

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

---

## AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT AGUS MUIR

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND THE MARINE

---

*Dé Máirt, 3 Samhain 2020*

*Tuesday, 3 November 2020*

---

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 4 p.m.

---

The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Martin Browne,	Victor Boyhan,
Matt Carthy,	Paul Daly,
Michael Collins,	Tim Lombard.
Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Joe Flaherty,	
Paul Kehoe,	
Brian Leddin.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Michael Healy-Rae, Carol Nolan, Éamon Ó Cuív and Sean Sherlock.

Teachta / Deputy Jackie Cahill sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

### **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** We will commence. Members are requested to ensure that for the duration of the meeting, their phones are turned off completely or turned to airplane, safe or flight mode. It is not sufficient for members to put their phones on silent as this maintains a level of interference with the broadcasting system.

Members have been furnished with the draft minutes of the private meeting held last week. I will deal with these at the end of the meeting in private session, together with correspondence received, including the Minister's response to our letter on marts.

### **Challenges for the Forestry Sector: Discussion (Resumed)**

**Chairman:** This is the second of a series of meetings on the challenges facing the forestry sector, including ash dieback and licensing. We are joined, via Zoom, by representatives from Forest Industries Ireland - IBEC and Woodlands of Ireland. First we will hear from Forest Industries Ireland - IBEC, represented by Mr. Mark McAuley, director, and Mr. Peter O'Brien, chairman of the forestry group. We will then hear from Mr. Joe Gowran, chief executive officer of Woodlands of Ireland.

Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I advise the witnesses who are giving evidence from locations outside the parliamentary precincts to note that the constitutional protections afforded to witnesses attending to give evidence before committees may not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or the extent to which, the evidence to be given is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature. Persons giving evidence from another jurisdiction should also be mindful of their domestic statutory regime. If witnesses are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a matter, they must respect that direction. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I invite the representatives from Forest Industries Ireland to make their submission.

**Mr. Mark McAuley:** I am the director of Forest Industries Ireland. Our chairman, Mr. Brian Murphy, sends his apologies as he was called away and was not able to make it this afternoon. I am joined by Mr. Peter O'Brien, chairman of the forestry group within Forest Industries Ireland. I thank the Chairman and members for the opportunity to discuss with them the contribution forestry and timber are making to our economy, society and environment. We would also like to talk about some of the deep challenges the sector is facing.

Forest Industries Ireland is an all-island body constituted within IBEC. Our member companies cover the whole supply chain. There are nurseries that grow the saplings. We have

forestry consultants who work with farmers and landowners to plant and manage their forests. We have factories that convert the forest crop into construction timber, panel products, fencing materials, packaging, biofuel and other products.

For many decades, the State and our people have invested in increasing afforestation in Ireland. In return, Ireland has an industry that provides 12,000 jobs throughout our rural communities. The economic contribution is of the order of €2.3 billion per annum. Over the coming years, the private forests planted in the 1980s and 1990s will come to maturity and significantly increase the supply to the market. This is a further opportunity for Ireland.

Today, we work with more than 20,000 farmer forest owners. Most of them made the decision to plant a portion of their farms. They get a steady and reliable income, and it delivers a valuable crop when the forest matures. Increasingly, farmers are interested in the environmental contribution their forests make.

In Ireland, our forests produce timber three times faster than in Scandinavia. The forests are a major carbon sink. Forestry in Ireland is therefore already a big part of this island's fight against climate change. Irish forests are capturing 3.6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year. The total carbon store is in excess of 300 million tonnes. This is a testament to the policies of successive Governments to plant trees and create a vibrant forest sector. All over the world, forests have been identified as the most scalable opportunity to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>. In Ireland, we have learned a lot. We are increasing diversity and balance in our forests, providing more leisure and recreational opportunities for our citizens and increasing the provision of one of nature's great renewable raw materials.

We should increasingly seek to use our own timber as a mass-market construction material. Wood can displace carbon-intensive materials in our built environment and is doing so today throughout the world. The world's tallest timber building was completed in Norway this year. It has 18 storeys of apartments. We should also embrace greater use of timber in Ireland. This would require changes to our building regulations. The Government can take a lead by enabling more timber housing and procuring new, greener schools and civic buildings which use cross-laminated timber as the backbone of their structure.

Ireland's forest policy is constantly evolving. To continue this into the future, we must plant more and continue to improve forest management. We have done well to climb back from less than 1% forest cover 100 years ago to the 11% of today. Now is the time to redouble our efforts and build a coalition of farmers, foresters and policymakers to drive continued forest development. Farmers are the foundation of future forestry. Industry and the Government must rise to the challenge of rewarding these farmers. Without enthusiastic participation from all, we cannot maintain the positive growth of forestry. We need to support our farmers and rural communities. We want them to feel encouraged to see forestry as a positive option on their farms, both for the sake of the environment and a reliable family income.

We all want to find ways to diversify the forest estate. Already, over 30% of the trees we plant are broadleaf species. We want to increase the creation of native woodland. We can do this in a way that goes hand in hand with the creation of conifer forests and the economic value they contribute. The greatest driver of broadleaf planting in Ireland right now is the planting of broadleaves alongside sitka spruce. This sector is calling for a renewed vision for forestry in Ireland based on economic development, climate change goals, biodiversity and social values. We need stakeholders to come together and agree the way forward, rather than have different groups pulling in different directions. If we get it right, it will work for everyone.

I have started with a positive vision today, but I must tell the committee that there is a deep crisis in the forestry sector right now. Tree planting has been decimated and our sawmills have run out of timber. Jobs have been lost and companies are in danger. We have a minimal winter planting programme and are having to import timber from as far away as Russia in order to supply the market. That is akin to Ireland having to import milk because farmers cannot get a licence to milk their cows. It has been caused by the introduction of a new regime for forestry licensing and a failure of this new process to provide the licences that are needed to plant trees and fell timber. The sector is completely undermined by this. There are simply not enough new licences being delivered by the forest service. There is a huge backlog in the Department and a further backlog of appealed licences in the forestry appeals committee, FAC. Farmers cannot plant new forestry or get a licence to fell their crop of trees. There are 2,000 applications awaiting approval from the Department and the run-rate of licences being issued is far below what the sector needs. It is absolutely essential that the Department finds a way to quickly deal with the backlog and dramatically increase the supply of licences.

The licensing system needs reform and must be capable of delivering licences within 120 days of application – this is the core industry requirement. The Department has not been able to deliver on its licensing targets and the industry believes the system needs complete reform if it is ever going to work. The industry is 100% reliant on a functioning licensing system without which we are at nothing and no Government ambitions in respect of forestry and timber will ever be delivered. People have lost their jobs and companies are in danger.

The problem with licensing is exacerbated by a further backlog of 500 projects under appeal Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act sets out a path to reform the FAC and deliver much greater output. I thank Members of the Oireachtas, including those here today, for the overwhelming support that this legislation received on its path through the Houses. Unfortunately, we are still awaiting proper implementation of the reforms that were enabled by the legislation. We discussed this issue in detail last week with the Minister of State with responsibility for land use and biodiversity, Senator Hackett, and her officials, and we remain unconvinced that the FAC will be able to deliver if it keeps going the way it is going because we will be waiting for many months for most of these appeals to be decided. The fact is that 1 million tonnes of timber are stuck and this is where our planting projects have stalled. The damage is enormous and is getting worse every time. The FAC must be reformed in line with the legislation and start dealing with appeals at the rate of 100 plus per month. Since the start of the year the committee has only processed circa 26 projects per month. The long delays at the FAC, coupled with inadequate licence approvals in the first instance, have led to our mills now running out of timber and our afforestation programme being on its knees. Forestry companies, contractors and hauliers have lost their jobs and the machines have been sold off. Irreparable damage is being caused to the sector. The system is broken and the Department needs to recognise this. Urgent action is needed now.

I underline three requirements. The FAC needs to implement the Forestry Act, work in multiple divisions, deal with appeals jointly and be resourced efficiently. It can be rigorous and fair to all parties and, at the same time, be much more productive. The Minister needs to stay close to this process and to ensure that it happens. The FAC holds 1 million tonnes of timber and we need to get it out of there.

The speed, resources and capability within the Department also needs to improve urgently to increase the rate at which forest licences are being approved to multiples of the current level. Targets continue to be missed. The backlog in ecology in the Department of Agriculture, Food

and the Marine has increased to 2,000 files. The system is in failure and this must be recognised.

In the longer term, the regulatory system must be revised and we should move away from a licensing model to a regulatory model that does not require a fresh licence for every activity. This is unnecessary and is not replicated in other countries. We need a more sensible approach that can be both rigorous and efficient. Again, the Department needs to accept the need for reform and begin the process.

In conclusion, we are in a crisis right now and it is one of our own making. We can, however, recover once the problem is fixed. Then the forestry section will be in a fantastic position to deliver for our farmers and for rural Ireland. We will grow and create many more jobs all around the country, all the while delivering for our environment and providing a great recreation for our people. We can achieve this if the current crisis in licensing is resolved quickly and the industry can return to normal operations. Failing this we are going over a cliff. It is a crisis that can still be solved and a disaster that can be avoided. I thank the committee.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr McAuley. I call Mr. O'Brien to make his opening statement or does he wish to take questions from members from the floor?

**Mr. Peter O'Brien:** I had wanted to go into some detail as to where we are.

**Chairman:** It might be better then if I allow some questions to be put and this might give Mr. O'Brien the opportunity to respond. Is that okay?

**Mr. Peter O'Brien:** That would be fine.

**Chairman:** I will take the questions of three Deputies and Senators together and then I will return to our witnesses. Mr. McAuley has raised some serious questions about how the licensing system is operating and I am sure that the committee members may wish to have this further elaborated on. I call Deputy Kehoe first, then Senators Paul Daly and Boyhan.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** I thank Mr. McAuley for his opening presentation and he is very welcome to the meeting. Everybody in this room will very much agree with the sentiments expressed that the forestry sector is in crisis. I read with interest today a press release from the IFA. I do not know if anybody else present has seen it. The headline is that the forest service is strangling the sector that it has responsibility for promoting. We will all agree with that because it has been a sentiment of my own for the last while.

I studied horticulture and worked in the forestry sector with None-So-Hardy (Forestry) Limited in Wicklow, with John McCarthy, for quite a number of years and have a little bit of experience of the sector. One of the most damning things that I have ever seen was millions of trees being dumped on a yearly basis. It must be most frustrating for the companies and the industry to see this happening.

I have three questions I wish to put to Mr. O'Brien. What are the most critical issues facing the sector? I am aware that Mr. McAuley has mentioned to us a number of these but I would like to know his views on this. What do the stakeholders in the industry see as tangible solutions? What is needed right now to get over the difficulties we have? The other thing that received great play over the last while is the implementation of the Mackinnon report. I had an oral parliamentary question on that with the Minister about two months ago. It is in the programme for Government. Will this address the licensing delays and delays in the forest service?

Will this report, if fully implemented, address most of the problems? At the meeting with the Minister last week, what was the Minister's update on the current status of the implementation of the Mackinnon report? I will come back with further questions later on.

**Senator Paul Daly:** I will ask a couple of brief questions and make an observation and whoever feels they are most appropriately positioned to answer them can take them. Mr. McAuley mentioned in his submission that we can take forestry forward to where we want it to be and achieve the targets set out with "enthusiastic participation". How will we gain the enthusiasm of farmers going forward based on the rigmarole we have been dealing with over the last two weeks? They have seen all the issues and their colleagues, relations and neighbours got themselves into 25 or 30 years ago which are only becoming evident now. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. They are far more informed of the consequences of the investments they are making and that it may not be as easy at the other end. How do the witnesses propose we recreate that enthusiastic participation?

Can the witnesses give us some idea of where we are at due to the current failings with imports? Can they put tonnage on it? Where may we end up if the problem is not solved?

I will make a final observation and perhaps the witnesses will comment on it. We started out this process in the Seanad with the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. It was probably my naivete but I took it that the core issue here was due to appeals. However, it has come to light now that there are 2,000 applications sitting in the Department that are not being appealed. Why did that backlog, in the witnesses' opinion, arise? Was it due to lack of staffing numbers, inefficiencies or lack of interest? How did we get to a situation where we have a backlog of 2,000, from the industry's perspective?

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I thank Mr. McAuley for his paper. I am familiar with IBEC in many forms, particularly in this area. I thank him for the professional way in which IBEC conducts its business and communicates with Oireachtas Members. It is very concise in all its documentation that I have received and that is helpful in getting to grips with the issues and the tasks. IBEC is in the business of promoting business and enterprise and I support all of that. However, I could not help thinking as Mr. McAuley was reading his statement to the committee that we have heard all this before. We had the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, in the Seanad and the Seanad unanimously approved the Bill. I had great reservations about it. I studied horticulture, I know a lot of people in the forestry sector and I am close with people who own commercial forests. We said it was not all about the logjam in the appeals process and now, some weeks after this legislation was approved, Mr. McAuley is painting an honest and frank picture, but a very negative one.

What sticks out for me is that, having met the key Minister responsible for this sector in the Government - the Green Minister, Senator Hackett - they remain unconvinced and that is disappointing. Perhaps the witnesses will share with this committee what happened in that meeting. What are the main areas of concern? We were led to believe it was a block caused by serial objectors going up and down this country. That was the picture painted by this Administration. These serial objectors were totally opposed to it on spurious environmental grounds and so on. Now we are told we have 2,000 cases that are not being appealed. I would like to hear about that engagement.

I am concerned, as members of this committee should be and also as a Member of Seanad Éireann, that there were 8,888 public submissions and, as of today, I have not been able to view those because of data issues and so on. It does not wash with me. I am clearly not in a position

to read all of those submissions. I make the call that we need to see all of those submissions because people in the commercial sector made them. We got broad brush strokes to the effect that this was all about appeals. I would like to hear the issues of concern that remain and why the witnesses were not convinced by the responses from the Minister in question.

**Chairman:** Deputy Kehoe addressed three questions to Mr. O'Brien. I ask him to please answer them, as well as the questions raised by the two Senators.

**Mr. Peter O'Brien:** The first question was about the critical issues. The critical issue is the Department's total inability to deal with licensing. The legislation on the habitats directive has been a place for a number of years. It started to become an issue in the forest service towards the end of 2018. The approach to dealing with the problem has been wholly inadequate.

It is important that I give some background to how we have arrived at this logjam. As Mr. McAuley said, there are 1,800 or 2,000 applications sitting in the ecology department. They did not arrive in there; a sequence of events caused the build-up of applications. When it became evident that an appropriate assessment had to be carried out on the application for licensing and a subsequent Natura impact statement may have to have been prepared, the forest service decided it would endeavour to get its people to do that. My understanding is that no other Department or a licensing authority takes that approach. It is up to the applicant to submit the appropriate assessment and the subsequent Natura impact statement, if necessary, with the application. The licensing authority then makes a determination on that information.

It is quite an onerous job to prepare a Natura impact statement and it has to be carried out by an ecologist. The forest service decided to get its inspectorate to do the screening. The inspectors are foresters, not ecologists. This process was taken in hand by the Department in 2019. It was not fit for purpose. My understanding is that the inspectorate said it was not fit for purpose, yet management proceeded along the same path.

The industry was reassured on numerous occasions that this would be sorted out and there would not be a problem. Through the first four or five months of 2020, practically no licences were being issued for afforestation, felling or roads. The applications have been referred to the ecology department and it was not possible to deal with them. I understand at that stage one ecologist, or possibly two, was employed to deal with the continuous increase in the number of applications being referred to the ecology department.

The industry was reassured on a number of occasions that there was a process in place that was fit for purpose and there would not be any issue. The industry made a recommendation to management in the Department that one of the recommendations in the Mackinnon report, namely, the possibility of introducing a grant or payment towards the cost of the preparation of the appropriate assessments or Natura impact statements, would be made by the Department. That proposal from the industry was flatly refused by the Department's management. The industry could see that the problems were not being addressed. In July, a project plan was put in place by the Department. We viewed its targets as being extremely soft. By the Department's own calculations, it will be the end of 2021 before the 1,800 applications in the system will be cleared out. That assumes no new applications will be submitted. This will be the case even with a fully resourced Department with more ecologists and inspectors. The first three months of the plan have seen the Department achieve 50% of its own soft targets. This is a crisis. We need to achieve at least double what the Department has in its soft targets for the private sector to have enough licences to fell the amount of timber outlined in the COFORD supply report, build the number of roads required and reach a target of 8,000 ha per annum. We will be lucky

to achieve a little over 2,000 ha this year. That is a quarter of what is outlined in the programme for Government.

This is where the problem lies and it is why we are where we are. It is a resource issue, but it is also a systems issue, given that the system is not fit for purpose, specifically where licensing is concerned. In order to achieve 8,000 ha per annum, meet our targets in private sector felling of available timber and construct roads, we will need approximately 3,500 licences.

That does not even take into account the chalara issue, which the committee discussed with other witnesses two weeks ago. There are between 4,000 and 5,000 forest owners with ash plantations that are dying or dead. It must be remembered that chalara did not just appear in Europe five years ago. Rather, it was in eastern Europe 25 years ago. The Department was negligent in not preventing it from reaching our shores. A scheme to deal with chalara was rolled out in June, but it is not fit for purpose. It is too complicated and, as far as I am aware, no applications to it have been approved. These are indicators of the levels of catastrophic mismanagement by the Department.

I will make a further point about roads. In the Department's October figures, more than 200 felling licences were approved but only 19 roads were approved for construction. How does the Department expect us to get the timber out of the forests? Felling licences are very important if we are to get timber to mills, but if we cannot get the timber out of the forests in the first place, we will not get them to the mills. These are facts.

I will turn to solutions. In the short term, by which I do not mean months, but immediately, the solution is the real allocation of resources, not just pushing resources from one area to the next. The FAC has to be resourced to a point where it can release those felling licences that are ready to go. However, there is no point in doing that if resources have to be taken from the licensing area and put into the forestry appeals committee. New resources must be put in place to get these licences out of the FAC without impinging on the resources available for the issuing of licences in the first place.

The system is not fit for purpose and does not stand up to scrutiny. Applications have been in the system for two years or longer. The uptake in licences issued, from an afforestation point of view, is extraordinarily low, at 60%, because it takes so long to get a licence. Anyone who has been waiting for two years for a licence will more than likely have done something else with the land. Either that or the applicant has amazing faith in the forester he or she is dealing with. If it takes that long to get approval to plant a handful of trees, the system is not fit for purpose.

These are the endemic problems on the afforestation and felling sides. It is not just in one area but across the entire industry. As Mr. McAuley said, the industry is in crisis. It is not a case of tinkering around the edges next year. Unless something very serious is done in the short term, the industry will fall off the precipice. The industry is in absolute crisis and that crisis lands on the management in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The Mackinnon report was commissioned by the previous Government to look into how the Department manages applications. Clearly, therefore, the way in which the Department carried out its business must have been a concern to the Minister at that time. This was before the appropriate assessment problem brought everything to a head this year with the requirement for the legislation to be changed.

James Mackinnon is a planner from Scotland who looked at the afforestation sector in Scot-



land. At the time, afforestation had fallen to around 3,500 ha or 4,000 ha per annum. He looked at how the systems worked in Scotland. He was commissioned to do a report here and examine how the Department did its business. He issued his report in February of this year. It is referred to in the programme for Government and the previous Administration identified an individual as the most qualified person to implement the report. Nothing has happened, however. Would its implementation help? Of course, it would but where is the political will to implement it? We cannot stall or talk about looking at forestry next year. That will not work because there will be no industry by the middle of next year.

As a result of the Mackinnon report in Scotland, planting increased from 3,500 ha to 11,000 ha within four years. We have more than enough interest in this country to achieve a target of 8,000 ha if the Department were to get its business in order.

The current mechanism requires not just the implementation of the Mackinnon report but also the appointment of somebody who can actually deliver. I will not call that person a project manager but someone who will look at the system, make the necessary changes and deliver the licences. That will not happen with the current regime.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. O'Brien. I gave latitude to Mr. O'Brien in his answers because I felt he was giving a comprehensive review of the issues in the industry. Other members are anxious to pose questions. There has been a comprehensive outline by both Mr. McAuley and Mr. O'Brien. I will call on Deputies Carthy and Fitzmaurice and Senator Lombard, and then Deputy Leddin.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Cuirim fáilte roimh na finnétithe go léir. I thank Mr. O'Brien for that and thank Mr. McAuley for his opening statement. They will not find much argument in this room that forestry policy is a mess in this State. We have had several conversations about it. It takes a special type of incompetence of the highest order to have a policy that pleases absolutely nobody. From the industry to the communities, to the farmers and to environmentalists, everybody - apart from the Department and the new Ministers who one would hope would come in with a fresh pair of eyes - is in agreement that our forestry policy is a complete mess. I have listened to a number of Dáil debates in which the Minister of State with responsibility, Senator Hackett, has essentially reiterated and regurgitated what we had been hearing from the Department over the past couple of years and it has been incredibly disappointing. I wanted to premise my first question with that. We accept that the system is a mess and we accept that the primary responsibility for that lies in the Department.

My question is whether the forestry industry accepts any responsibility for the mess that we are in. We are at this point because of the delays with felling licences. If we go back to the start, the root of all of these problems, to use a forestry term, lies in the fact that no plans were put in place when the trees were planted in the first place. We have had several decades of opportunities to get these matters right and we have not had that.

My second question relates to the point made by Mr. McAuley with regard to the industry's willingness to find ways to diversify the forest estate. He said:

Already, over 30% of the trees we plant are broadleaf species. We want to increase the creation of native woodland.

A new forestry policy is due next year, we are told. What percentage would Mr. McAuley put on it? What percentage should be broadleaf? It would be helpful if we could reach a consen-

sus on what the target for that should be.

Mr. McAuley made an interesting point that the Government can take a lead by enabling more timber housing and construction to take place. I am sure many people who would not consider building their homes with anything other than concrete would be surprised to learn of the Norwegian example Mr. McAuley cited of an 18-storey building made from wood. There has to be scope there. We would look forward to those type of developments taking place in Ireland built with wood produced in Ireland. That would be the absolute panacea. In advance of the new forestry policy that we are discussing, what regulations or legislation should be incorporated into that policy to facilitate and encourage those type of developments?

Mr. McAuley mentioned the carbon sink. I am familiar with his figures. I am also aware that others who contact us would argue with those figures but let us assume that they are correct and that they are not in dispute. What measures can be put in place to ensure that forestry plays an even more valuable role in terms of building a carbon sink?

Finally, in relation to the backlog of licences, this committee, the Dáil and the Seanad were misled, when we were dealing with the amendment to the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2020, by two Ministers, and by the officials in terms of the briefings that they provided us. Certainly, the inference I took was that the delay was as a result of the number of appeals. The number of appeals has had a major impact, of that there is no question, and that is why there was almost unanimous support in both Houses for the legislation. It appears the Department is largely responsible, which is a very serious issue. I know this has been touched on. I would ask Forest Industries Ireland whether further legislative change is required to the Forestry Act to address the deficiencies we have learned of, or whether it is a matter of resourcing and changes in regulations.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank the witnesses for the presentations. They are preaching to the converted on this issue. In 2017, I went to the Department when I saw this coming. Unfortunately, it was all bluster and promises, but nothing happened.

With regard to the Mackinnon report, have the witnesses had any contact with the Department or Ministers? My understanding was that the previous Minister had put it out to tender, whatever system was used. It is also my understanding that someone was ready to be appointed. Deputy Sean Sherlock tabled a parliamentary question a couple of weeks ago about the Mackinnon report and its implementation. The response that came back, although I will not quote it verbatim, basically stated that, where feasible, the Department would implement it. My understanding is that a person was to be appointed and that person was going to take on the role of implementing a strategy, to which the witnesses have just referred. Is it of concern to Forest Industries Ireland that this answer came back? Does it have meetings with representatives of the forestry sector? Mr. O'Brien talked about the soft figures, some of which were approximately 50% less. Has that continued since we passed the new legislation?

I will not say I was misled because I said from day one that we have a problem. We can blame everybody in the whole world, and we can blame people for objecting, and I am no admirer of them. However, at the end of the day, we have a Department that for the past ten years, and especially the past four years, has never achieved the targets set out. There is a major problem. The Mackinnon report states very clearly that the morale of the forestry inspectors within the Department is gone. We can have all the meetings in the world, and we have dealt with forestry on three or four different days, but unless there is change in the Department, we are not going to solve anything. We cannot keep playing the same tune and expect a different result.

The committee has to be blunt on this. If we have spent three years on it and the whole thing is going from bad to worse, which it is, then a Minister has to intervene. If people are not fit for purpose in their positions, they have to be given an alternative job, and that has to be spelled out clearly.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** I thank Mr. McAuley and Mr. O'Brien for their statements and contributions so far. Mr. O'Brien elaborated on the crisis in the sector and I thank him for his comments. The statement refers to the longer-term reforms that are required and, if he can, he might elaborate on those. I know we are here to talk about the current crisis and he has also touched on that. We are trying to embark on a very ambitious programme of development of the industry in the coming years and decades and with the current crisis it does not bode well for the future if we cannot solve that. I ask Mr. McAuley to elaborate on what he sees as the medium-term to longer-term reforms that are required. In his opening statement he spoke about moving from a licensing model to a regulatory model that would not require a fresh licence for every activity. He might elaborate on that, the move towards a more close to nature approach and also a broadleaf based forestry model.

**Chairman:** Before calling the witnesses I want to refer to Deputy Carthy's comments on what we voted on in legislation in the Dáil. I was clear that we were voting on the licensing process. I knew there were 2,000 applications in the licensing system that were separate from the appeals. I knew we were voting on a segment of applications that were gone into appeals and to try to speed that up. I was fully aware that the licensing process is a huge issue and that the legislation we were passing would only deal with a segment of the problem with licence applications. I just want to make it clear to Deputy Carthy that I was clear on that when we were voting.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Fair play to the Chairman but I am saying the Ministers clearly identified the backlog in appeals as being the core issue at play while ignoring their own culpability in the fact that we are currently facing a crisis.

**Chairman:** The point I am making is that when the legislation was passed I knew there was a serious backlog in the applications system that was completely separate from the appeals.

I ask the witnesses to give very brief answers because another four or five Deputies and Senators want to ask questions. They previously gave extremely comprehensive answers but I ask them to be brief this time around.

**Mr. Mark McAuley:** Yes. With Mr. O'Brien's permission I will take this question. I will try to be brief. I thank the members for their questions. In terms of the questions from Deputy Carthy, I agree 100% that the current policy pleases nobody. It certainly does not work for the industry. It does not work for various of our NGOs or our farmers on the ground.

In terms of whether the industry accepts any responsibility, there is not a capacity problem in the industry. The industry has invested literally hundreds of millions of euro in the past number of years to have the capacity to deal with the timber that is available in huge quanta all over the country. There is no problem with the availability of timber. As the Deputy pointed out, much of it was planted in the 1980s and 1990s. It is all there. We have a great timber boom on our hands if we could only get the system to work. The industry has put in the investment and it has the expertise. The industry is very willing to adopt the new environmental regime, albeit that it brings with it new and additional costs and new burdens on the industry, but we are in the 21st century and we need to have rigorous environmental regulation and controls.

In terms of the percentage of broadleaves, that is somewhat of a million dollar question in terms of future policy. What we have to do is balance the commercial side with the native woodland. At the moment the vast bulk of broadleaves that are planted in this country are planted alongside commercial productive forests. In effect, one could say that the commercial pays for the broadleaves. I believe one would have to take a landscape approach to that. There are certain places where it is absolutely right to have commercial productive forests and in other places it is absolutely right to have native broadleaf forests, those that are developed principally for nature purposes. Already, approximately 25% of the Coillte estate is managed primarily for nature purposes and biodiversity. At the moment we are doing more than 30% broadleaves. Could we get that to 40% with the right model? I believe we could. Once we have the balance everything is achievable. As an industry we support all types of forestry. We are absolutely keen to push up the number of broadleaves being planted and the amount of native woodland being done as long as we can continue to supply timber to our sawmills, which in itself has huge environmental benefits in terms of locking up timber in our houses, structures and buildings because it is a long-life timber product. That brings me to the scope for timber building. We need some reform of our building regulations. There are restrictions on the height to which a residential building can be built with a timber frame. Those regulations need to be looked at. There are 18-storey buildings in Norway and a new record is going to be set shortly in Canada. We need to look at that.

I would also look at things such as schools and community centres that could readily be built using timber technology and displace an awful lot of carbon-intensive materials. I read a report recently which stated that, with energy efficiency in our heating and lighting and where we get our energy from, much more focus is coming onto the embedded carbon in the building, the amount of carbon that is used in the materials. The focus is coming back onto that after many years during which we, quite rightly, thought that the energy efficiency of the building after it is built is the important thing.

The level of carbon sink is a function of the size of the forest estate. This country has an ambition to have 18% forest cover. It would take us a very long time to get there but if we could do 8,000 ha per annum and grow the forest estate, that would be the principal source of carbon sink. It must be well managed and looked at over a proper timeline, rather than taking snapshots here or there. Climate change is a multigenerational crisis that needs to be looked at over hundreds, rather than dozens, of years. A large forest estate must be managed properly. Separate parts of the estate should be managed for different reasons and that is how to tackle the carbon sink issue.

A number of the Deputies touched on appeals and licensing delays. The legislative change was focused on the forestry appeals committee, FAC. There is no question but that it is a critical piece of legislation. It is also a good piece of legislation from many perspectives and, if properly implemented, would deliver an enormous amount for us. On the other hand, there are 2,000 files stuck in the Department that we need to deal with. That is a question of resources, management and running a good process.

Deputy Fitzmaurice asked about the Mackinnon report. It is my understanding that a person was identified and is close to being appointed. That would be a positive development. If all 22 recommendations of the Mackinnon report could be implemented, it would do a lot for us, although there seems to be some sort of reluctance. The Minister wrote to the various stakeholders yesterday and today to invite us onto a new committee which will probably look at the Mackinnon report but I do not feel there is a focus on it now. The Department would say that a

lot of those recommendations have been implemented but I am not so sure about that. There is a need for fundamental change in the process and system. There is certainly a need to bring in additional management and operational expertise. We need a group of people who can purely focus on running the process, aside from policy.

In response to Deputy Leddin, the best formulation of the need for long-term reforms was made by Professor John FitzGerald recently in *The Irish Times* where he wrote about moving away from a licensing model towards a regulatory model. That is the way it is done in other countries. There is no need for every piece of forestry activity to get a new licence and to be inspected many times over, in the same way that we do not need a garda on every street corner with a speed gun. We do not need forensic examination of every piece of forestry activity. It can be done on an audit or inspection basis. That would be a critical piece of work that the Department and Minister should start into straightaway. They should look to European models to see how forestry is regulated in other places.

Does that deal with most of the questions that were asked?

**Chairman:** There are five more contributors who wish to ask questions. We have time constraints, due to our Covid-19 restrictions, so I am going to take those five together. Those contributors are Senator Lombard, Deputies Martin Browne, Michael Collins, Sherlock and Ó Cuív.

**Senator Tim Lombard:** I will be as brief as I possibly can. I thank our contributors for their informative statements. It is obvious where we are with the forestry sector. There has been a major lack of progress. Part of it has been addressed in terms how the FAC works. How we can get the Department to work with that legislation is the next matter to be dealt with. Trying to move things forward and to get the figures and processes through will be a major issue. I visited Grainger Sawmills in Enniskeane a few months ago and saw the issues faced there. It needed plant and timber. Without licences, I am very much aware that jobs in west Cork will be affected.

How can this committee play a role? Do we need to ask for a monthly update on the figures, how many licences have been granted and how many tenders are coming through? A continuous flow of information on a monthly basis coming through the committee could put pressure on the Department to deliver. Should we set goals? We do not have a public accounts committee that can work on this issue. Should this committee act as a public accounts committee for the next 12 months to make sure that we get the streamline of timber which is so badly needed to ensure we can keep our mills open and the whole process going? I would like to hear the views of the witnesses as to whether we should look for a direct line once a month to get figures, data and information what has increased and decreased from the Minister so there can be true accountability.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I welcome the witnesses. We are all in agreement that the forestry industry is in trouble and that the system is not delivering and needs complete reform. All of this means our timber mills are running out of time. The afforestation programme is close to being on its knees.

The witnesses mentioned the backlog in licenses. Apart from the slow pace in the Department in terms of how it operates, could they outline the issues they see arising? Is bureaucracy regarding assessments slowing things down? At the previous meeting of the committee, we heard about licences that cover the overall development of a project plantation and not just the

individual parts, something that was mentioned again today. Do the witnesses see any potential problems with this way of doing things? They spoke about the need to reform the FAC and said it will take many months for most of the backlog to be dealt with. What proposals do the witnesses have to allow this to happen more quickly? Is it a matter of staffing or are there other problems in the system?

The witnesses spoke about the appeals process and how it needs to be rigorous and fair. Can they tell us about the unfairness in the process? Are they of the view that there is active discrimination between larger and smaller applicants in the licensing system?

A small forestry group contacted me recently. It stated that the rate at which licences are being issued makes the aim of 8,000 ha of afforestation annually impossible. Is that the view of the witnesses?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** We discussed this matter a number of weeks ago from a different perspective. Forestry policy is a complete and utter mess and an embarrassment. There are no winners because nothing is working. Until this issue is resolved, anyone who wants to plant will run a mile. Over the past number of weeks, I have said in the Dáil that perhaps only 2,000 ha will be planted. The Government's target is 8,000 ha. That is proof of how bad things are at present. An amnesty may be a simple solution for the 2,000 people who are seeking felling licences. If there is an issue with the Department and it has not been able to deal with it, an amnesty is the way forward. The board should be cleared and things should start anew.

The forest of a lady in west Cork was knocked down by a storm and is rotting on the ground. She cannot get a licence. That is how wrong the system is. Obviously, there is concern about the threat to more than 500 jobs in the sector in west Cork, including in sawmills such as GP Wood and Grainger's. These workers are geographically spread throughout west Cork from Enniskean suppliers in Ballineen all the way to Schull. Their jobs are in danger. We must focus on those companies and on those who are supplying the product. A simple solution would be an amnesty. It would not please everybody but the people on the ground who are suffering should not be allowed to continue to suffer. Companies such as GP Wood and others would at least have some solution and then the issue could be tackled moving on from that. That is my proposal.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I thank the Chairman for allowing me the opportunity to speak at the committee. I will address my questions specifically to Mr. McAuley. There was much talk of the Mackinnon report during the deliberations on the forestry Bill. We did not get very far on Committee Stage of that Bill. Certainly it was the intention of some of us to speak more comprehensively to the 22 recommendations of the report in the amendments we had tabled to the Bill but, unfortunately, that did not happen.

I am worried about what Mr. McAuley said about the invitation he received to come before the Department as part of a stakeholder group. If I understood him correctly, he said he was not sure if there would be a focus on the Mackinnon report. As Deputy Fitzmaurice said, I tabled a parliamentary question some weeks ago in respect of the chair of the implementation group of the recommendations of that report. Many of us put much stock on that report and its recommendations as a way forward whereby all stakeholders could move with both State interests and stakeholder interests. Is it Mr. McAuley's impression it is the intention of the Department to lessen the impact of that report in some way or not give it its due regard? I do not wish to put words in his mouth and forgive me if I have misinterpreted him but is it his view that the report has ended up on shelf and will gather dust? If that is the case, it would worry me considerably

because I would have thought many forestry stakeholders would have actively participated in that process and that it would have provided a template to move forward and progress matters we are discussing here today.

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Ó Cuív.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Planting is important but in the meantime we are in a crisis because there will not be enough in the mills to keep them open. Mr. McAuley stated 1 million tonnes of timber are held up in the forestry aid committee, FAC. Has he any indication if the recent Bill is having any effect in releasing any of that timber?

Has Mr. McAuley any knowledge as to how much is involved in total felling licences? Metaphorically, the house is on fire because there is no timber for the mills. Has Mr. McAuley any idea of the volume of timber held up in the Department in terms of felling? I understand the problem here is the ecological assessments. Has he a proposal as to how they might be speeded up? Unlike Deputy Collins, I do not think there is any magic wand here. An amnesty cannot be granted. We would be brought eventually to the European Court of Justice if we were not to comply completely with European law. One of the reasons this process has been held up is that there was a court case which directed that extra processes must be followed. Therefore, there is no shortcut. Is é an bóthar árd an bóthar gear anseo. The high road is the short road here. Would Mr. McAuley agree with me?

How dependent are the big sawmills on Sitka spruce or coniferous timber now? How likely are they to continue to be dependent mainly on Sitka spruce and other coniferous timber as opposed to broadleaf trees?

To keep the sector going until Christmas what extra timber would need to be cleared through the system? Allowing for the fact that much of it could be subject to appeal, getting it through the Department would be a help but it would not answer the problem if it was all appealed. What net extra timber needs to be put back into the system between 1 January and 30 June next year to keep all the mills open and people employed?

I would be interested in the witnesses giving more information on how a regulatory system would work and how, as opposed to the licensing system, it could be kept immune from legal challenge. Anything that would be open to legal challenge would bring us back to where we are now. Should the current system be improved or should a new system that might be open to legal challenge and spending years in the courts, thereby holding everything up, be started? I am conscious that EU directives ultimately control everything. They are superior to the Irish Constitution and laws.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to speak. I appreciate the witnesses' participation. I will tell them directly that there should be nothing in this debate that is us against them or *vice versa*. We should all pull together. When I say "we", I mean officials in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and people involved in the forestry sector. I mean politicians, foresters, farmers, people who cut the timber and people who haul the timber. We should all be working together to try to ensure that we are not the laughing stock of Europe by allowing timber to be brought in from Scotland, England and Russia. Our carbon footprint has been mentioned. We can show others around the world how to grow timber quickly, efficiently and in a financially wise way. It is good for our landowners who grow the crop. We should be able to lead and show the rest of the world how to follow.

The Chairman is a man of great common sense and practicality, and I like to think I am too. At the end of the day, this is a simple issue. We have farmers who are growing a crop and who want to thin or clearfell it and make roads for access. We have great and respectable haulage contractors involved in this operation. We have excellent mills and millers, many of whom I know. I was proud to have given years to cutting timber in a forestry. My employer was Grainger Sawmills and I was grateful for every lorry of timber that I sent out of forestries. I worked with great people from east Cork and elsewhere who knew how to put down a long and hard day's work.

What I cannot get my head around is the bureaucracy that seems to be tying up everything. I am not a person for pointing fingers or taking things apart and asking what is wrong with the Department or inside officialdom, but it is not the farmer or haulier or the person operating the mill who is wrong. Rather, it is down to the bureaucracy that gives a person permission to thin or clearfell timber legally, make the necessary roads and so on. The committee could do a great job of work in this regard, which is why I appreciate my few short minutes to contribute. There is no point in the world in blaming a Minister. That would be nonsense. I have nothing but respect for the new Minister and Ministers of State in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and I wish them good luck in their roles. The permanent government in officialdom is dealing with this issue and I want to know what it will do. I am not directing this question at any one person but at those people in general. What I am saying in a nice and polite way is that what has happened in the past will not be tolerated in the future. I know I can speak on behalf of every politician who is present, as politicians will not put up with or allow officialdom to choke and hold up our farmers, destroy our haulage industry and make us the laughing stock of Europe. Our mills have spent millions of euro on developing major production capabilities and have excellent sawmills and staff, and we as politicians cannot sit back and allow this situation to continue next year and the year after, and allow forestries to go mad.

I am saying this in the nicest possible way. I am not blaming anyone for what happened previously. At times, any of us might need to be told to up our game. I am telling that to the people in officialdom. What happened previously will not be allowed to continue into the future. It is finishing now. The witnesses saw what happened when this matter was debated in the Dáil in recent weeks. Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents were excellent and everyone fought their case. We would have liked it had other amendments been made and for matters to go further, but that is democracy. We all came together and legislation was introduced. There is a new impetus now and everyone will have to pull up their socks.

**Chairman:** I have another witness to call on. Since our time is restricted due to Covid, I would like brief answers. Given that many comprehensive questions have been asked, I would like it if the witnesses could send us written answers to some of them. Detailed and pertinent questions have been asked and, in normal times, I would be able to let the meeting extend beyond two hours, but I will have to stop witnesses in a few minutes' time to let in the next witness.

**Mr. Peter O'Brien:** We would welcome Senator Lombard's suggestion of a monthly reporting mechanism whereby the Department would report to the committee. One of the major problems with the process is the lack of a timeline for anything. That is why we are looking at one year, two years or two years plus for the issuing of a licence. There is no accountability and there is no yardstick against which the forest service can be measured. What the Senator suggested would be very important. A farmer's charter could also be considered. It formed part of the Mackinnon report. The question of timelines and a farmer's charter were raised in the



context of the basic payment scheme, BPS, years ago, streamlining that process significantly.

I will make a final comment before Mr. McAuley deals with the rest of the questions. Deputy Sherlock spoke about the Mackinnon report. To be perfectly honest, I believe it has been buried. That may be an inflammatory comment, but this situation has been going on for too long. The person was identified eight months ago but has not been appointed yet. That is not good.

**Mr. Mark McAuley:** I echo Mr. O'Brien's comments on Senator Lombard's suggestion. It is a good one.

Regarding Deputy Browne's questions on increasing the FAC's output, if we could get the FAC's members to implement the legislation on the ground, it would go a very long way towards increasing output and solving the forestry appeals issue. It is good legislation and is capable of solving the problems. The Department has told us that resources will not be left wanting and that, if the FAC needs more people, it will have them, but it will have to get the process right in order to make use of them.

The issue of large versus small applicants is a complex one, but I will be brief. Currently, small applicants to the forestry programme are at a definite disadvantage because a large activity can afford to pay for a Natura impact statement and a small one cannot, given the sums of money involved. A clear gap in the Department's approach is the question of what to do, particularly for farm forestry. In a farm forestry project, neither the farmer nor the forestry company is in a position to pay for this Natura impact statement. Something has to be done there or farm forestry is dead.

In respect of the 8,000 ha, it is impossible to do without changing the system. As Deputy Collins and Senator Daly mentioned earlier, farmer confidence is critical in all of this. It is a 40-year investment and there have to be reassurances that if, for example, frost, fire or wind damage occur, the Department and the Government have their backs because otherwise the whole thing is too full of risks. There has to be confidence that there is not going to be a moving of the goalposts, which has happened previously in the context of mapping and all of these sorts of things. Therefore, farmer confidence is critical.

On the issue of an amnesty, I am not able to respond because that is really a legal question. I certainly believe that the Department has grave concerns regarding the idea, but I do not know about that. My colleague spoke to Deputy Sherlock and, just to clarify, the old forestry programme implementation group has been wound up. There will be a new group going forward. As I said, I do not know whether that focus is going to be on MacKinnon or on a range of other things. I do not know whether MacKinnon is still alive and well.

**Chairman:** I am sorry to have to cut Mr. McAuley short but I wish to give Mr. Gowran ample time to make his statement and take questions from the members. I thank Mr. McAuley and Mr. O'Brien for their contributions. They saw, in light of the extensive number of questions, that there is huge concern among the members about where the forestry industry is at present.

I invite Mr. Gowran, CEO of Woodlands of Ireland, to make his opening statement. Sorry, we cannot hear Mr. Gowran.

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** Apologies, I forgot to unmute the microphone.

I thank the Chairman and the members for inviting Woodlands of Ireland to address the committee. Woodlands of Ireland is a not-for-profit charity dedicated to native woodlands.

It is an inclusive organisation, whose primary objectives are to generate awareness of native woodlands among policymakers and the general public and to develop projects and sustainable management strategies aimed at ensuring the future viability of native woodlands.

As regards the appropriate assessment and the Natura impact statement appeals backlog, many site applications relating to the native woodland scheme, NWS, afforestation that contain significant sub-compartments with native woodland grant premium category, GPC, plots within larger applications, are being delayed by a very thorough rate of appeals. We have asked the Forestry Service whether codes could be applied in order to indicate the percentage of NWS GPCs in each application. We believe that the people lodging appeals will respond to that distinction being made.

The factors that have compounded the appropriate assessment and the Natura impact statement backlog situation are linked to genuine efforts by various Departments and agencies, including the Department for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, to significantly improve compliance with the water framework directive, WFD. Hence the need for appropriate assessment screening and Natura impact statements in respect of a range of sites where previously the cycle of forestry activity and practices, such as clear felling and pesticide use in reforestation, had predated the State's now focused implementation of the WFD, which is an umbrella encompassing 17 different EU directives, including the habitats and birds directive.

As regards the WFD and the timescale for reform and the implementation of such reform in the forestry sector, the deadline for all EU member states, including Ireland, to comply fully with the WFD, is 2027. Many of the points in the written submission, which all members should have, have been made by forestry industry representatives.

Most conifer stands are designed to be clear-felled or can be too unstable to thin because of soil type and shallow rooting. Rotation lengths have in some cases been reduced to as low as 27 years. Clear-felling often creates conditions for surges in pine weevil populations, which in turn present a ring-barking threat to restocked plants. In most cases, plants are treated with pesticide and may later have top-up spray treatments on site.

Each individual harvesting and reforestation plan detailed in a felling licence application requires an assessment by the Forest Service which in turn may need to consult local authorities, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Inland Fisheries Ireland and An Taisce. The frequently asked questions of all of those organisations and those lodging appeals are as follows. Can siltation be avoided? What form does a new or improved water setback take? Is there run-off or leaching of fertiliser or pesticides into water courses? Does the plan meet the 15% broadleaf restock requirement of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine? Is there sufficient enforcement of licence terms following on-site inspections over time?

What I am suggesting as a part solution to move towards better planning in forestry is to consider developing what we call protective forest zoning. Many forest sites are in upland areas and will invariably drain into river catchments. Consequently, they should be regarded as potential components of a network of protective forests within catchments. This concept originated on the European mainland, for example, in countries such as Switzerland, it dates back to the 14th century. However, in an island of Ireland context, the function of a protective forest could be the protection of drinking water sources, Natura 2000 sites and fisheries, and the repair of woodlands, which would come into the dairy sector's response in the carbon accounting equation. Repairing woodlands would also reduce habitat fragmentation along water courses.

As regards forests that are designed to reduce the risk of flooding and landslide and also, in their own right, to maintain woodland habitats for conserving biological diversity, this concept of protective forests links in with the objectives of the national technical implementation group, NTIG, of the river basin management plan. Much of this is outlined in two documents published by the Department entitled *Woodland for Water: Creating new native woodlands to protect and enhance Ireland's waters* and *Forests & Water: Achieving Objectives under Ireland's River Basin Management Plan 2018-2021*. The idea in these documents is "to provide the basis for identifying key locations where new native woodland will contribute most to protecting and enhancing water, and for engaging with farmers and other landowners to undertake such planting."

In *Woodlands of Ireland*, our technical advisory panel is looking at developing the criteria for a research project on mapping potential protective forest zones in catchments. Essentially, we are offering a part solution in terms of whether that will go forward into proposed legislation, as mentioned by a previous speaker.

On the issue of ash dieback, there are two key points. A reference was made in last week's meeting of the committee to elm having become extinct and ash going the same way. Elm, although a shadow of its former self, survives in semi-natural woodland and in hedges in a range of localities around the island, as I have observed. In the 5% survival scenario for ash, it is likely to remain present in mixed species woodland, scrub and hedges. The natural regeneration of ash and elm needs to be encouraged to keep these species alive. This can be done in the context of native woodland scheme conservation measures, woodland improvement measures, the neighbourwood scheme, continuous cover forestry schemes and agri-environment measures. Second, let us consider supporting those who were under contract with the Department to plant single species or a few species such as ash stands to convert them to multi-species stands of indigenous genetic stock of native species, including Scots pine, using an amended version of the under-utilised native woodland scheme conservation measure. The target in the native woodland scheme conservation measure was 1,950 ha of funding for the period 2014 to 2020. By the end of this year it looks as though significantly less than 200 ha of that funding will be allocated. We suggest an amended version of that to assist those who were in that ash dieback situation. Those are my key points.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** It is very important that this committee hears all of the arguments in respect of this because, as we have said on a number of occasions, we need to get forestry policy right for many different areas. There is much in what we have heard today, both in terms of the forestry industry but also regarding the alternative position.

I thank Mr. Gowran for his contribution. On his position with regard to the mix we have seen, the central proposition put to us from a number of different areas is that we are planting the wrong type of trees in the wrong places. Does he have a view on that? Is there something we can do at a holistic level in terms of departmental policy to try to get the balance right so that the right type of tree is planted in the right places?

I asked the previous representatives if they had a view on specific targets we should meet with regard to conifer and broadleaf. Does Mr. Gowran have a view on what would be the most appropriate percentage that should be set?

Mr. Gowran referenced previously that clear felling requires the use of pesticides to prevent disease. Does he have a view as to whether we could be better at ensuring that the mix of broadleaf, not just in terms of per plantation because that often means that all the broadleaf are

planted in one particular area and then we have extensive conifer plantations, would result in less clear felling? Would that have a knock-on effect in that there would be less need for pesticides? I am sure that is an issue that would be of interest to many because it could potentially reduce the cost.

With regard to Mr. Gowran's reference to last week's committee meeting, I note his comments relating to the prospects for the ash plant were a little more optimistic. They are a world apart from the evidence we heard previously. I ask him to go into more detail on the types of measures that would be required to save the ash if it is his position that the ash can be saved. What type of measures are required and what level of success does he believe is possible to attain? Following on from last week's, it is clear that there will be a massive reduction ash. Is there scope also to increase the presence that he mentioned is a shadow of its former self? Is there something we can do in that regard?

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I am grateful to the Chairman for allowing this opportunity. The fact that we have 12,000 jobs on the line because of this fiasco is nothing short of a national embarrassment. We are importing timber. One organisation has called that a national embarrassment but the entire lot from start to finish is an embarrassment. We have an opportunity now to get this right. I will say it straight out, and I said it in the Chamber during the discussion on the legislation, the forestry Bill could have gone much further. It could have closed a loophole in terms of the relevant person piece that was in the draft legislation but subsequently taken out of the forestry Bill. I firmly believe that had that been left in we would not have a situation where people who live 200 to 300 miles away from an area can continue to object. I would like to hear Mr. Gowran's views on that particular point.

He mentioned the water framework directive and suggested that that is slowing down the screening and assessment process within the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. My understanding, however, from engaging with a number of experts involved in forestry is that there is a lack of expertise in that Department to move on these applications, licences and appeals quickly. There is a problem in terms of the appeals process and a lack of expertise. What is Mr. Gowran's view on that? Does he believe we need to recruit more people with expertise in forestry related matters? I am hearing that there is a need in that regard.

We have to act quickly on this. We have to be pragmatic and ensure we get this right from start to finish. There is a need for a strong forestry policy because we have not had one but we must ensure that that forestry policy is not aspirational. We have to ensure that it does justice to the industry and that it protects jobs. We must also make sure that we are meeting climate action targets but because forestry is in the mess it is in today we will not meet climate action targets and we will see job losses. We have seen job losses. I know of sawmills that have been ground to a halt. I know of timber harvesting companies that are absolutely struggling. It has been said to me by contractors, hauliers and sawmills, that they cannot see themselves continuing beyond Christmas.

We have to take urgent action and that urgent action should start in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ensure that the right people with the right expertise are put in to do the screening and to ensure that the process moves quickly. We have to protect this industry. It is a very important industry in Ireland and we need to do everything in our power to protect those jobs, and the industry.

**Senator Paul Daly:** I thank Mr. Gowran for his comprehensive submission to the committee. I will be brief as I know the Chairman is under a time constraint. I want to get more

feedback from Mr. Gowran on a point Deputy Carthy raised. It relates to ash dieback and how he believes that situation has been handled to date. What could have been done better? What should have been done and what needs to be done now? I asked the previous witnesses, based on their submission, about the damage to farmer enthusiasm or the brand that is the species of ash. How could any farmer in his or her right mind be encouraged to plant ash based on what he or she has seen, the problems associated with the ash dieback disease and how it was or was not handled? Deputy Carthy touched on that also but Mr. Gowran might elaborate on it.

To go back to our licensing process, the backlog in licensing is affecting when and if people do their thinning. What is Mr. Gowran's view of a forestry project, how it is affected, its longevity and its overall quantity and quality if it is not thinned at the right time or not thinned out at all? I am aware some people are skipping the opportunity to thin. They are having to deal with so much hassle and bureaucracy to get a licence to get in and do it that they are not thinning when they should do so. How detrimental is that to the overall output at the end of the project if the forest is not thinned properly and at the correct point in time in its development?

**Chairman:** Mr. Gowran might answer those questions. Two more members are offering so I ask him to be brief.

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** In response to the point made by Deputy Carthy, the bulk of the industry needs to move to continuous cover forestry, which involves continual selective thinning rather than the clearfell system we have. What I propose in the context of the protected forest zone would only solve part of the problem. It will, however, solve the most sensitive part, namely, in respect of those areas where the forest service seeks Natura impact statements. That would also eliminate or massively reduce the requirement to treat plants in reforestation with pesticides, which have appeared in water sampling done by the EPA in recent times. Also, in order to promote a stronger shift to hardwoods, we need more research in respect of hardwood products. Training is required. This links to ash dieback disease. We need more focus on managing existing woodlands, not just broadleaf species but also in the context of thinning conifer crops.

The main way that ash will survive, apart from producing a plant - testing is being done to find a strain of ash tree that is resistant to dieback, which may happen in time - will be through the management of existing woodlands to create conditions for the natural regeneration of ash trees. I cannot give the precise proof on this right now but it is likely that natural regeneration will be more resistant to disease over time. I do not disagree with the 5% survival scenario. By that I mean that only 5% of the ash trees we have now may survive into the future. We must make sure that an amount of the species is encouraged to survive in existing woodlands. That is essentially the point.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank Mr. Gowran for his presentation. He stated that 5% of ash trees will survive. Does he agree that the way in which this matter is being handled, especially in the context of what emerged last week in other submissions to the committee, is not encouraging and will not entice new people to become involved in planting trees? Is Woodlands of Ireland funded by the Irish Environmental Network?

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** No.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Is Woodlands of Ireland opposed to planting spruce? Does it support the planting of more broadleaf varieties or is that just in areas on sites that suit better? Has the organisation worked or liaised with the Department? Will the Department be involved with the organisation going forward?

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** Woodlands of Ireland is part funded by the forest service, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Heritage Council. We would be of the view that native species will grow on most of the forest sites and that it would be better if the bulk of forestry here was based on native species. Have I answered the Deputy's question?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The one worry I have is that the organisation is being funded by Government bodies. It is very hard to talk against whoever is providing the money. We have a serious problem in the forestry sector at the moment and I completely understand how the Woodlands of Ireland promotes its side. However, he who pays the piper calls the tune. If the organisation is being funded by the NPWS, which has sites around the country, does the NPWS give a site to the organisation? Will Mr. Gowran explain how this operates?

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** In Woodlands of Ireland, we have a technical advisory panel that includes people from the core funders but also from the industry in general and universities. Contractors and a range of stakeholders are involved on the panel. Through that, we form expert committees on different subjects. We concentrate on the technical aspects of native woodlands and how that relates to the overall forestry and try to provide technical solutions or show ways to make changes to and reform existing schemes. A range of different people engage with Woodlands of Ireland and then communicate to the funders changes that can happen plus how they might come about.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Woodlands of Ireland is funded to carry out analysis and consider changes. Am I correct that the trees that it is involved with are left there? Is it fair to say that they are not commercial?

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** No, that would not be fair to say in that we would like to see more product development and more industry developed from native species. At the same time we want a combination of meeting the biodiversity requirements and ecosystem services and taking the opportunities to create a hardwood industry.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** I thank Mr. Gowran for his presentation. I ask him to speak to an issue that has not been touched on so far. If he cannot, that is fair enough. Last August, the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Senator Pippa Hackett, announced the woodland creation on public lands scheme. How does Mr. Gowran view the potential for the scheme? What are his thoughts on how Departments or other State bodies might be persuaded to avail of the scheme so that there is a significant uptake of the development of broadleaf native forestry on public lands?

**Mr. Peter O'Brien:** This is essentially the native woodland scheme afforestation scheme but geared towards owners of public lands. Training days will be provided to promote the scheme to owners of public lands. Iarnród Éireann is enthusiastic and is considering putting a number of sites under the scheme and, as far as I know, have one site up and running. I hope that there is uptake by local authorities, various public bodies and even some of land banks owned by IDA Ireland, for example. The new scheme is at a very early stage. As I am not directly employed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I am not sure what the full degree of uptake is or the full degree of response by the public sector so far.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** Is Mr. Gowran positive about the potential of the scheme, accepting that he is not directly involved?

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** I am. Given the climate crisis, every possible measure should be exam-

ined and encouraged. The positive move by the forest service is an indication that it is considering opening up new avenues for expanding tree coverage generally.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** Mr. Gowran's submission states protective forest zoning may be part of the solution. What kind of acreage is he talking about in that regard?

On ash dieback, we were told at our previous meeting that ash is gone. It is good to hear somebody else with something different to say to us. Mr. Gowran mentioned a figure of 5%, which can be built upon. What solution has he for rebuilding our native ash stock other than opting for a different species?

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** Regarding treatment, I suggest that trees be stumped back in the dormant season when they become diseased. The logs should be removed, to a diameter of 5 cm, for craft wood or fuel, and the remaining lighter branches and leaf litter should be burned from the following September onwards to allow for the bird and mammal nesting season.

The initial response to ash dieback was to remove the stand entirely and burn or bury all of it on site. The indications are now that it is better to deal with trees as they become diseased. From an economic point of view, that will not suit many owners because, in some cases, they have a high percentage of diseased trees. This is why I suggest examining one of the under-utilised schemes such as the native woodland conservation scheme and converting the stands into multispecies stands. In the long run, funding the landowner to do that would be the best approach. Within the stands, there is the possibility of a certain amount of ash regenerating. More mature trees tend to show less dieback, from observation. We may get seed from them that will regenerate into the new multispecies stands. In multispecies stands, the spread of disease is slowed down to some extent and there is a greater possibility of creating shelter to protect the ash. There would still be a high percentage of deaths in ash, however.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I want to go back to my original question, which was not answered. With regard to screening and assessments associated with felling licence appeals, Mr. Gowran made the point that the EU water framework directive is slowing things down. Does he believe, however, that other factors are at play? With regard to forestry expertise in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, does he believe there is a need for the Department to recruit more staff? Mr. Gowran works closely with the Department and knows what it is doing. He spoke about what is slowing down the appeals process but I understand there are a number of factors at play. What is Mr. Gowran's view on that? Is there a need for more staff with more expertise in this area?

**Mr. Joe Gowran:** The answers to that question is "Yes". There is a need for more expertise. For example, because of the current backlog there is no processing of native woodland conservation applications. Yes, it would be good to have greater recruitment of people with environmental science qualifications and more fire service inspectors as well. They need quite a number of additional staff.

**Chairman:** I thank the three witnesses, Mr. McAuley, Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Gowran for attending today. We have had a very good exchange of views. I thank them for getting used to the technology for the meeting. This is the first successful Zoom meeting we have had. I also thank the staff for getting the meeting up and running. We had a false start on the last occasion but it has run very smoothly today. I thank the staff and the witnesses for their co-operation.

I propose we now go into private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

JAM

The joint committee went into private session at 5.57 p.m. and adjourned at 6.25 p.m. until 4 p.m. on Tuesday, 10 November 2020.