

## **Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Agriculture and Marine**

### **Attendance by officials of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine**

#### **Challenges Facing the Forestry Industry, including ash dieback and licensing issues**

**29<sup>th</sup> January, 2021**

- I would like to thank the Committee for this invitation today and we welcome the opportunity to update on developments since Minister Hackett's appearance before the Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2020.
- I know Mr. Chairman that you have asked me to address certain issues in my opening statement which I am pleased to do below. Before coming to these, I would like to highlight that there have been a number of important developments on forestry policy since the Minister's appearance before the Committee as the work continues to help drive the strategic development of the sector. Amongst the main developments have been:
  - The establishment by the Minister of a new Forestry Policy Group which has met on two occasions already with plans to further intensify its work in 2021;
  - The commissioning by the Minister of an external consultant, Ms. Jo O'Hara, to advise on the implementation of the MacKinnon report with her report due to be received by end-February;
  - The launch of a new one-stop online forestry portal called the Forestry licence viewer for the display of all new forestry licence applications and decisions. This is part of the Minister's commitment to further enhancing transparency and public participation in forestry decision-making;
  - The introduction, as a result of Brexit, of significant new import and export requirements for timber and timber products since 1<sup>st</sup> January

which to date appear to be functioning relatively smoothly thanks to the intensive preparatory work by all concerned. There has been a huge Department effort on developing systems and recruiting and training staff for export certification and import controls. We continue to engage intensively with the sector on this;

- The continued improvement in licencing output with just under 1,200 licences issued in the last four months and which requires further intensive effort before the situation is resolved;
- I will address the licensing in more detail. Members are more than aware of how vastly changed our licensing system now is due to the requirements of environmental law. As mentioned before, while these changes took time in terms of new procedures, training, the recruitment of ecology and other resources, it is now a very robust process. This is what is needed to support the national aim to deliver sustainable forestry.
- The Department continues to focus all efforts on the licensing issues which are impacting the sector. There is no denying that delays have created difficulties for those involved in the forestry sector. As all here know, both the licencing and appeals system have come under significant pressure in the last two years. We have and are taking steps to resolve the situation. While we are not where we wish to be, the situation has improved. In recent months there has been an increase in the number of licences issued and this momentum will be built upon to deliver continuous improvement in the months ahead.
- As a licencing authority, we essentially have three strands to our licencing programme:
  - Private licencing
  - Private files referred to ecology;

- Coillte files

- All three combine to deliver our monthly output. In reality, it is only since October that we have seen real progress in licencing. However, we acknowledge that this improvement has been uneven.
- The improvement since October has come about because our investment in resources has started to come through. We now have 16 full-time equivalent ecologists on forestry licencing which is up from just 2 this time last year. We are continuing to recruit ecologists and will be adding to this team very soon. 10 permanent Forestry inspectors have already been recruited or reassigned to assist on forestry licencing.
- The Committee now has sight of the weekly dashboard of outputs. In there you have seen that output for the months October to December and continuing into January showed a significant increase on earlier months averaging close to 300 licences per month.. In fact, January looks like being the best month in some 18 months for volume of licences issued.
- As indicated before, we adopted a strategy of prioritising felling volume in view of the urgent need for this volume by the sector and in order to help maintain jobs. This meant prioritising licences which would deliver higher output. Licences for felling volume of some 2.8 million tonnes has issued since October.
- Coillte, as the largest supplier of material to Irish sawmills, has seen its 2021 licencing programme significantly improved and they have 85% of their 2021 programme already licenced with the final felling licences for the year to be processed over the next few weeks. I understand that not all of this is immediately available for sale but they are working with the Department to close out any issues and ensure availability of this supply to market as quickly as possible.

- In summary terms the end of year position for 2020 was as follows:
  - The total number of licences issued in 2020 was 2,593. 1,045 new licences issued October to December reflecting the improvement in licencing output in Q4 of 2020.
  - On felling:
    - The volume licenced in 2020 was just over 5 million m<sup>3</sup>. This is down from the 6.5 million m<sup>3</sup> licenced in 2019. Of the 5 million licenced, some 2.7m m<sup>3</sup> was for Coillte and the remaining 2.3m for the private sector;
    - 40% of this output or 2 million m<sup>3</sup> was licenced between October and December.
    - 2,760 felling applications are on hand at present. This is down from 3,230 applications on hand at 1<sup>st</sup> October last;
    - Since 1st October, 29 felling licence decisions have been appealed for 474ha/124,803m<sup>3</sup>
  - On afforestation,
    - Licences to provide for 4,300ha of new afforestation issued in 2020 which is the same figure as 2019. 2,433 new ha's were planted in 2020.
    - There were 960 afforestation licence applications on hand on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2020; 1,090 afforestation licences are on hand at present.
    - Afforestation licences have a three-year validity and a total of 4,900ha remains licenced and available for planting with a valid afforestation licence and not subject to appeal.
    - Broadleaf trees made up 34% of all new planting In 2020. This is an increase from 21% just 3 years ago and means that the 30% broadleaf planting target set out in the Forestry Programme has been exceeded for the first time since the start of the Programme;.
    - Since 1st October, 23 afforestation licences were appealed totalling 306ha.
- On Forest roads

- 129km of forest roads were licensed in 2020. This compares to 195km in 2019 and both are above the target in the Climate Action Plan of 125km per year
  - Since 1st October, 10 roads licences were appealed amounting to 5.2km
  - There were 642 forest road applications on hand at 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2020; approx. 700 road licences are on hand at present
- It is clear that notwithstanding recent gains that the progress has been uneven and that the project plan for private licences has not been delivering to the extent we would like or that stakeholders would expect
- We are more than aware that for the thousands of farmers who have planted with the assistance of the State, a felling licence is needed so that they can realise their asset. Licensing also supports the planting of new forests by farmers who wish to complement their farming activity and who wish to avail of the generous grants and premiums available. New forestry is essential to meeting not only our economic objectives but also our climate change targets and our aims in terms of enhancing biodiversity. As mentioned at this Committee before, tree planting makes a vital contribution to the agriculture and land use sector's response to the climate change challenge.
- The vital importance of forestry to deliver on society's needs is well understood and the need for a robust licensing regime to unlock this value into the future is clear. Therefore, the immediate priority is to address the current licencing difficulties.
- We currently have approximately 4,500 licences on hand for processing which has reduced from 4,700 in October which means licence decisions are exceeding new applications received. As mentioned above the categorisation of these applications on hand are:

- 1,090 afforestation applications;
- 730 roads applications
- 2,700 felling applications
- Issuing these as licences remains our top priority for 2021
- A particular focus of our efforts is on the 1,900 files needing specific ecological assessment in our system. This backlog is a subset of our overall licencing output and there are other files which are not yet licensed but these are the ones which pose a particular challenge. While the project plan for these licences has not delivered the output expected, mainly due to the complexity of the files encountered, we are re-adjusting the plan and providing extra resources in order to reach the targets set.
- It is our objective to increase this level of output by means of increasing the productivity of the resources we have and by recruiting further ecologists and inspectors in 2021. We have sanctioned for eight permanent ecologists and intend to recruit 10 contract ecologists. Ten new inspectors are in place with a further 4 to be added to that.
- The initiatives we have introduced are making a difference and will continue to do so. We are fully committed to resolving this situation so that all stakeholders may have renewed confidence in the system. We will continue to engage intensively with all stakeholders as we see to resolve this issue.

### **Forestry Appeals Committee**

- Turning to appeals now. Since its introduction in October, the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2020, has had a real impact on the efficiency of the appeals system. While the FAC is completely independent of the Department, I can update on its current output based on their figures reported to us.
- There are now four Forestry Appeals Committees in place, up from one, which has significantly increased the number of decisions made. The FAC

is now hearing on average of 60 appeals per month, as opposed to 24 previously. In total 191 licences under appeal have been heard since the new committees came into operation on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2021. The number of appeals received since the introduction of the Act is now much reduced with 50 licences appealed in that period. The FAC now expects to have dealt with all appeals on hand by the end of June, including those received since the introduction of the new Act.

### **Ash Dieback**

- As advised previously, the effects of Ash Dieback have been felt in ash plantations throughout the country. The eradication of the disease is no longer possible, which is why we have now moved into a phase of disease management. This is the approach adopted under the new Ash Dieback scheme known as the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme.
- This approach aims to encourage the active management of ash plantations in the context of the control and spread of ash dieback disease. It 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. 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 in June over 250 applications have been submitted. We have communicated directly with the majority of these applicants and the remainder will receive notification this week. We have also begun to issue approvals, and this will continue as applications are assessed.

Thank you.

