

Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Agriculture and Marine

Attendance by Senator Pippa Hackett, Minister of State for land Use and Biodiversity Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Issues relating to the Forestry Industry

4th August 2021

- Good afternoon. I would like to thank the Committee for this invitation today. I very much welcome the opportunity to update you on developments since the last appearance by my officials before this Committee on 27th May. My officials were also here on 29th Jan, and on the 3rd Dec and 17th Nov last. I myself was here on 3rd Nov. So, I would like to acknowledge the ongoing interest and engagement of this Committee with issues impacting the forestry sector in Ireland. I am joined here today by Patricia Kelly and Kevin Collins from the Forest Service, and the Project Manager of Project Woodland Eamonn O’Doherty.
- I know, Cathaoirleach. that while there are many issues affecting forestry, licensing is the most immediate and impactful challenge the sector faces. I am more than aware of its importance and it continues to be my top priority. My officials, as well as Working Groups under Project Woodland, are completely focussed on turning this situation around and we all want to reach a stage where licences are issued in a timely fashion.
- And we have been making in-roads into this problem, as members will have seen from the figures published on the weekly dashboard. It is of note that the number of licences issued in June at 415 were the highest since July 2019, and that the number of private felling licences issued in June was the highest in the last five years at 220. This is progress indeed and a trend I would wish to see continuing.

- As regards the total number of licences issued this year, this figure was at 1,900 at 23rd July, which is 42% of our annual target of 4,500 licences. While one may expect that this should have been higher, it has always been our intention to intensify output in the latter half of the year, on the basis of system improvements and streamlining of procedures.
- These improvements have already had an effect, as can be seen in the number of licences issued in June. The system improvements introduced in the preparation of the various Appropriate Assessment documents have allowed our ecologists to optimise their time, and to concentrate on the ecology aspects of each application. Currently, these improvements are applied to tree felling licence applications and roads only, and we are now turning our attention to applying the system to afforestation files. This should increase output on these files too.
- Speaking of system improvements, it is the case that better quality applications have a smoother progression through the licensing process. In order to make the system more efficient, and to give a clear picture of why certain files are held up, we recently provided Registered Foresters and Forestry companies with lists of felling files which require further information before they can be progressed by ecology. We have found that around half of the applications for private felling files screened in for Appropriate Assessment require further information. Working together with the registered foresters and in the spirit of co-operation I believe that we can improve this situation, to the benefit of forest owners.
- Of course, members will have noticed a down-turn in licence output for July. This is directly linked to the introduction of a second 30-day public consultation process for applications subject to Appropriate Assessment. These requirements arise from the European Union (Birds and Habitats) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (SI Number 293 of 2021), which were

recently introduced by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

- This means that any application that is screened in for Appropriate Assessment, and which has a Nature Impact Statement or an Appropriate Assessment Report, must be advertised with all relevant documentation on the Forestry Licence Viewer for 30 days public consultation. This is part of an extensive public consultation process which affords all interested parties an opportunity to have their say in relation to projects with the potential to impact European sites.
- There is no denying that this does add extra time to the processing of these applications. We must now advertise all such cases, and we are currently working our way through them. 536 cases went to public consultation up to 23rd July, an average of 178 a week. The first of these will exit this process on the 6th of August. We have not, to date, received any submissions on cases advertised, but if we do they will need to be taken into account before the file progresses to decision.
- The reality is that this has indeed affected recent output, as certain files ready for decision were interrupted. We are committed to making up this ground and I expect that by mid-August you will see an increase in the number of licences issued and a return to previous levels. This new requirement means that we will have to re-double our efforts to reach our target of 4,500 licences this year, but I remain hopeful that we can do so.
- The number of licences issued is not the only metric and the volume of timber licensed is a crucial factor for the sawmills. The volume issued to 23rd July 2021 is 3.727 million cubic metres.
- In terms of overall output to 23rd July:
 - Afforestation is at 2,732 hectares
 - Road lengths licenced are at 157 km

- We are making progress but there is a way to go and clearly there is more to be done. And as I said at the outset Project Woodland is key to this. Its work is focussed on identifying the means to improve the system by introducing efficiencies and on resolving the backlog.
- I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the excellent work done so far by the Project Board and the four Working Groups. Since we introduced the Project in February, there has been intense and active engagement by all involved, and the first Interim Report by the Project Board, published the week before last, bears witness to this productivity.
- The Board has received a number of excellent papers and recommendations from the Working Groups and has examined each, has spoken to the Chairs and has evaluated them in detail. It has provided feedback and suggested next steps, as outlined in the Interim Report.
- I am glad to say that the Board has agreed to immediately advance two of these recommendations.
- The first recommendation, a regulatory review, is one which members here will be well familiar, and indeed was one of your own recommendations, and one which I wholeheartedly support. It was also recommended by both the Backlog Working Group and the Process Improvement Working Group. It involves an independent regulatory and planning review of the licensing system, to be conducted by an independent expert or experts and it has already been advertised for tender.
- It will review the existing statutory framework for the licencing of forestry activities in relation to environmental and public participation obligations in order that practical advice can be provided to DAFM on how to work more efficiently within the existing legal framework. Arrangements in other EU Member States will be considered to see if lessons can be learnt from them. The review will also evaluate the current 15km radius for screening for

Appropriate Assessment, having regard to the requirements of European Union law. The business systems analysis currently being undertaken by our business analyst, Shelly O’Sullivan, will interact with and run parallel with the regulatory review, so that best possible system improvements are delivered.

- The second recommendation, made by the Shared National Approach Working Group, is the prioritisation of an effective and inclusive public consultation on a shared vision for forestry. Our future vision for forestry must ensure we bring nature and communities with us. This important work has commenced, and stakeholder and public attitudes to the role of trees, woods and forests in Ireland’s future will be canvassed, through various means and fora, in order to reach a shared vision. I expect that our Forest Strategy will be influenced by the new European Forest Strategy which was published on 16th July 2021. We will of course be aiming for a balanced strategy for forestry in this country to address environmental, societal, and economic needs.
- Of interest to members too will be the Project Charter for Project Woodland, which has been published along with the Interim Report. This was drawn up by the Project Manager, Eamon O’Doherty. The Charter outlines very clearly the scope, tasks, governance structure and reporting and communications framework for the Project.
- Turning to other matters, members have on previous occasions raised the Ash Dieback Scheme, which I know is of interest to many forest owners. As the Scheme has been in place for over a year, I thought it timely to assess the response to its operation to date. One question which arose was the availability of management options for plantations greater than 25 years of age. After careful consideration I have now revised these management options as set out in Circular 12/2021 of 23rd July 2021, which is published on the government

website. This change brings sites over 25 year of age into the Scheme. We will, of course, review those cases over 25 years which were refused under the previous rule and issue a fresh decision.

- Another development I would like to bring to your attention is a proposed new riparian native woodland initiative under the National Forestry Programme. We all know that we face significant challenges in terms of meeting Ireland's environmental objectives. This proposal focusses primarily on addressing our water quality goals but will have associated and real benefits for climate change and biodiversity too.
- It builds on the success of the Native Woodland Establishment Scheme which can now be more specifically focussed to target water protection. The plan is to introduce, in addition to the current grant and 15-year premiums, a once-off bonus top-up payment of €1,000 per hectare to those landowners planting critical source areas in EPA PIP (Pollution Impact Potential) zones and similarly in accordance with drinking water Source Protection Plans. The extra payment will also be made available in other defined circumstances. These are to be identified by my Department in consultation with Inland Fisheries Ireland, the OPW (e.g., to create natural water retention measures), Irish Water (e.g., to protect water abstraction points), and LAWCO (e.g., to enhance areas as part of community involvement in local waters).
- We would hope to roll this out, once all details are finalised, in the Autumn. We will promote the scheme widely and in particular encourage farmer uptake. My officials are engaging with Teagasc advisors, LAWPRO community officers and with the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advice Programme, Inland Fisheries and the Dept of Housing and Planning so that we can achieve this.
- In conclusion, I would like to say that I am confident that we are moving in the right direction and that the momentum already shown in dealing with all

of the issues facing us will be maintained and indeed gather pace in the second half of this year.

- Thank you for your attention and I am now happy to take your questions.