

Opening Statement on Forestry to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine – 5th July 2023, 5.30pm

Update on Ireland's Forestry Strategy

Thank you for the invitation to your meeting today. I very much welcome the opportunity to provide an update on Ireland's Forest Strategy and forestry programme.

Today we will be discussing the Government's approach to expanding, protecting and developing our forests and woodlands for the benefit of the environment, people and the economy, especially the rural economy.

The first requirement of any new Strategy is a Vision for what we are trying to achieve. What do people want from our forests, what value do they attach to them and what benefits do they wish to get from them?

After extensive consultation across a broad section of society which included a citizens deliberative dialogue, a youth forum, engagement with rural communities and bi-laterals with key stakeholders, a Vision Statement was published last year. It called for "the right trees in the right places for the right reasons with the right management".

This new Vision statement underpins the development of a new Forest Strategy to 2030, which sets out clear objectives for the role of trees and forests in Ireland between now and 2030. This draft strategy focuses on 5 key goals which recognises the importance of forests for Climate, Nature, Wood, People and the rural economy.

The Strategy in turn will be realised in the medium term by means of a range of actions. A significant proportion of these actions will be delivered under the proposed new Forestry Programme for 2023 to 2027..

To inform both the Forest Strategy and the Programme we have consulted widely. As part of the SEA and AA process a 6-week public consultation has been carried out on the draft Implementation Plan. In parallel we invited submissions on the Forest Strategy. We have 130 submissions on the Strategy and over 150 on the Forest Strategy Implementation Plan. We are currently examining these inputs and expect to be in position to publish the Strategy as soon as Forestry Programme receives State Aid Approval.

. The Department, after an extensive pre-notification process, submitted the Formal State Aid Notification for the Forestry Programme 2023-2027 on the 20th April 2023. The Department is engaged proactively with the Commission in order to secure State Aid approval as soon as possible.

The Commission is currently reviewing this notification in detail to decide whether the proposed Forestry Programme is compatible with EU State Aid Rules. I can advise that to this effect, the Department has now received further written correspondence relating to this notification on the 06th and the 21st of June 2023.

Additionally, bi-lateral discussions were held on the Forestry Programme in person between the Commission and Minister Eamon Ryan and Minister of State Pippa Hackett on the 20th June 2023. This included intensive engagements with First Vice President Timmermans and Commissioner Sinkevičius.

The Department has recently responded in detail to the correspondence received on the 6th June and is also currently preparing an additional comprehensive reply to the further correspondence received on the 21st June, which will issue shortly.

The Department recognises the importance of a well-funded forestry programme and has highlighted the importance to the European Commission who are currently assessing Irelands application for state aid.

We look forward to engaging with the Joint Oireachtas Committee this evening and addressing any questions you may have.