

Speech by Minister Hackett at Joint Committee on Agriculture and Marine

Issues relating to Forestry

- I would like to thank the Committee for this invitation today. This is my first appearance as Minister with responsibility for forestry and I very much welcome the opportunity to engage with you and to answer any questions you may have. It is clear that members have a keen interest in the forest sector which is not surprising. I share this interest which is reflected in the Programme for Government which as members will know is very ambitious for the future of forestry in Ireland;
- Forestry is an integral part of the rural economy and that the vast majority of the 23,000 private forest owners in the country are farmers. Indeed, as a farmer and forest owner myself, I fully understand how well forestry can sit alongside a productive farming enterprise. Payments and grants received through the Forestry Programme have allowed countless farmers to diversify their farm incomes. This has had a positive effective on the rural economy.
- Since 1990 the State has invested some €3 billion in forestry and continues to offer generous payments to those who sign up to planting. When you add in the thousands of jobs created right across the forestry supply chain the wider impact on the rural economy is formidable. I intend to continue with strong state supports for forestry during the lifetime of this Government;
- While forestry benefits the rural economy, it delivers other benefits to society too. As you know better than most, tree planting is increasingly recognised as an effective way to reduce net emissions and respond to the climate emergency. It makes a critical contribution to the agriculture and land use sector's response to climate breakdown. Forests are not only a carbon sink, but also help in preventing the erosion of soils and reducing flood risks, while also providing us with fantastic recreational spaces. These spaces have proven more valuable than ever in the current circumstances. As

we all know, time spent in nature, surrounded by the sounds and scents of trees, can restore our mood and refresh and rejuvenate us.

- Our forests are contributing to our biodiversity goals also. The forest estate in Ireland is very diverse with 29% of forest cover made up of broadleaves and native woodlands. This year we hit a milestone, with the highest recorded planting of native woodlands at 450 hectares. This totals over 1.4 million individual native trees, half of which were planted by farmers. The creation and restoration of these woodlands is a vitally important part of the Forestry Programme, given their historical and cultural significance.
- However forestry as a land-use in this country has become has become divisive. This is often characterised by misinformation or misunderstandings and a priority for all of us with an interest in the sector is to ensure that any strategy is informed by facts and science. It is also essential that all stakeholders with an interest in the sector are communicating directly and constructively. It is for this this reason that I have established a new stakeholder Forestry Policy Group which meets for the first time this Thursday. This Group will help to provide stakeholder input on the big forestry questions, both short-term and longer-term issues such as the development of the next Forestry Programme.
- For now though, I understand the focus is on the immediate priorities and particularly licencing issues. The Committee has asked me to address this and the ash dieback scheme in particular.

Ash Dieback

- The ash tree is of historical and cultural significance too and the unfortunate effects of Ash Dieback has been felt in ash plantations throughout the country. As the eradication of the disease is no longer possible, we have now moved into a phase of disease management. This is the approach being

followed under the new Ash Dieback scheme known as the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme.

- The revised approach set out in the new scheme categorises plantations into three groups based on the plantation age and tree size. Different support options are available, depending on the category into which the ash plantation may fall. This approach aims to encourage the active management of ash plantations in the context of the control and spread of ash dieback disease.
- It also aims to promote the vigorous growth of ash through thinning to realise as much of the potential value of the crop as possible. Since its launch almost 200 applications have been submitted and we moving to deal with those applications so that forest owners will have certainty in terms of how to manage their individual situation.
- This is a valuable reconstitution scheme and one which recognises the difficulties faced by the landowners concerned. It is a responsive and well considered measure and its important now that we move to process the many applications and allow the applicants to get on with managing their plantataion. I know that members may have questions about the scheme, and I will be happy to answer any that arise.

Licencing

- Turning now to licencing issues, I absolutely acknowledge that there are huge difficulties in the forestry sector related to licencing. I have been engaging intensively with all relevant stakeholders on this issue and know what is happening. I am aware that the current delays in issuing licences have led to serious difficulties for people involved in the forestry industry. Everyone here knows that both the licencing and appeals system has come under significant pressure in the last two years. This is not a situation which

can be resolved immediately or through one single action. It requires many different solutions and I would like to outline to the Committee the many steps we are taking to help resolve matters.

- On appeals first, we reached a point during the summer where close to 100% of certain licences were being appealed and the appeals system was overwhelmed. This was clearly an unsustainable situation and why I moved quickly to bring forward the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2020, almost immediately on taking office. I want to acknowledge the contribution which members of both Houses made to the passage of the Bill. The Act was concluded on 7 October and the implementing regulations were introduced immediately afterwards.
- These initiatives are already having an impact. We now have four Forestry Appeals Committees in place, up from one, which will significantly increase the number of cases determined. The Act also allows for other improvements in the appeals process in line with other planning systems, such as enabling the FAC to determine appeals without an oral hearing where appropriate, and the introduction of reasonable fees which I have introduced. I should emphasise of course that the FAC is completely independent of my Department. I am confident that these changes will make the system significantly more efficient and fairer to both applicant and appellant.
- As members of this Committee know, my Department is the sole licensing authority for all afforestation, forest road and felling applications. All licences must be issued in compliance with EU and national environmental legislation, including the 1992 EU Habitats Directive. It is essential therefore that all licences are issued in full compliance with the relevant regulations and that the integrity of the licencing process is fully upheld. Due to changes in the interpretation of environmental law, we have had to

completely overhaul our Appropriate Assessment procedures in the last 18 months.

- The complexity involved in developing and resourcing a new approach to assessing these licences should not be underestimated. We now have a robust and reliable procedure in place..
- These delays have led to a backlog of some 1,900 files on our system for consideration. This backlog, which is a subset of our overall licencing output, is of particular concern to me and I am anxious that we resolve it as quickly as possible We committed in a project plan to KPIs for this cohort of licences which we are not meeting and we must redouble our efforts. We are tackling this backlog through a dedicated project plan, which operates to key performance indicators. A project manager is in place to and a Project Management Board is overseeing and monitoring delivery weekly. We have invested heavily in extra ecologists and now employ 16 full-time equivalent ecologists where previously we had one. 10 additional forestry inspectors have been recruited to deliver on the plan and it is already yielding progress with an increase in output month-on-month.
- I understand that my Department is now sharing with the Committee the weekly dashboard of outputs. In that you will start to see early signs of progress with October bring the highest output this year. We issued 12 new forestry licences every day in October and over 300 licences for the month. Our aim is to sustain and grow this level of output. Productivity will improve further as experience grows and as we adjust and review the system to make it more effective. Additional resources will also help. We have also provided updated guidance and advice to companies on how to maximise the quality of their applications and are committed to working with all stakeholders to resolve this. I would like to assure the Committee that I am very much committed to turning this situation around and believe we have the right processes and people in place to do so.

- Notwithstanding the current difficulties, we must look to the future. The Government is committed to the development of a new Climate Bill and forestry will be a key part of this. We have huge potential to increase our forest cover from 11% and I am determined to put in place the strategies and programmes to deliver this. There is a clear opportunity to do so as this as we have the second lowest forest cover in Europe. To do so will require an ambitious new National Forestry Programme. It will need to be transformative in nature to encourage farmer uptake and to garner societal support. I will therefore be looking for a partnership between the political system, businesses, state bodies, farmers and communities in developing a vision for forestry. We will start the discussion on this shortly and I look forward to your views.

Thank you for your attention.