

# Forestry incentives welcomed but weaknesses identified in new programme

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While the range of schemes in the new forestry programme and levels of funding have been welcomed, serious reservations have been expressed about its implementation.

Further details emerged at a meeting last week when Department of Agriculture officials outlined details of the programme to registered foresters, ecologists and other relevant stakeholders.

"The Native Tree Area Scheme will probably be of the greatest interest to farmers and offers new opportunities to drive planting for those who wish to plant small areas up to 2ha," said Geraldine O'Sullivan, IFA senior policy executive for environment and forestry.

"However, the increased cost of applications and complexity of the new scheme will negatively impact on future afforestation and the achievement of an 8,000ha annual planting programme," a view shared by John Roche, the managing director of Arbor Forest Management.

"The programme is creating

more barriers to afforestation," he maintained.

"Issues such as peat depth, high nature value farmland, bird breeding and foraging areas are being introduced or extended," he added.

"The Government needs to revise their afforestation target of 8,000ha, because the details provided in the programme suggest that this is wildly optimistic – I think we will do well to plant 2,000ha per annum."

The expansion of "no-go forestry areas due to environmental constraints" will impact negatively on land availability for afforestation, maintained O'Sullivan.

"When you take on board an even more complicated application process than previously, the grant scheme is most certainly not 100% funded," said Daragh Little, managing director of forestry at Veon.

"The time it will take to prepare an application, submit it, track it and get a licence – not a certainty by any stretch – will be prohibitive as foresters cannot afford to do this at no cost to the farmer," he added.

"If I had anything positive to say, it's that the Department of

Agriculture are trying to provide as much training and support as possible."

## Cumbersome

"While the schemes are designed for farmers, they cannot be accessed by farmers because applications are far too expensive and cumbersome to process," said Padraig Egan of the Social Environmental and Economic Forestry Association (SEEFA) and general manager of Axe Forestry Ltd.

"Irish Forest Owners (IFO) welcomes the programme and, in particular, the increase in premiums for all forest types and the extension of premium length for farmers to 20 years," said Olive Leavy, IFO secretary. "We fully support mass afforestation in Ireland to help meet our climate change commitments."

She expressed concerns about "the apparent lack of emphasis in the programme on commercial forestry".

"Afforestation with conifer trees is the most efficient carbon sequestration tool we have and is the only forest type that will provide material for the timber industry and a return for the forest owner within a



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Ramona Farrelly

generation.

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She said the success of this programme will depend on the speed of licence approval. The achievement of "realistic timescales between licence application and approval" was a common theme among all those interviewed.

"With the addition of more environmental conditions and surveys, rapid decision-making and clear communication with forest owners will be essential

on all licence applications for farmers and landowners to plant trees en masse and to avoid another disastrous licensing backlog," said Leavy.

## Benefit

"The grant and premium rates are particularly attractive with the added positive benefit of fixing carbon and improving national biodiversity," said Donal Whelan, technical director of the Irish Timber Growers Association.

"The various new environmental requirements however make the process more complex and costly with potential

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additional environmental reports," he added.

"Unless these costs can be mitigated, where farmers are assured that such costs will be covered whether they are approved to plant or not, many affected areas may not attract applicants.

"The Department could undertake these applications in-house, making these schemes considerably more attractive."

The programme "never had more options and choice for farm forestry for both existing and new forest owners," said Marina Conway, CEO, Western Forestry Co-op.

"However, my biggest concern will be delivery of these schemes in a timeframe that allows people to make decisions.

"Otherwise, we are at risk of having the best forestry programme in Europe with the largest budget ever, and very little uptake, which would be embarrassing."

