

Forestry

Turning a forestry vision into reality



A new approach is required to achieve a viable afforestation and forestry programme including the establishment of an independent forestry agency which has widespread support, writes Donal Magner

A much larger and more diverse forest footprint is being successfully managed to balance and deliver multiple objectives and benefits for climate, nature, water quality, wood production, people, the wider economy and rural communities.

– “A Shared National Vision for Trees and Forests in Ireland until 2050” – Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM).

The recently announced State Aid approval of Ireland’s Forestry Programme (2023-2027) is designed to reinvigorate afforestation after more than a decade of decline. The programme provides a range of schemes to achieve the aims of the Department’s “Shared Vision”.

It contains a series of objectives based on public consultation and the outcomes of Project Woodland, which was established in February 2019. The vision tried to encapsulate a wide range of aims that advocate “the right trees in the right places for the right reasons with the right management”.

It is strongly influenced by NGOs and members of the public, whose views were canvassed in various opinion polls. What the public want from the new forestry programme and what forest owners, foresters and downstream timber industries can deliver is the key to developing a balanced forestry programme in Ireland.

2050

Ireland is committed to achieving carbon neutrality or ‘net zero’ by 2050. It is not only a date with destiny for DAFM’s “Shared Vision”, but also for the National Climate Action Plan (NCAP) that covers a similar timeframe.

NCAP identifies afforestation as Ireland’s most important land use in achieving net zero by 2050. It acknowledges forests as major carbon sinks in sequestering carbon, while promoting forest products for their dual role as carbon stores and displacing fossil-based material, such as steel and concrete, especially in construction, which is the world’s greatest emitter of carbon.

Inherent in this proposition is the need for productive commercial forests. Reconciling this with the NCAP’s recommendation to enhance “native woodland expansion and planting of small native tree areas” has widespread support, but is a national target of 50% broadleaves the right way to tackle climate change mitigation by 2050?

Commercial forestry

Given the limited timescale to achieve net



While acknowledging the need for biodiversity, Dr David Styles, University of Galway, believes the emphasis should be on productive forestry to achieve net zero by 2050. He says these forests “can provide twice the climate mitigation of mixed conservation forests, and four times the net mitigation of semi-natural forests, over a 100-year time horizon”.

Donal Magner

Agri Sustainability at University of Galway, believes the emphasis should be on productive forestry. “Crucially, fast growing commercial forestry can provide twice the climate mitigation of mixed conservation forests, and four times the net mitigation of semi-natural forests, over a 100-year time horizon,” says the co-author of “Harnessing the forest carbon life cycle for climate neutrality”.

“In the unlikely event that we don’t need to use wood for construction, advanced materials and bioenergy in the future, trees can be left in the ground as a valuable store of carbon,” he adds. “So, planting commercial forestry now will give future generations a wide range of options to sustain a low-carbon, circular economy of different hues.”

Unlike the proposed 8,000ha programme, Dr Styles calls for “a sustained annual planting rate of 20,000ha”, which he acknowledges as a “dramatic and unprecedented change in Irish forestry and agriculture”. He is conscious of the impact of an annual afforestation of this magnitude and says that “farmers need to benefit from carbon payments to incentivise them to plant and to remove the threat of EU fines if we don’t achieve net zero”.

Instead, Ireland has opted for a “Shared Vision”, which by its nature has something for everyone; from those who depend largely on commercial forestry for their livelihoods to those who advocate broadleaves – native and naturalised – rewilding and agroforestry.

Where the ecological and economic converge is the point at which forest owners and potential forest owners opt in or out of forestry as a viable land use option. The 50:50 ratio of conifers now required at a national level in the new forestry programme shifts the point of convergence dramatically.

Many believe that this ratio is achievable, as the sector has planted 40% annually with mainly native broadleaves in recent years. But this ratio was achieved in 2,000ha annual planting programmes. Pushing this dial to 50% of an 8,000ha programme is a far more challenging proposition.

However, most of the organisations contacted by the *Irish Farmers Journal* believe that while they can live with this species mix, they have no confidence in a business-as-usual approach by the Department in achieving it.

They advocate an independent State Forestry Development Agency to achieve a viable forestry and forest products sector and believe the present structures are ill-equipped to turn the “Shared Vision”

Further push for a Forestry Development Agency

Organisations such as the Irish Timber Growers Association (ITGA), IFA, Society of Irish Foresters, Irish Timber Council, Tree Council of Ireland and the Social, Economic, Environmental Forestry Association (SEEFA) support the establishment of a Forestry Development Agency (FDA).

Forest Industries Ireland (FI) is discussing the role such an independent agency could play in the future development of Irish forestry with its members.

FI, the forestry group in Ibec, has broad representation in the Irish forestry and forest products industry.

ITGA has advocated the establishment of “an independent national forestry body”, which, according to Donal Whelan, “would

have responsibility for ongoing monitoring, implementation and reporting on the programme and Ireland’s forestry strategy”.

Whelan, who is ITGA’s technical director, believes that such a body “would result in better and more effective communications within the wider agriculture sector and also with the general public”.

Stakeholders

The agency would need involvement from a wide range of stakeholders, “but input from those who will establish and manage a sustainable forestry programme along with those who add value to the product is essential,” said Pat O’Sullivan, technical director of the Society of Irish Foresters.

“Forestry is the only

natural resource in Ireland without an independent development agency, which needs to be addressed urgently.”

The present structures are ill-equipped for dealing with issues such as delivering a carbon-based afforestation programme, according to the Society’s position paper on forestry and carbon.

A critical first step is to establish “a Forest Carbon Code (FCC) for Ireland along the lines of the Woodland Carbon Code (WCC) in the UK – piloted in 2010 – but tailored to meet the needs and demographics of the Irish market”.

An FDA, in addition to being “responsible for the promotion of forestry and the overall development of the sector,” would initiate a carbon code for Ireland.

Origins of a Forestry Development Agency

Michael Guilfoyle presented a number of reasons for an independent State FDA in 2008 when I met him along with John McCarthy, director of Noneso-Hardy Nurseries.

Guilfoyle, a former Assistant Secretary General in the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, maintained that forestry needed an independent State development agency like other natural resources, such as ports and shipping (IMDO), food (Bord Bia), sea fisheries (BIM), inland fisheries

(IFI), marine research (Marine Institute) and renewable energy (SEI).

Benefits

He had seen the benefits of these bodies and had played a key role in establishing IMDO and the Marine Institute. We made a submission to the DAFM calling for a Task Force to consider the establishment of an FDA in 2010.

Since then, the proposal has gathered support from over 40 forestry companies, organisations and the IFA.

When I interviewed Guilfoyle in February

2018, he was more convinced than ever of the need for an FDA with a developmental and promotional role, which he said would address “uncertainties that had impacted badly on confidence and investment”.

He said: “It is time for a new approach, as repeated failures to reverse the rapid decline in afforestation rates have demoralised the sector and may have fatally compromised its capacity to contribute to climate change mitigation, at anywhere near its potential to do so.”



The present DAFM structures are ill-equipped to turn the “Shared Vision” into a “Shared Reality”