

Forestry

COVID-19 emergency forestry legislation required



Forestry is determined to stay open but needs emergency legislation to maintain planting, harvesting and roading during the coronavirus pandemic, to alleviate the licence backlog and allow the FAC to issue findings on the 489 outstanding appeals. Donal Magner reports

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the forestry sector is at work and strives to deliver a viable programme against the odds. After Brexit and the exceptionally wet February and March, the sector is now trying to come to grips with the greatest ever challenge to face the nation.

Yet, all companies contacted by the *Irish Farmers Journal* were determined to continue production. Nurseries are delivering plants to sites or putting them in cold storage for later planting, while forestry companies and contractors are preparing sites and planting. Harvesting contractors, sawmills, board mills and wood energy outlets are determined to ensure wood mobilisation can be optimised.

Maintaining production while safeguarding staff according to HSE and Government guidelines is their main objective and forestry by its nature has inherent health advantages in this regard, especially in relation to social distancing.

While there is unanimity among stakeholders that they will continue to perform, they all identified the slowdown in issuing sufficient planting, felling and roading licences as a major obstacle facing the sector in terms of productivity and maintaining jobs. The planting programme will suffer, while harvesting depends on felling and roading licences. For example, for the fourth month in a row, Coillte cannot provide sufficient logs for an electronic auction, although the company received a number of licences in recent weeks.

The Department's performance in issuing licences increased in February and March, but there is still a major backlog. It is vital that Forest Service inspectors and registered foresters maintain dialogue throughout the licensing process, especially during the pre-application phase as recommended by Mackinnon. This is not happening. There are sufficient applications in the system to be screened by both parties and with emergency legislation in place, these could be activated without Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) hearings. This would free up the FAC to hear the 489 appeals outstanding. These include some oral hearings, which have been indefinitely postponed during the COVID-19 emergency.

A temporary emergency change to the legislation, either to the Forestry Act or through statutory instruments in the Act, would be sufficient to provide



Oak seedlings, pictured last summer in None-So-Hardy Nurseries. Sown in 2016, they have been lifted and placed in cold storage in Shillelagh, Co Wicklow, along with millions of other plants from the company's 215ha nurseries to fulfil Ireland's 8,000ha planting programme. Without emergency legislation, planting may under-perform by up to 5,000ha, with millions of surplus plants.

Otherwise, key forestry operations and jobs are jeopardised. This situation could be alleviated by the Government if emergency legislation was put in place to allow licences for these essential operations to flow. Otherwise, the sector will grind to a halt.

This view has been echoed by nurseries, foresters, growers, contractors and timber processors. Right now, COVID-19 has shaken the sector to its core, but issuing appropriately assessed licences would raise morale and ensure that it continues in business.

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assurances. This temporary emergency legislation – like recent government emergency legislation – would be subject to a sunset clause review on 9 November 2020, whereby powers enacted under this new temporary law can be reviewed, with an option to remove or renew.

The following have called for the introduction of emergency COVID-19 forestry legislation:

- Matt Dempsey, former editor of the *Irish Farmers Journal*.
- Vincent Nally, chair, IFA Farm Forestry.
- Mark McAuley, director, Forest Industries Ireland (FII), Ibec.
- Donal Whelan, technical director, Irish Timber Growers Association.
- Mike Glennon, joint managing director Glennon Bros.
- Dermot Houlihan, chair, Association of Irish Forestry Consultants.
- Marina Conway, CEO, Western Forestry co-op.
- Paddy Bruton, managing director, Euroforest Ireland and Forestry Services Ltd.
- Susan Grainger, director, GP Wood.
- Jim McNamara, director, Laois Sawmills Ltd.
- John Phelan, director, Woodland Managers Limited.
- Michael Moroney, CEO, Association of Farm and Forestry Contractors in Ireland.
- Patrick Murray, director, Murray Timber Group.
- Sean Finan, CEO Irish Bioenergy Association.
- John O'Reilly, CEO Green Belt Ltd.
- Daryl Fahy, managing director, ECC Timber Products.
- John Roche, managing director, Arbor Forest Management.
- Dr Gerhardt Gallagher, forestry consultant.
- Brendan Lacey, managing director, Irish Forestry Unit Trust.
- John McCarthy, director, None-So-Hardy Nurseries.
- Pdraig Egan, general manager, SWS Forestry.
- Daragh Little, managing director forestry, Veon Ltd.
- Alex Kelly, manager, Irish Wood Producers.
- Kathryn O'Donoghue, CEO, Forest Owners Co-operative Society.
- Conor Daly, director, The Forestry Company.
- John Sherlock, chairperson, Northeast Forestry Group.
- Michael Fleming, past chairperson, IFA Farm Forestry.
- Brendan Fitzsimons, CEO, Tree Council of Ireland.
- Pat O'Sullivan, technical director, Society of Irish Foresters.

On the ground: the impact of coronavirus

While the forestry and forest products sector is likely to face major challenges over the coming weeks and months due to COVID-19, it was a case of all hands to the pump last week to maintain production while safeguarding staff from the virus

Murray Sawmill Group

"We will continue to produce timber for the domestic and export market, as long as the demand exists," said Patrick Murray, director of Murray Sawmill Group. "We are especially conscious of the nation's need to provide food and provisions, as outlined by An Taoiseach." He pointed out that pallets that are processed and manufactured in Ireland are the key wooden packaging platforms for transporting food, provisions and other products.



Laois Sawmills

"We are in production and will continue on a day by day basis," said Jim McNamara, director of Laois Sawmills. "Coillte's difficulties in receiving felling licences has impacted on their supply to the mills. We are also experiencing major supply shortages from private growers, as they are finding it difficult to receive licence approvals."



Green Belt

"It's business as usual," said John O'Reilly, "but there isn't a moment that you are not conscious of the virus." He said safeguarding staff and clients is paramount. "Contractors travel separately and keep their social distances. The days of meeting a farmer informally during planting and harvesting are over for now."



"The main problem is the lack of felling and planting licences. Emergency legislation should now be considered to speed up licences."

Teagasc

"Teagasc is very conscious that the forestry sector needs to remain viable and retain experienced staff, so they need a steady flow of work," said Dr Nuala Ní Fhlatharta. "Without this, we risk expertise and capacity leaving the sector with significant longer term implications. Teagasc is available and working to support forest owners and the overall sector in these very difficult times."



Certification success for private growers

DONAL WHELAN

In recent years, Ireland has been making significant progress in Forest Certification in the private sector. In 2018, as part of a major initiative supported by DAFM, two forestry producer groups achieved Forest Certification to an international forest management standard, the first in Ireland to achieve this recognition.

Since then, at least two private forestry companies have successfully achieved forest certification, while all major sawmills have Chain of Custody certification. This November, Ireland will host the International PEFC general assembly and certification week. It will give Ireland's forestry sector a significant profile and reflects a sec-



tor that has considerable abilities and potential, despite the difficulties it currently faces.

Acknowledging these developments, the Soil Association has just announced that a series of training courses will be held in Ireland in order to facilitate foresters who wish to access accredited training courses in forest certification, without having to travel abroad.

Soil Association has teamed up with forestry.ie to promote the courses to the wider forestry community. They will be held from 24 August – 3 September 2020. For more information, contact forestrytraining@soilassociation.org.

Donal Whelan is principal of Commercial Forestry Services Ltd and technical director of the Irish Timber Growers Association.