

Green Party

Forestry Policy



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1. Summary & Key Points

Recognising:

- The ecological and social value of forests - for example, they store carbon (saving €millions in Kyoto penalties), clean the air, reduce water movement, minimise soil erosion and provide habitats for flora and fauna, all of which have an economic worth, too (including tourist income from 18 million visits to Irish forests annually).
- The economic value of timber for construction and manufacture (at home and for export) and of biomass for renewable energy generation (40% of electrical consumption is to be by renewable energy sources by 2020).
- The threats of climate change.
- The long-term commitment required for investment in forestry and the relatively low impact on the public purse of an increase in financial support (current grant aid is but a small fraction of public expenditure on agriculture), and the relatively high employment potential of forestry.
- European Directives on environmental issues relating to the countryside.
- Our ecological and landscape heritage.

The main thrust of Green Party policy is:

- To promote a graduated adoption to Close to Nature-Continuous Cover permanent forestry silvicultural systems and management (without clear felling), thus (i) ultimately creating permanent biodiverse forests containing trees of all ages, (ii) providing a more sustainable flow of products once the system is in place and (iii) maintaining the “capital” of mature and diverse forests to resist the threat and risks associated with climate change, such as new pests and diseases.

- The planting of 10,000 ha (preferably 15,000 ha – double what was planted in 2011) trees per annum until 2035, of which broadleaves should be well over the 38% planted in 2010. 15,000 ha would give 490 direct sustainable jobs per year, plus downstream employment, mostly in rural areas. (This would still leave Ireland with well below the European average of 43% forestry cover.)
- The retention of hedgerows and their enhancement with appropriate species.
- The planting of protection forests bordering rivers and lakes to protect water quality and assist in managing flood risks.
- The protection of heritage and amenity trees, including by improved legislation.

Other objectives are:

- Support of the Deer Management Policy of the Inter-Agency Deer Policy Group and humane control of pest animals in general.
- Regulation of imports in relation to illegally logged timber and timber traceability and certification.
- That the underlying land assets, commercial forests and amenity woodlands of Coillte are retained in public ownership.
- Educational policies and information campaigns (including grant-aiding them where appropriate) in relation to the planting management and protection of trees and forests in accordance with Green Party objectives.
- A research programme with the aim of protecting and enhancing the environment and forest industry.

- That the policies of the various Government Departments and agencies incorporate the above objectives and that their functions are co-ordinated to eliminate overlap and the consequential complexity of communication with an excessive administrative burden to forest owners.
- The setting up of inventories of all woodlands and urban trees.
- Long-term planning, with associated multi-annual budgets.

2. Policy

2.1. Introduction

Ireland was once largely covered by forests. Many of the place names we know today refer to this heritage. However, by the early 1900s, much of our forests were gone and forest cover was as low as 1%. Since the end of the Second World War, Government policy has been largely to support afforestation. In 2010, as a result, forest cover was 10.82%, with the majority of this being coniferous. To achieve a sustainable and self-sufficient forest industry, a target of 17% cover by 2030 - still well below the European average of 43% - has been suggested. This is in the context of rapidly decreasing forest cover worldwide.

Trees have considerable economic value for construction, manufacture, in satisfying the growing need for wood for renewable energy generation and through recreational forests as a source of tourism income. The Irish Forest industry now provides over 1% of GDP and employs over 16,000 people, mostly in rural areas. There is a market for timber exports and home use of our own timber saves imports. The timber processing sector has successfully been exporting timber for years and exports most of what it produces, winning market share by selling well-made certified timber principally to the UK but also across Continental Europe. It is one of the bright sectors in the Irish economy at the present time.

Apart from the tangible economic values of trees, they provide other services. Trees and forests store carbon, clean the air, mitigate water movements, prevent soil erosion, provide habitats for flora and fauna and provide amenity for the public (18 million visits to Irish forests per year). Most of these services have not been valued, but in the case of Carbon Capture, Irish forests planted since 1990 store 4 million tonne of CO₂ per year, at the same time saving Irish tax payers €44 million per annum in Kyoto penalties alone.

The current EU-agreed target of 20% cut in carbon emissions by 2020 and the strong possibility of a higher target is an incentive to increase our carbon sequestration capacity through afforestation.

The average level of planting over the three years to 2009 was approximately 6,500 ha per annum. To assist landowners to plant, which brings wider economic opportunity, employment and climate-change benefits and to conform to EU policy, there is an urgent need to increase this level substantially to at least 10,000 ha, preferably 15,000 ha, per annum, to catch up with the lost years of the past decade when afforestation levels were below targets. Achieving the 10,000 ha per annum would give 327 new direct sustainable jobs per year in establishing, managing, harvesting and processing that timber. There would be further “downstream” employment created too. The cost of this in grant aid at today’s rates would be only a small fraction of current public expenditure on agriculture.

Developing Ireland’s forests is a long-term business requiring clear and sustained policies, which will benefit not only us but future generations.

It is clear from the many economic and ecological benefits that forests provide that forestry will have a central and significant role in creating a sustainable green economy in Ireland.

With the foregoing in mind, the Green Party have been striving, and will continue, to promote forestry and the highest quality standards for best managing this important national resource.

2.2. Climate Change and Carbon

Recognising climate change as a severe threat to the environmental, economic and sociocultural benefits of forests, Ireland must take effective measures to adapt its forests to climate change.

The Green party advocates:

- forest policy that prioritises an integrated, sustainable and resilient forest management strategy.
- 15,000 ha per annum to be planted over the next two decades to maintain the maximum carbon sequestration benefits of Irish forests.

- a Climate Change Adaptation Strategy that promotes Close to Nature-Continuous Cover silvicultural management* that includes broadleaved species, for the benefits of delivering effective carbon sequestration and forests resilient to the effects of climate change.
- diversion of funds from the Carbon Fund into afforestation.
- research into a payment mechanism for ecological services to enable Irish forest owners to realise the carbon value of their woodlands.

* Close to Nature-Continuous Cover Forestry silviculture management seeks to increase the economic, ecological and social value of forests without clear-felling (now is opportune because of the high proportion of coniferous planting in recent decades). Some advantages would be:

- ultimately creating permanent, stable, biodiverse, viable and valuable forests containing trees of all ages
- providing a more sustainable flow of products to forest owners once the system is in place,
- maintaining the ‘capital’ of mature and diverse forests to resist the threat and risks associated with climate change that may see new pests and diseases arise with increasing virulence,
- delivering cost savings in dramatically reducing the need for planting (once regeneration is established),
- obviating higher energy costs (largely based on fossil fuel) in forest establishment and maintenance,
- obviating the long-term negative consequences to soil productivity, of clear-fell and replant forestry systems using monocultures. After several rotations of monoculture plantations, productivity of land and economic returns are dramatically reduced.

2.2.1. Afforestation

The Green Party advocates:

- a minimum of 10,000 ha of afforestation per year but aiming at achieving 15,000 ha per annum until 2035, with significantly increased levels beyond the 38% of broadleaves planted in 2010. The planting of 15,000 ha per annum would result in 490 direct jobs per annum. Quality seed sources from Ireland to be promoted where available.
- that native woodland establishment is targeted at enlarging existing native woodlands and creating links between native woodlands to encourage biodiversity and connectivity within areas like SACs, SPAs and NHAs where appropriate. Also consider establishment of native woodland to come under the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.
- a requirement of attaining Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) where planting areas exceed 50ha. However, survey costs must be balanced so as to not prohibit planting (and enough assessor staff be available).
- that 15% of new forest to be devoted to biodiversity yet ideally advocates measures – including integrating rides, glades etc. and increasing woodland edges (by scalloped woodland edges) - to improve biodiversity in 100% of forests.
- public consultation when there are reviews of afforestation by Local Authorities, Heritage Offices and County Archaeologists.
- that new forests are planted with a view to being managed using Close to Nature-Continuous Cover permanent forestry silvicultural systems, rather than clear-felling, including on clear-felled ground. Planting should be done in a way that will allow an increase in the forest's carrying capacity for wild deer while obviating their negative impacts on commercial forestry and biodiversity.

- Insofar as practicable, plant where the ground and soil conditions are suitable for the trees to grow and thrive without the necessity of draining, obviating such as drying peat soils (depletion of carbon sinks) and run-off (contributing to flooding).
- greater integration of small scale forestry into farming systems.
- the retention and conservation of hedgerows with appropriate species and sustainable management. In addition, to meet Ireland's international obligations (including the EU's Birds and Habitats Directives), and to reverse threatened and diminished biodiversity, revise section 40 of the 1996 Wildlife Act (as amended) to continue the closed period on annual hedge-cutting from 1 March to 31 August inclusive. This would be a means to safeguard the wide range of ecosystem services hedgerows provide and protect wildlife, including some very threatened species (birds, pollinators, bats etc.,) that hedgerows sustain as a critical habitat. The Green Party advocates that later cutting should be encouraged and incentivised.
- furthermore, as conserving hedgerows is critical for biodiversity, as well as of considerable significance for Ireland's landscape heritage, farming and archaeology, the Green Party advocates the formation of an advisory forum to bring together stakeholders to shape a framework for hedgerow conservation. This may include actions to implement agreed policy and best practice, education for hedgerow establishment and management for farmers and Local Authorities and procedures for conservation to thereby share knowledge and ideas, to encourage and inspire, to resolve conflicting interests and to work with farmers and other land managers to conserve, enhance, celebrate and maximise the private, public and environmental benefits from Ireland's hedgerows.
- planting of protection forests (of suitable species) bordering important rivers and lakes to protect water quality and to assist in managing flood risks in rural and urban areas. Also, all other afforestation where bordering rivers and lakes should be of suitable species.

- reinstatement of the Neighbourwood scheme, which is devoted to the creation of urban woodlands. Further, Local Authorities should focus on creating urban woodlands planted with native species.

2.2.2. Forest Management

The Green Party advocates:

- the continuation of a sustainable Forest Road Grant Scheme for the development of access for management and harvesting in private forests. This will also help provide a steady supply of timber to the growing bio-energy sector.
- the development of policy, research and education strategies for foresters, forest owners and those in forest education to employ new sustainable forest management practices, including Close-to-Nature-Continuous Cover silvicultural systems, that improve timber quality and that produce a greater range of log size categories and species diversity. This will ensure sustainable and profitable production for the Irish and export market; furthermore, a forest's trees would become ready for sale in a more even way.
- a graduated target of initiating the transformation of 20% of the State's conifer plantations to Close to Nature - Continuous Cover Forest* management by 2015 in suitable stands and on appropriate sites, and 50% by 2030. The target should consider a range of stands from post clear-fell, young re-stock stands to semi-mature stands with an established forest capital. The target should include the private sector and recognition that it will need incentives towards transformation.
- the management requirements of young broadleaved forests in a way that enables them to develop into high quality forests designed to provide needs of the hardwood sector. All broadleaved forests should be managed under Close to Nature-Continuous Cover Forestry* silviculture management systems.

- seek to have recognised (through payment or preference), the value of environmental services provided by preferred forest management systems (Close-to-Nature-Continuous Cover, rotated coppice, coppice with standards etc.) in regards to biodiversity, carbon sequestration, water and soil quality.
- support for the Deer Management Policy Vision of the Inter-Agency Deer Policy Group under the Departments of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and Coillte Teoranta (currently in Draft form at Public Consultation stage), which seeks the sustainable management of wild deer populations in Ireland within tolerable population limits towards ensuring that productive and ecological functions of affected land use sectors can be protected and that the socio-economic potential of wild deer in Ireland can be maximised in consultation with the various stakeholders. It advocates inter alia a deer census, minimising economic loss to woodlands, support and encouragement for the contribution of recreational hunters, welfare and humane treatment of deer. The Vision would help to protect Ireland's investment in its relatively new forest industry and be particularly important for forests managed by Close-to-Nature-Continuous Cover silvicultural systems that employ natural regeneration of forests that can be seriously affected by deer grazing.
- similarly, promote humane control of numbers of pest animals such as rabbit and grey squirrel.

2.2.3. Energy

Government targets for biomass to 2020 are dependent on planting at least 15,000 ha per year over the preceding decade. Overall, a target of 40% of electrical consumption is to be achieved by renewable energy sources by 2020.

The Green Party advocates:

- increasing the sustainable production of biomass for the newly developing and valuable renewable energy sector on suitable farm land.
- thinning of forests to supply and support the burgeoning bio-energy sector and associated enterprises and local cooperatives.
- adequate funding for the establishment of bio-energy crops, focusing in particular on willow production, is available, whilst encouraging the use of mixed native species.
- promoting solid wood burners and heating systems as a carbon neutral alternative to turf and other fossil fuels and discontinuing support for domestic wood pellet stoves.
- supporting farm-based coppicing firewood enterprises that would supply local heating demands, ensuring a permanent switch from burning turf to a sustainable wood supply.

2.2.4. Grants and Funding

The Green Party advocates:

- restructuring the grant and tax relief system to support the objectives herein.
- ensuring grant aid is sufficient to (a) obviate or reduce the necessity for imports, (b) enhance exports to the extent there is a market, (c) enable, by forest roads, access for timber harvesting, extraction, other management and recreation, (d) promoting sustainability, thereby enhancing the return from the State's grant-aid and also potentially helping the existing 17,000 small scale private forests (avge. 10.6 ha).
- incentivising alternative silvicultural systems such as Close to Nature-Continuous Cover forestry transformation and management and other sustainable practices such as coppicing.
- continuing support for the Native Woodland Scheme, both conservation and establishment schemes.

- continuing support for fledgling forest Co-ops and local wood/biomass enterprises.
- promoting professional management of all grant-aided forests to protect the State's investment in forestry.
- recognising that banks won't lend long-term, thus the need for grants and other sources of funding.
- recognising the relatively low impact on the public purse of an increase in financial support for forestry and the relatively high employment potential of forestry in relation to GDP.
- showing that forestry can eventually be developed with less financial support by better forestry management systems.
- investigating the following as possible sources of funding:
 - State forestry bonds
 - Credit Unions
 - Self administered pensions and other pensions
 - National Pension Reserve Fund
 - European Union

It is noted that Budget 2012 provides for grants (planting 7,000 ha, forest roads, minimum percentage of broadleaves) and premia at much the same levels as the previous year. While the current financial climate is limiting, forestry is only a very small percentage of public spending on agriculture and the forest industry makes a significant and growing contribution to the Irish

economy, so the Green Party reiterates its concern for the long-term adverse effect of supporting planting of less than 15,000 ha per annum.

2.2.5. Heritage and Biodiversity

The Green Party advocates:

- full compliance with the Forest Consent System, the Bird and Habitats Directive and the catchment management approach of the water Framework Directive. Note that there are EU Environment and Biodiversity directives pertaining to forestry with financial penalties for non-compliance.
- a new Award System rather than confer NHA status to the 54 high scoring woodland sites identified for protection in the national survey of native woodlands. Many of these sites are well managed for generations and should not be countered by regulations and permissions, but be recognised for their good management,
- an increase in area of protected forests in Ireland.
- a comprehensive protection policy for heritage trees along the lines of proposals formulated by the Irish Tree Society.
- the Minister re-examines the current replanting requirement contained in the 1946 Forestry Act, so that landowners are no longer necessitated to replant on sites that contravene water quality, biodiversity or heritage objectives.
- the Departments of the Environment, Community and Local Government and Agriculture, Fisheries and Food create a set of agreed common forestry objectives, at the same time eliminating overlap in function and the consequential complexity of communication with the authorities by forest owners and the administration this entails.

2.2.6. Coillte Teoranta

The Green Party advocates:

- a review of the 1988 Act that established Coillte with a view to (i) re-focusing it to managing the State's forests in a commercial, sustainable, ecological and social way and steering away from non-core activities such as property investment and development, (ii) sharing its knowledge and experience with other State forestry authorities and the private sector and (iii) its financial viability and accountability. State involvement should, in consultation with the private sector, be through policy formation (including long-term planning), education and marketing (assessing potential, seeking, Enterprise Ireland involvement).
- that the underlying land assets, commercial forests and amenity woodlands of Coillte are retained in public ownership. It is noted that the Government has considered and decided against for the time being, but may not have ruled out, (a) selling the harvesting rights to the Coillte forests (but not the underlying land) for a period of up to 70 to 80 years, other than in high amenity areas, and (b) that at least some of the proceeds of such sale would go towards an afforestation programme, public local consultation regarding the sale or change of land use by Coillte.
- that Coillte reveal a detailed breakdown of its revenues between timber sales, property sales, wind farm leases, timber leases, deer lettings and its other principle activities.
- that the State gets a better return for its investment in this Asset, notwithstanding the cost of the amenity value being provided and the partial and increasingly favourable response to this Party's call for sustainability, biodiversity and increasing the proportion for broadleaves. Over the last 20 years, Coillte has paid only one dividend to the State even though it has sold over €1 billion in timber in that period and many millions of euro worth of other State assets.

2.2.7. Forestry Legislation

The Green Party advocates:

- adoption of the emergent Forest Europe (Forest Europe Ministerial Group) Legally Binding Agreement due 2011 (in development) that sets to regulate the sustainability and long term viability of all European forests and agreed European 2020 Targets for forests. Adopt that Sustainable Forest Management is “the stewardship and use of forest lands in a way, and at a rate, that maintains their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality and their potential to fulfil, now and in the future, relevant ecological, economic and social functions at local, national and global levels, and that does not cause damage to other ecosystems”.
- that importation into Ireland of illegally logged timber must be subject to immediate regulation and Ireland must implement the Action Plan on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade FLEGT. Also introduce a monitored traceability system and third party verification, at least at point of entry.
- that the Government implements the new National Timber Procurement Policy that ensures all State purchase of timber and timber products are independently certified through recognised authorities, such as FSC. However, the effectiveness and appropriateness of the FSC certification scheme for the Irish forest industry should be reviewed.
- that all State agencies and Local Authorities use locally grown timber as a preferred construction material. This should extend to encouraging the private sector to do the same.
- reviewing all forest legislation with a view to promoting the future of the industry and to overcoming legal barriers preventing its development and administrative obstacles, including:

- reforming Forest Consent System to ensure forest licensing includes the protection and management of rare and protected species and habitats.
 - maintaining current requirement for felling licensing yet immediately introduce flexibility for on-going and sustainable Close to Nature-Continuous Cover harvesting and fuel wood extraction; eliminating the need for a felling license for thinning.
 - additional guidance is needed for forest roads licensing, separate to existing COFORD guidance on road construction.
 - providing guidelines for Local Authorities to ensure consistent application of laws associated with forestry and where they interact with associated laws.
- reviewing the relevant forestry legislation with a view to protecting existing mature trees of amenity value.

2.2.8. Education, Culture and Local Enterprise

A new vision of forestry needs to convey the little realised and varied, long term and many sustainable benefits that an established national forest culture could provide. Forests provide recreational use, which has been valued at €97 million, generating €268 million in related economic activities in mainly rural areas. And over 18 million visits are made to Irish forests annually. They are the most important outdoor recreation facility in Ireland.

The Green Party advocates:

- educational policies and information campaigns to greatly increase the promotion of the cultural landscape, local enterprise and ecological heritage of our Forests, particularly to our young people and those involved in local enterprise.
- training for downstream enterprises.

- encourage more use of private woodlands and further support the development of community woodlands.
- recognition that woodlands and forests offer important environments for education, recreation, health, celebration, contemplation and spiritual growth.
- sponsorship of European and other Close to Nature-Continuous Cover forestry experts to come to Ireland to teach all aspects of sustainable forest management.
- further development of amenity potential of Irish woodlands for recreation, tourism and cultural pursuits.
- the production of higher quality softwood, for e.g. structural use.

2.2.9. Forest Research

The Green Party advocates:

- a substantial multi-annual budget for research and development for this relatively young industry.
- a vibrant and development-focused research programme covering both environmental and commercial issues with the aim of protecting and enhancing the environment as well as the forest industry.
- quality research into locally grown timbers, especially hardwood timbers.
- tax incentives for forest research and development by the private sector.
- further collaborative research between Teagasc and Coford into various agroforestry systems (silvo-pastoral, silvo-arable) regarding their possible applications and benefits in an Irish context.

- research into the role of Close-to-Nature - Continuous Cover permanent forestry's role in flood management.
- dissemination of the results of research to the private sector and general public.

2.2.10. Forest Service Policy

The Green Party advocates:

- updating Forest Service Guidelines to emphasise the role of low-impact silviculture systems, such as Close to Nature-Continuous Cover forest management for their integrated climate, timber production, biodiversity and amenity benefits.
- updating Forest Service training to include forest planning and management for landscape impacts low impact silviculture systems and provide suitable training. Encourage training in observation, traditional knowledge and understanding of the whole ecosystem.
- that systems of assessment used by archaeologists in the Forest Service and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government be standardised.
- that the Forest Service proactively fosters mixed hardwood plantings.
- reviewing and reissuing of the Forest and Water Quality Guidelines, Forest Biodiversity Guidelines, Forest and Landscape Guidelines and Forest Harvesting Guidelines.
- that Forest Service administration of schemes are streamlined so that value for money is guaranteed and that the administrative burden of forest owners is minimised.

2.2.11. Forest Inventory and Long-Term Forestry Planning

The Green Party advocates:

- supporting the setting up and maintenance of a stand-based National Inventory of all woodlands, by the Forest Service. This will be an aid to planning and monitoring the development of the industry.
- the implementation an inventory of urban trees with the objective of identifying their importance from a heritage, amenity, carbon storage, flood risk management role, etc. viewpoint. This will be invaluable in education of the public.
- long-term planning, with associated multi-annual budgets, as forestry is a long-term industry with components which include seed-production, machinery, sawmills and employment and where continuity of input and availability of supply to meet demand are fundamentals (whenever supply exceeds demand, the timber can be allowed to continue to grow, with harvesting merely postponed).
- communication with stakeholders, including industry, hunting, Fisheries Boards and environmental groups.
- promoting co-operation between forest owners and promoting co-operatives.
- liaising with the IFA and IBEC in their support for and development of forestry.

If and insofar as any of the foregoing proves to be impractical, a pragmatic approach should be adopted in the interest of better overall achievement.

ENDS

