

A Delivery Plan for the Implementation of the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010

During Consideration Stage of the Forestry Bill, now the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development called for a commitment from the Department to produce a Delivery Plan. The purpose of the Delivery Plan is to set how Forest Service will deliver its General Duty under section 1 of the Forestry Act, and translate Forest Service strategies into effective actions.

The primary audience for this Delivery Plan is our stakeholders and partnerships, and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. However, the wider audience is of course the Public of all ages and across the social spectrum for whom our woodlands offer recreational enjoyment and diverse benefits and opportunities.

A resource such as trees lends itself to long-term planning. The Delivery Plan will concentrate on the short term, but its activities will be monitored and evaluated as part of the Forest Service's annual Business Planning and Reporting process, and through its delivery of PSA targets under the Programme for Government. In the long term it will keep in view the Department's strategic aim to double the area of tree cover over the next fifty years in the context of sustainable forestry.

The Forestry Act is inextricably linked to the Forestry Strategy, articulated in "Northern Ireland - a Strategy for Sustainability and Growth" (March 2006). Northern Ireland forestry policy is a devolved matter, but operates in a global economy in an international context of deforestation, climate change and loss of biodiversity. The Forestry Strategy is built around twin pillars:

- The sustainable management of existing woods and forests
- A steady expansion of tree cover to increase the many diverse benefits that forests provide

The Forestry Act will address the Department's contemporary and evolving commercial, environmental and social objectives for forestry and will allow it to

obtain better value from the forest estate. It will help protect all forest trees from damage, and regulate the felling and regeneration of trees in private woodlands, including in ancient and long-established woodlands. Importantly, the Forestry Act will promote sustainable forestry and the management and development of forests to contribute to the protection of the environment, biodiversity and the mitigation of, or adaptation to, climate change.

It is important to note that “sustainable forestry” is not defined in the Act, but in line with its modern understanding, including the UK Forestry Standard, it encompasses economic, social and environmental strands.

There is no hierarchy of importance in all these elements, because sustainable forest management recognises an integrated approach, even if on the surface one activity or aim may not appear to sit neatly with another. This is the hallmark of multi-purpose forestry and a recognition of the sheer diversity of its benefits. For example, a key part of our approach to sustainable forest management is based on a planning process which balances recreational use, timber production and environmental functions of forests over broad geographic areas, while accommodating differences in emphasis in each of these factors between individual forests.

Several key themes emerge from the twin pillars of afforestation and sustainable forestry:

- Forest Expansion
- Timber Production
- Management and Development of Forests
- Protection of the Environment
- Climate Change
- Recreational and Social Use
- Partnership Development
- Commercialisation

This Delivery Plan provides a background to the key themes and the range of activities which they will generate. These activities relate in turn to Forest

Service key strategic aims, targets and objectives in its annual Business Planning process, and will be monitored, evaluated and reported upon, in our Annual Reports. While the emphasis is firmly on section 1 of the Forestry Act, reference is also made to other key sections of the Act which support its duties and themes.

Key Theme – Forest Expansion

Background

From a base of only 0.4% of land area at the end of the First World War, forests and woodland have expanded to cover 6% of the North. However, this remains much less than 10% cover in the South, 12% in England, Wales and Scotland, and 33% cover in Europe. Forestry is a matter of international importance because of concerns about the global impact of deforestation on climate and the loss of biodiversity.

Creation of new woodland

The Department has a 3-year PSA target to create an area of new woodland of 1650 hectares by 31 March 2011. There have been acknowledged difficulties in meeting the annual target of 550 hectares due to low levels of uptake of forestry grant schemes, against a background of the economic climate and a reluctance of farmers to convert their farmland to woodland. The Department will continue to explore creatively how to meet this challenging target and to make woodland creation an attractive option.

Woodlands Register

An important information tool in the aim to double forest cover over the next fifty years will be an accurate register of the location and size of our woodlands and the types of trees in them. Section 6 of the Forestry Act contains a duty to provide and maintain such a register, and publish it every ten years. The Department has commenced work on this project.

What we will do

- Continue to offer a variety of grants for woodland creation
- Continue to explore how to make our grant schemes more attractive, in particular to the farming sector
- Continue to explore, including with stakeholders, how to overcome barriers to uptake
- Engage in a creative and focussed publicity strategy
- Consider the relationship between the Woodlands Grant Scheme and the Department's other land-use schemes to determine means of increasing levels of woodland creation
- Consider how the forestry elements of the next Rural Development Programme can be developed to optimise woodland creation
- Research and gather the statutory data for a Woodland Register and publish that Register

Key Theme - Climate change

Background

Climate Change is one of the most serious threats facing the world today. It also creates great uncertainty and will require long-term strategic ecological adaptation. It is recognised that forestry makes a net contribution in reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide by carbon uptake in growing biomass, in vegetation and in soils. Managing and enhancing woodland related habitats can increase the amount of carbon taken up and stored in them. Energy crops as substitutes for fossil fuels have an important role to play, and the use of forest land in renewable energy generation such as wind power, subject to environmental safeguards.

The results of a recent public opinion survey on forestry in Northern Ireland revealed a widespread view that climate change would have an effect on Northern Ireland, and the strong belief that forests and woodlands could mitigate the potential negative effects by sequestering carbon, as well as providing shade and reducing the effects of flooding.

Within the Department, a Climate Change branch has been established to develop mitigation strategies, and Forest Service will have an important contribution to this.

What we will do

- Encourage the expansion of tree cover to mitigate climate change
- Promote supply of wood for industrial use and in support of renewable energy opportunities
- Promote the Short Rotation Coppice grant scheme for planting of crops for renewable energy purposes
- Encourage renewable energy on forest land
- Plant and promote the planting of trees that can adapt to changing climate
- Raise awareness of the potential impacts of climate change and the role of forestry in mitigation and adaptation

Key Theme - Timber production

Background

The Forest Service contributes to the Department's vision of "a thriving and sustainable rural community and environment in Northern Ireland". It supports the Department's strategic goals to "strengthen the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas" and "to develop a more sustainable environment". The Government accepts that timber production and the ancillary industries are important means of sustaining the rural economy; and many of the forests are situated in the socially disadvantaged areas, and thereby generate employment and public access in those areas

The supply of timber is a key economic element of sustainable forestry. The diverse benefits from our forests and woodlands depend on an economically viable forest business sector.

What we will do

- Optimise the return from timber sales
- Continue to provide employment in rural areas
- Stabilise and ensure continuity of industry by meeting contractual obligations to provide timber and wood products to wood processing industry with downstream benefit to local economy
- Promote the use of timber as a renewable, versatile raw material
- Ensure continued certified status of UK Woodland Assurance Standard to allow customers to sell products in markets requiring assurances of sustainable sources
- Ensure re-establishment of felled areas according to sustainable redesign plans

Key Theme - Management and development of forests

Background

The Department's General Duty of promoting afforestation and sustainable forestry refers to all forests in Northern Ireland, not only the Department's forest land. The Department recognises the valuable contribution that forestry makes in achieving its vision of a thriving, sustainable rural community.

Through the Forest Service, it aims to ensure the sustainability of forests as an invaluable heritage, expansion of tree cover, management of forests in a way that increases biodiversity, enhances the landscape and assists in improving water quality.

Forest Service will meet this important duty primarily through ensuring that all forests, including its own, are compliant with the UK Forestry Standard, and a variety of other measures that address sustainable forest management.

Further, Forest Service will ensure that it retains its important certified status under the UK Woodland Assurance Standard, which assures consumers that

timber products derived from its forests are sourced from sustainably managed forests.

Regulation of Felling

Integral to afforestation and sustainable forestry will be the regulation of felling of trees in woodlands of 0.2 hectares or more. Our long term aim is to increase woodland area and to ensure that it is sustainably managed, not least for the UKWAS certified status so important to our timber exporters.

To enable us to do all this, the Forestry Act contains a felling licensing system which will enable us to safeguard the area under forestry, and require owners to regenerate their woodlands in line with sustainable management criteria. We aim to introduce the necessary subordinate legislation and a user-friendly system with the minimum of red tape.

What we will do

- Ensure that our forests are compliant with the UK Forestry Standard, and promote good forestry management practice with other woodland owners
- Regulate the felling of trees in woodlands of 0.2 hectares or more
- Introduce necessary subordinate legislation
- Complete user-friendly guidelines respectively for stakeholders and staff
- Draw up a customer standards charter on timelines for handling felling applications

Key Theme - Protection of the environment (Biodiversity)

Background

Our woodlands are a precious heritage. They enhance the attractiveness of the landscape, provide essential habitats, are a rich source of biodiversity, and are embedded in our culture and natural heritage. They also have a beneficial

effect on water, soil and air. We must protect these resources and benefits and minimise negative impacts upon them. We also have a responsibility to protect our woodlands from damage by animals such as deer, hare, rabbits and squirrels, and from damage by fire, or indeed from pests that jeopardise plant health.

Management of wild deer populations within forests will continue to secure woodland regeneration, welfare of deer, maintenance of habitat diversity and reduction of road traffic accidents. The Forest Service will continue to cooperate with environmental groups and will also be mindful of Environmental, Wildlife and Habitats Regulations in respect of forestry operations.

What we will do

- Encourage the restructuring of woodlands to increase structural and species diversity
- Continue to implement our “Ancient Woodland Inventory” Woodland Strategy
- Help to diversify farmed landscapes through appropriate woodland expansion
- Protect or enhance the environment in accordance with the relevant Forest Guidelines
- Ensure that any felling management plan has regard to the desirability of maintaining the special character of ancient and long established woodlands
- Protect woodlands from depredation by deer and other animals

Key Theme - Recreational Use of Forest Land

Background

The Forest Service manages 75,500 hectares of forest land - representing almost 6% of our land area. There are more than two million visits to our

forests every year, with visitors enjoying forest trails and nature walks through some of the most beautiful scenery in the North of Ireland. The physical and mental health benefits of outdoor recreation are well reported and our forests offer great scope for these benefits to be enjoyed. Some of our forests provide eco-trails, and orienteering, cycling, and horse-riding opportunities. They also regularly host a range of organised outdoor recreation and sports events including walks, athletics, cycling and car rallies.

Under the new Forestry Act, there is provision for a public right of pedestrian access to our forest land, subject to byelaws. We will modernise our byelaws to ensure safe, recreational enjoyment and respect for the forest environment.

Recreational and Social Use Strategy

The main vehicle for the recreational element of our General Duty is our "Strategy to Develop the Recreational and Social Use of Our Forests". The vision of this Strategy is that our forests will become key venues for outdoor recreation and tourism, offering opportunities to appreciate and enjoy biodiversity, and a wide choice of activities for an increasing number of visitors. However, it also recognises that Forest Service cannot maximise the full range of opportunities on its own. Partnership working with others, including commercial operators and with other public bodies will enable much more to be achieved.

What we will do

- Continue to implement effectively the vision of our Social and Recreational Strategy
- Explore scope and opportunity of partnerships in achieving this vision
- Use forest planning process to allow a stronger emphasis on social and recreation opportunities including participation across section 75 categories
- Bring into law the public right of pedestrian access supported by modern

byelaws

- Complete implementation of the Signage Strategy
- Improve website and other means of communication to increase participation, including by children and young people
- Actively promote forest land to support healthier life-styles and well-being.
- Explore opportunities for increasing cycling and horse riding in forests
- Encourage increased use of forests close to towns and villages by local people
- Develop arrangements for promoting the use of forests for new outdoor learning opportunities
- Work actively with Northern Ireland Tourist Board to identify the business potential of our forests and how to realise that potential

Key Theme - Commercialisation

Partnership with others is a key element of our commitment to implement the Government's Wider Markets Initiative. For example, recent key tasks have included a market-sounding exercise to establish private sector interest in the renewable energy and leisure sectors. This exercise culminated in the development of our Commercialisation Plan.

Section 7 of the Forestry Act allows the Department to use partnership arrangements to support any aspects of the General Duty or indeed the use or development of forest land for a purpose other than forestry (section 4).

Use or Development of Forestry Land

It is Government policy, and a key aim of the forestry strategy, to obtain better value from the public forest estate. Possible enterprises could include the development of wind farms, eco-tourist facilities within forests or forest chalets. Any such initiative will, of course, be bound by normal planning restrictions and by the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations, covering

change of use of forested land. Any disposal of land will be considered carefully, and ultimately must have due regard to the General Duty.

What we will do

- Explore opportunities to use forestry land for other purposes to generate better value from the public forest estate
- Where appropriate, facilitate partnerships to optimise economic potential
- Progress existing initiatives and finalise outline business cases

Maintaining the Momentum

The Forestry Act is inextricably linked to the Forestry Strategy, the progress of which is monitored on an annual basis by our Business Plan and Annual Report, and these will remain the principal means for our performance targets. All the activities listed under each Key Theme in this Delivery Plan have a link to ongoing targets and objectives in our Business Planning process.

Finally, the Delivery Plan is wedded to our strategic vision for forestry in the North - “To meet the forest needs of present and future generations through improved sustainability of forests and an increased rate of afforestation”. The aims remain consonant with the range of activities in this Delivery Plan:

- Provide those owning land with the information and the means to consider afforestation as a realistic alternative land use
- Continue a steady supply of timber to ensure the economic sustainability of forestry industries and to support the rural economy.
- Continue to provide access to forests and to realise the potential of forests to be used for recreation and tourism
- Provide a statutory basis for realising the vision
- Encourage forest growth to provide timber, biodiversity and access opportunities and further develop the quality of the NI landscape.
- Improve the sustainable management of the forestry resource in NI.