

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

- Thank you Minister McConalogue and thank you members of the Committee for this invitation today. I am very keen to discuss the Strategy and most importantly and of immediate significance the new Forestry Programme.
- As Minister McConalogue mentioned it has been a long and protracted process to arrive at a new Vision, Strategy and Forestry Programme for Ireland. It involved extensive public and stakeholder consultation and intensive engagement with the Commission to secure State Aid approval for the €1.3 billion commitment to forestry.
- What we now have is, I believe, very much in line with the spirit of the Shared National Vision that we will plant the right trees in the right places for the right reasons with the right management. True, we now exclude some areas which might have been planted historically, but this is necessary to meet our environmental obligations and to avoid the mistakes of the past. We can no longer plant on SPAs (Special Protection Areas for Birds), the top 8 Freshwater Pearl Mussel areas or within 1.5 kms of Curlew breeding sites.
- An analysis has been carried out on the afforestation files on hand that may be affected by these new restrictions. Of the 437 applications, approximately 3% are in areas that will not now be eligible under the conditions of the scheme, as they are within 1.5 km of a Curlew site. Approximately 24% of the applications are entirely unaffected by the changes and the remainder will require further assessment regarding their eligibility as they are in areas where new restrictions may apply and this may affect their eligibility. These applications are either on peat soils, in High Nature value Areas, in Breeding wader areas or a combination of these.
- I know that this will require additional work at application stage in cases affected. We are addressing this by means of virtual training sessions already held and by in person training of all registered foresters across the country starting next week. We have also produced guidance documents to assist foresters and a Frequently Asked Questions document to clarify any matters arising. We will continue to engage frequently and openly in order to facilitate the submission of the maximum number of applications. Furthermore we have an environmental report grant to support applicants in submitting required documents.
- In tandem with this training we have a targeted communication campaign underway. As Minister McConalogue mentioned, farmers are key to the delivery of the Programme. To this end we had a forestry focussed presence at the National Ploughing Championships and we have produced a Farm Forestry Booklet. This explains in clear terms the different forest types and the grants and premiums available. We will be sending a copy of this booklet to every farmer in the country.
- Print advertisements have been placed in newspapers and you may have heard some of our radio ads advising that ‘it pays to plant a forest.’ This promotion is also happening on social media and starting next week Teagasc is hosting a series of 20 information sessions throughout the country.
- Of course, we would like all interested in forestry to promote the new Programme. We will fund such initiatives under our Call for Proposals which is currently open to applications.
- I know there is concern that the legacy issue of delays in issuing licences will affect interest in planting. Our department has undertaken a great deal of work to address previous licensing issues, by improving processes and increasing resources. I believe that we are now in a position to give certainty to applicants as to when they will receive their licence.
- Currently we are working on a Licensing Plan which will cover the remainder of 2023 and will also provide indicative plans for 2024.
- We were not in a position to do so without having an indication of the number of applicants with an existing licence or with an application in the system who would opt into the new Programme.

I am pleased to say that we have received 377 opt ins for 3412 hectares to date, and that licences began to issue last week.

- I am acutely aware that another issue we need to address is the Ash Dieback situation. I know the distress that this disease has caused. Yesterday I published the report of the Independent Review Group which I commissioned to examine existing and previous supports available to landowners with affected ash plantations.
- We are looking closely at the recommendations in this report, some of which are in hand and some of which require further assessment, in particular in the context of State Aid rules.
- I will publish a full implementation plan in due course, but in the meantime, I would encourage affected landowners to apply for the newly launched reconstitution scheme. It will cover the costs of clearing and replanting affected sites, and it offers top-up payments to new higher rates for forest owners who are still eligible for premiums. I also want to stress my clear intention that any forest owner who applies to this scheme, or who availed of the 2020 reconstitution scheme, will not be disadvantaged by any changes made as a result of the independent review process.
- I wish to make clear my support for all types of planting under this new Programme, from native trees to agroforestry to forests planted primarily for timber production. The Forest Strategy Implementation plan has non-Programme actions focussed on increasing the amount of timber in construction, and we need landowners to plant productive mixed forests to support this aim. In support of this goal, this morning I announced Professor Owen Lewis as Chair of the Timber in Construction Working Group. The members of this group will shortly be announced, and they will seek to promote the use of timber in the Irish construction sector, so that we can displace emissions-intensive steel and concrete where possible.
- There are of course many other aspects of the Programme, which support the sustainable management of our forests which will be rolled out in the coming months, and we already have the Knowledge Transfer Scheme up and running.
- We have an enormous opportunity to make optimal use of our forests and to establish new ones for the benefit of future generations under this Programme, and I hope that this opportunity is grasped by all.
- Thank you.