ProSilva Ireland Statement to the Joint Committee on Climate Action, Houses of the Oireachtas, Leinster House.

ProSilva Ireland is an all Ireland organization supporting the use of alternative forest management systems to the clearfell / replant system that is currently widely practiced. These alternative systems are generally called “Continuous Cover Forestry” and these systems do not clearfell the forest but instead will thin trees from the forest periodically while allowing the retained forest to grow and develop. ProSilva Ireland was founded in 2000 and is part of a wider European network of ProSilva organisations across 27 countries. We have a diverse and dynamic membership of foresters, forest owners, forestry contractors, ecologists, wood scientists, artists and others.

Well managed forests can provide many functions. They can:
- produce timber for domestic and industrial use;
- be places of recreation;
- protect and clean our water;
- stabilize and improve our soils;
- harbour and enrich biodiversity;
- enhance our landscape;
- sequester carbon;
- shelter our farms;
- be places of inspiration, wonder and calm.

Up until now, successive forestry programmes and forestry practice in Ireland has really concentrated on the timber production function. This has resulted in the successful establishment of a vibrant timber processing sector and in vital job creation in rural communities. The clearfell and replant system has been efficient in producing timber to feed this developing industry and it is the forest management system that has been predominantly employed by the Irish forestry sector.

However, this management system struggles to satisfactorily deliver the other services that society requires from forests and this is at the heart of recent protests against forestry in Leitrim for example. It is clear that society wants more from Irish forests in the form of the aforementioned multiple benefits. This has been recognized in the forestry sector and many positive initiatives have developed over the last twenty years in this regard.
In ProSilva Ireland we believe that Continuous Cover Forestry will deliver these multiple benefits in a sustainable way that will re-connect our people with forests and create a forest culture that in centuries past we had and lost. We want profitable forests that produce valuable timber and where forest owners can generate income. However, these forests should also protect and enhance biodiversity, protect our water resources, they should bring us closer to nature and inspire our creative instincts.

This committee’s role is to consider action on climate change and what measures can be adopted to mitigate this hugely serious issue. Well managed forests are excellent carbon sinks and we are paying the price both globally and nationally for both current and historic deforestation. How we manage our forests also has a significant effect on the efficiency of carbon sequestration. Continuous Cover Forestry is an efficient means of optimising carbon storage in forests as it:

- Avoids the large scale release of soil carbon that occurs when plantation forests / are clearfelled (> 70% of forest carbon is held in forest soils)
- Produces a higher % of high quality and long life timber products in which sequestered Carbon is locked over a longer timeframe
- Increases forest biodiversity in general and provides permanent forest habitats which keep carbon locked in the forest or in long term harvested products
- Results in more resilient forests with lower biotic and abiotic risks
- Doesn’t require inputs associated with restocking such as re-cultivation, new plants grown in nurseries and transported to site, vegetation control, insecticide etc. which are all carbon emitting operations
- Is a suitable system for managing native woodlands and developing an industry around native timbers
- Serves the amenity and cultural functions of forests more satisfactorily than clearfelled landscapes
- During the transformation stage from new plantation to continuous cover forestry, smaller dimension timber is produced from early thinnings and used in renewable energy and heat production, displacing carboniferous fossil fuels

Planting new forests has been widely recognized as a tangible way in which society can take positive climate action. However, we must maintain a focus on delivering the multiple benefits of forestry to meet the needs of our growing population, the protection of our water and soils and to counter the growing biodiversity crisis.

The question of monocultures inevitably arises here. ProSilva Ireland are deeply concerned with the continued predominance of monocultures in Irish forestry. Even aged monocultural crops are incapable of delivering the wider long term social and environmental benefits of forestry. There is also considerable concern about their resilience in the face of climate change. Although concerns about their sustainability are not new, this is now being experienced across Europe where bark beetle is devastating large areas of monocultural spruce plantations that are suffering drought stress. We are experiencing problems with ash dieback in monocultural ash plantations here in Ireland. Most policy initiatives to date that were designed to
encourage or require greater levels of broadleaf / diverse conifer planting end up with compartmentalising of different species into plots – each plot another monoculture. We believe that new planting must be robustly mixed with greater utilization of native species and that the era of new monocultures is over. We know from experience from CCF forests managed in Ireland, and more so from those under longer term CCF management in Europe, that it is possible to sustain commercial timber production while delivering the multiple benefits.

It is important that expectations are managed in relation to what is possible. Forests by their very nature, take time to plan, develop, grow and transform. Similarly, if we want to achieve a cultural change in Irish forestry, this will also take time and investment. There is no magic wand that can be waved to transform Irish forests overnight. This will take long term planning with a refocusing of forest policy and programmes. There are significant challenges in the form of:

- Training and capacity building within the forestry sector
- Transforming existing monocultures into more diverse forests
- Maintaining commercial timber production and associated jobs through the necessary changes
- Reliance on private land owners and private forestry businesses to deliver the planting programme
- Educating wider society of the multiple benefits of forestry
- Managing invasive deer populations which in some parts of the country are rendering many forests unsustainable
- Transforming inappropriately located and designed forests back to more open habitats

Tackling climate change and specifically reducing our carbon and greenhouse gas emissions is a multi faceted problem and there is no single policy such as “planting more forests” that will solve it.

However, well designed and well managed resilient forests can play their part in tackling this great problem of our time, while at the same time doing so much more.

Paddy Purser, Pro Silva Ireland

05.12.2019

Pro Silva Ireland, 36 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin 2, Ireland
www.prosilvairland.org prosilvairland@gmail.com

Pro Silva Ireland Committee:

Chairman: Liam Byrne
Secretary: Declan Carroll
Paddy Purser
Padraig O’Tuama
Robert Scott
Sean Garvey

Vice Chairman: Vacant
Treasurer / Membership: Manus Crowley
Faith Wilson
Jonathan Spazzi
Ciaran Duggan
Sean Hoskins

PRO: Cathy Fitzgerald
Kevin O’Connell
Sean Conlan
Karen Woods