

The Anglo-Celt recently featured an article which accurately reported a debate amongst some Cavan County Councillors, who were disgruntled by some of the current forestry policies. The following Op Ed article is provided by Andrew Doyle TD Minister of State for Food, Forestry and Horticulture, responding to some of the comments.

I stand by policy to increase afforestation levels - Doyle

I REFER to an article in your paper on May 26 entitled "Some harvested forest look like 'nuclear landscapes'". I disagree strongly with the content of the article.

The afforestation scheme managed by the Department offers the same terms and conditions to both farmers and non-farmers and if anything is more beneficial to farmers. For example, farmers who hold valid herd numbers can qualify for Basic Payment and



Andrew Doyle TD

Forestry Premium on the same land; they can also qualify for Areas of Natural Constraint and GLAS payments, whereas non-farmers cannot.

Many farmers do not share the views expressed within the article and see forestry as a good option for their farming business. Over 13,000 Irish farmers received a forestry payment in 2015 with an average payment made of €16,000 (includes establishment grants and annual premiums). More than 600 farmers established new forests during 2015 - a year in which the Department spent €104 million on forestry development. This important source of income for small rural communities should not be underestimated.

On the question of a lack of strong regulation for forestry, all new forests must be established in compliance with national and EU legislation and the Department's requirements as set out in the Forestry Standards Manual, Scheme Documents, Code of Best Practice - Ireland, the suite of environmental guidelines, and relevant procedures and pro-

ocols, consultation with statutory consultees and adherence to the Acid Sensitivity Protocol. Only those applications which receive prior written approval from the Department, in line with the relevant Statutory Instrument, and in compliance with Sustainable Forest Management, can proceed to planting. (See www.agriculture.gov.ie)

Forestry is good for the environment. It has a role in protecting water quality, flood alleviation and climate change mitigation through carbon sequestration and by replacing fossil fuels with a renewable source of energy. Our premium rates are strongly biased towards species diversification and according to the latest national forest inventory 52% of the national forestry estate is made up of Sitka spruce.

Over the years, our knowledge and understanding of the interactions between forests and the wider environment has increased substantially, resulting in changes to where and how forests are planted and managed, and these changes are reflected in the schemes of-

fered by the Department.

As to the appearance of the land after the forest is clear-felled, it is important to note that all forestry land must be re-planted within two years of felling taking place, thereby ensuring that the visual appearance of the forest is restored as quickly as possible. This re-planting obligation applies to all land-owners who clear-fell their forest.

The assertion within the article that "much of the timber felled in Ireland is exported unprocessed and therefore no added value to the Irish Economy" is completely inaccurate.

According to the IFFPA, 12,000 people are employed in forestry and the majority are rural based. Secondly, of the 4.4 million cubic metres of softwood fibre made available for processing in Ireland in 2014, 1.8 million cubic metres was processed by the sawmilling sector, 1.4 million cubic metres was manufactured into panels and 0.9 million cubic metres was burned for heat and power generation. The remaining fibre was used for stake-

wood and bark mulch. To further underline how misleading this statement is, 68,000 cubic metres more roundwood timber was actually imported into the country than was exported in 2014. This roundwood was processed in Irish sawmills and timber processing plants.

Government policy is to increase the afforestation levels but we don't target any specific county or region. The decision to plant trees is a voluntary one for the landowner. Coming as I do from Wicklow, the most heavily forested county in Ireland, I can see firsthand that forestry is a great way for landowners to generate a new source of income. Forestry creates jobs and exports. It contributes to carbon reduction. The approval process for planting trees is heavily regulated so as to protect the environment.

To conclude, it is important to recognise and support the valuable contribution that forestry can make to our society and our environment and I intend to continue to fully support farmers should they decide to avail of the afforestation scheme.

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