

Opening Statement for the public session of the Joint Committee on Climate Action on the subject of **‘Forestry and Climate Change’**

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Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to address the Joint Committee on Climate Action on the subject of forestry, climate change and the social impacts of forestry. My statement will cover the social impacts of forestry. I am joined today by Dr Eugene Hendrick who will take any additional specific questions on forests and climate change.

As stated in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine’s Forestry Programme - one of the aims of the current afforestation programme is to increase forest cover so as to “capture carbon, produce wood and help mitigation”¹. This programme will require a significant number of landowners to change land use by undertaking afforestation. Such a change will have climate impacts and also social impacts.

So what are the social impacts of forestry? In its narrowest sense the social impact of forestry can be measured in terms of employment generation. Based on research carried out by myself and a number of colleagues we estimated that the total (direct and indirect) employment associated with forestry is 5,531 full-time jobs; estimates for total employment in the wood products sector is 6,408 full-time jobs². This research dates back to 2012, and I am involved in new research to get more up to date estimates of current employment in the two sectors. Employees in the forestry and wood processing sectors are in the main rural based and a recent study suggests that a significant proportion of these are part-time farmers³.

In recent years the understanding of what is meant by social impacts has broadened to include impacts on quality of life. Forests may generate social values, or be connected with people’s lives, in ways that contribute or deduct from social well-being⁴. For example, forests provide opportunities for recreation and amenity. Based on published research, estimates of visitation rates to Irish forests vary from 18 million visits per annum⁵ to 29 million visits per annum⁶. Recreation in Ireland generally occurs in the public forest estate; there is no right of access to private forests.

Other quality of life impacts are generally assessed by investigating how local stakeholders perceive forestry as a part of their social and physical environment. In Ireland a number of social impact studies of forestry have been undertaken. These have focused on case studies in the north-west⁷; east and south-west of Ireland^{8, 9} and have employed structured interviews with stakeholders. The findings from this research indicate that the reaction to afforestation and attitudes generally to forestry are context specific. Where planted forests have been a feature of the landscape for a long period more positive attitudes to forestry and afforestation have been recorded^{10, 8}. Among the factors that influence reactions to afforestation is the question of “who is doing it?” is it local people or “outsiders”; if it is the latter it can lead to a sense that afforestation is replacing people thereby threatening cultural identity⁹. Even if local people, typically farmers, are those engaging in afforestation

there can be a concern that if trees replace agricultural activity that this will in turn replace people⁹.

The evidence to date is that the majority of the 22,955 owners of forests planted since 1980 are farmers¹¹. The statistics suggest that these have chosen to afforest only a portion of their farm, as the average size of afforestation parcel is 8.7 hectares¹¹. Typically afforestation has been carried out on the poorest parts of farms. The income from the forestry premium contributes to farm income and enables those who wish to do so to remain in farming⁹. In 2017, of the €72 million paid in forestry premiums, €67.5 million or 94%, was paid to farmers.

Social impact studies have consistently highlighted the often dramatic effect of large blocks of forest, in particular conifer forests, on the landscape^{8,9}. As trees grow they heighten the sense of social isolation that prevails in many rural areas. Afforestation has often coincided with social changes, such as a decline in the agricultural labour force, aging of the agricultural population, and population migration to urban areas. For some, forests are the manifestation of this rural transformation. Afforestation often also challenges long-held beliefs as to the appropriate use of agricultural land⁹.

At a broader scale public attitudes to forestry in Ireland have been gauged in a number of large studies. In the most recent study, the vast majority (88%) of the almost 1000 people surveyed agreed that forests were an important part of the traditional landscape of the Irish countryside and also agreed that all types of forests are good for the environment (78%)¹². Nevertheless, the study showed a strong preference for mixed forests and broadleaf forests over conifer forests¹³. It also showed (as have similar studies across Europe) that the forest outputs that the general public rank as the most important tend to be the ecological ones such as the conservation of plants and animals rather than the timber production and employment outputs.

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