest roading and biodiversity were not announced.

“There needs to be clarity on the allocation of €1.3bn

"The Irish Timber Growers Association (ITGA) welcomes the announcement, but the focus on forest establishment needs to be matched by an emphasis on the active management of existing woodlands, including funding supports for biodiversity and ecosystem services," said Donal Whelan, ITGA.

"In order to now achieve a viable forestry programme, the Department must reduce

the administration required to facilitate normal forest management activities, such as securing felling licences for standard thinning and related operations," he added.

"The key to reactivating the programme is to set in place realistic timelines in achieving afforestation and other licences," said chair of the Social Economic Environmental Forestry Association of Ireland (SEEFA) Teige Ryan.

Jason Fleming agreed because "farmers, in particular, will not opt for forestry as a viable land use if they have to wait for over a year to receive licences".