

**Opening Statement by Minister McConalogue to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine – 4 October 2023, 5.30 pm**

- Thank you for the invitation to your meeting today. Both myself and Minister Hackett very much welcome the opportunity to update the Committee on Ireland's Forestry Programme and Strategy.
- I am pleased to say that after a long and protracted process we published the Forest Strategy and launched the Forestry Programme on the 6<sup>th</sup> September. It is timely that we now discuss this significant milestone.
- The Forest Strategy reflects what people want from their forests. This has changed over time. It has broadened out, as we all know. It now includes a full range of values and benefits that people expect from their forests. Jobs, recreational areas, diverse forests, wood, climate and environmental considerations and support for our rural community are now all part of the mix. These objectives are set out clearly in the new Forest Strategy to 2030
- How are we going to deliver on these collective goals ? It is a big ask and in response we have published a comprehensive and detailed Forest Action Plan [ known as the Forest Strategy Implementation Plan.] The majority of the actions in the Plan relate to the new Forestry Programme, which we are discussing here today. There are however non- Programme actions too which will contribute to the development of the forestry sector.
- The new Programme is all about expanding, protecting, and developing Ireland's forests and the forestry sector in an environmentally sustainable way.
- However if we wish to have a successful Programme, we need farmers to plant trees and we really need to reverse the declining interest in forestry.
- It is not always an easy decision to get involved in forestry and I know that farmer engagement in planting has been in decline in recent years.
- Forestry is, after all, a significant land use change and I am very well aware of the many competing demands on land use at the moment.
- The new Programme is designed to address this resistance and to present forestry as an attractive proposition. It has 12 diverse forest types, with options to suit every farm. Farmers can now avail of 20 year premiums in addition to getting paid their Basic Income Support payment on land afforested.
- There has been some commentary about the farmer definition for the Afforestation Scheme. The purpose of this definition is to ensure that those extra 5 years of premiums are received by farmers. We have made provision for new and young farmers in our definition also. It is our intention that active farmers who own and or manage land will benefit from these extra payments.

- It bears repeating that under this Programme forestry premiums have been increased by between 46% and 66% and Premium payments now range from between €746 to €1,142 per hectare, per year. This should prove an attractive package for farmers who wish to have an additional source of farm income to complement their main farming activity.
- Given the range of planting options now available, there is something to suit all farming types. That farmer who wishes to produce wood for our bio-economy may choose to plant mainly spruce. Agroforestry, which we have revised significantly since the last programme, will find favour with those who wish to combine forestry and pasture, including grazing and growing fodder.
- And today I am happy to say Minister Hackett opened the Native Tree Area Scheme, which could suit many farmers who have never planted before and wish to try out planting on a small scale. This allows tree planting without the need for an afforestation licence, while of course observing environmental law. Farmers will be able to create small native forests or native forests for water protection of up to 2 hectares per holding. I look forward to significant interest in this scheme in the coming months. Indeed we could have new native forests planted before the end of the year under the scheme.
- While farmers are key to increasing planting levels, public bodies will have the opportunity to play their part also. We will support communities too who wish to create and enhance local forests for the benefit of all.
- Our ambition now is to expand our forests beyond the current 11.6% of land cover. I know that this will present challenges but with the type and range of planting on offer in the new Programme, and the incentives provided, I believe we will see renewed interest and a new impetus behind afforestation.
- Thank you for your attention and I will now hand over to Minister Hackett.