



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Submission to Ireland's New Forestry Strategy 2023-2030 and Implementation Plan 2023 - 2027

November 2022

Contact
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Irish Rural Link is core funded by the Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development through Pobal



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on the new Forestry Strategy 2023 – 2030 and the Implementation Plan for 2023 -2027.

IRL is a member of Project Woodlands Policy Group and undertook a study on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM) on *Attitudes by Communities and Interested Parties on Forestry and Woodlands*¹ as part of Project Woodland and inform the development of the wider *Shared National Vision for Trees and Forests* and the new Forest Strategy.

The purpose of the study was to explore the attitudes of communities towards forests and woodlands as well as current forestry practices in Ireland. The study built on the work done by Dr. Áine Ní Dhubháin and University College Dublin in 2019 on “The Socio-Economic Impact of Forestry in Co. Leitrim”. It engaged with those communities and community groups, not just in Leitrim but across the country, who feel adversely impacted by forests developed in their local area over the past number of years as well as those involved directly in the sector and those interested in forestry from an environmental, recreational and wellbeing point of view.

One clear finding from the study was that no person or community group was against trees and understood the benefits that some tree species bring to the environment and community. The results of both the survey and some of the Focus Groups highlighted the need to increase Ireland’s forestry and woodland coverage. The need to move away from fossil fuel to renewable heat sources as well as meeting housing targets will require an increase in timber and other wood products. The study also highlighted the many benefits forestry, woodlands and trees can provide for biodiversity, as an education resource and mental and physical health. However, the impact certain monoculture and excessive and dense plantations of Sitka Spruce has had on some communities, mainly rural communities have formed a negative attitude towards forestry over the years.

The new Forest Strategy must ensure that there is continued engagement with not only stakeholders but also the public and communities, including those communities that feel current forestry practices in their local area are not serving the community well.

¹Irish Rural Link (2022) *Assessment of Attitudes by Communities and Interested Parties on Forestry and Woodlands* Available on <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/forestry-policy-and-strategy/#shared-national-vision-for-trees-and-forests>

The following are IRL comments on the Draft Forest Strategy 2023-2030 and its Implementation Plan for 2023-2027 pertinent with our members and the finding of the study we undertook.

Initial Comments

We welcome that the Implementation Plan is a five-year plan. However, we expect there will be continuous monitoring and progress reports on the implementation of the new Forestry Strategy and that there will be opportunities for the public and local communities to engage with this process.

The new Forest Strategy is being developed at a time when the country, Europe and the world are facing cost of living crisis and increased energy prices and a move away from our dependency on fossil fuels to more renewable and cleaner energy sources. We are also in a time where we need to address carbon emissions from the construction sector and how this can become greener and more sustainable and homes more affordable. Exploring how forests play a key role in helping to address these challenges is essential but cannot be done at the detriment of not reaching housing targets or pushing those most impacted by the energy crisis further into fuel and energy poverty. It is important therefore that the new Forestry Strategy is not developed and implemented in a silo and it aligns with and compliments other Government and EU Policies and Strategies including but not limited to; Climate Action Plan 2021 and all future Climate Action Plans; the new Biodiversity Strategy; new Peatland Strategy; Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021 -2025. It should also work with Local Authorities in their County Development Plans.

The 4Rs – Right trees, in the Right places for the Right reasons with the Right management principal is welcome and was cited by many respondents to the IRL survey and in focus groups. However, it is important that this phrase doesn't get overused to the point it loses its meaning.

We welcome that two of the five principles of the new Strategy includes Forests for People and Forests for Rural Economies and that communities will feel a sense of connection to forests in their local area. It is important therefore to ensure that those communities who have been seen as hard objectors to forestry in the past are also engaged with and that DAFM look further into their concerns when raised.

Goal – Effective Communication

Action 7: Develop and implement a Communications and Engagement Strategy in support of the implementation of the Forest Strategy.

IRL welcome that this action will include Stakeholder Representative Bodies but it also must ensure that the concerns of those who were most impacted by dense plantation of Sitka

Spruce in the past are engaged with and their concerns are taken on board or investigated. Engagement must be open to everyone and that all concerns are listened to.

Action 8: Conduct a public attitudes survey every three years to assess changing outlook on trees and forests in Ireland compared to the first public attitudes survey of 2021.

This survey must ensure that a wide range of people and communities are included in the survey and that the survey is shared widely with NGO's working with communities so people can have their say. There must be a good balance of rural and urban people having the opportunity to engage with the survey.

Goal: Alignment of Land-Use

Action 11: Align tree planting measures in Agri-Environment Schemes with forest creation support measures.

Adequate supports for farmers will be needed for this. Linking it the Knowledge Transfer Scheme that will be one of the actions in the implementation plan may help to increase up-take of the scheme. Farmers must be adequately compensated for planting forest over other more viable farming practices but that are often seen as being harmful to environment.

Goal – Support promotion and awareness

Action 12 - Implement a support scheme for existing private forests to enhance social, cultural or heritage value

More clarification is needed if this scheme will be open to smaller farmers who plant forest and small forest owners or if it is aimed only at larger investors. If smaller farmers and forest owners are included, how will they be compensated for opening up this part of their land to the public, will farmers and forest owners be compensated and how will insurance work? DAFM must engage with Heritage division within Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Heritage Council, Local Heritage Officers, Department of Tourism, Culture and Arts as well as local Heritage groups.

Action 15 - Promote forests and forestry on the public forest estate through the provision of recreation areas, the development of visitor destinations, and knowledge transfer initiatives on the multifunctional role of forests in our society

This came out strongly in the Irish Rural Link study and that better access to forests is needed. Public forest estates must be accessible to all – wheelchair users and others with limited mobility, which links it to using forests for health and wellbeing.

Goal – Incentives for forest creation and management

Action 16 - Implement support schemes that support redesign and, where appropriate, restoration measures at reforestation stage.

In the Irish Rural Link study and especially within the Focus Group among the ‘Save Groups’ there was an opinion that a lot of local biodiversity was lost and land damaged following years of dense plantations and the ‘plant it and leave’ attitude of large forest investment companies. It is important that the new Forest Strategy engages with all communities including those communities and parts of the country that have seen their area damaged by the excessive plantation of Sitka Spruce on this action. The redesign process must look at how else the land can be used, e.g. in the case of where forests were planted on peatlands and wetlands before now, can this land be restored and conserved. Action 16 will need to work and align with new Biodiversity plan and new Peatlands Strategy.

IRL would see this action linked also to *Action 37 - Implement support schemes to support the creation of a mix of forest types, including productive, native, closer to nature and agroforestry.* Making sure that there is a good proportion of native species will be important.

Goal – Sustainable Forest Management

Action 19 - Develop a shared understanding of the Four R’s (Right trees in the Right places for the Right reasons, with the Right management) in an Irish context.

It is important that there is a clear understanding from the outset of what is meant by the Four R’s. As mentioned above it must have meaning throughout the duration of the strategy and that it does not become overused to the point where it’s meaning gets lost. It must be set out clearly what is meant by the 4R’s not just by those working in the industry, other stakeholders but also by communities and the general public. There is a link between this action and action 16 in that redesign and restoration measures take this into consideration. Areas that have been damaged from dense plantations in the past must be examined and if the land is still suitable.

Action 21 - Establish baseline for the area of forest managed under Closer to Nature forest management as a percentage of total forest area and put in place measures to increase this.

More clarification is needed on this and if the baseline will be for each plantation of trees and forests or for the total forest area of the country. Irish Rural Link suggests that it be for each plantation but that a higher proportion of native and broadleaf trees are planted where it is a large private company. This may help avoid many of the same issues some communities face with current and past forestry practices.

Goal – Education, Skills and Careers

The actions under this goal are welcome and came out in the Irish Rural Link survey. It would also be beneficial to engage communities with this also. It would also be important to link this goal to promotion and awareness of forests in local communities on their uses.

Goal – Forest Expansion

This goes back to the 4R's principal and ensuring that communities are not negatively impacted by expansion of forests – trees must be planted to ensure communities can benefit from them in terms of job creation, local amenities, improved ecosystem services and protection of local biodiversity. It should also be part of wider Local Development Plans.

Goals on Carbon Storage, Sequestration and Biodiversity

Forestry must complement other carbon stores such as peatlands and wetlands. Forests cannot be planted at the detriment of local species and biodiversity. Where these have been damaged in the past supports to restore these with the plantation of the right trees and mix of trees is needed.

Goal – Promote Forest Recreation for Health and Well-Being

This came out quite strongly in the Irish Rural Link survey and focus groups. During the Covid-19 pandemic there was a renewed appreciation for nature and the outdoors and how it helped to improve people's well-being and mental health at this time.

Action 71. Review and expand the Neighbourhood Scheme to support the creation of new public amenity forests and the enhancement of existing forests for public access, education, recreation and health and wellbeing for rural and urban communities.

Review and expansion of the Neighbourhood Scheme was one of the recommendations IRL made in its report on Communities' Attitudes to Forests and Trees. We welcome that this recommendation has being included in the Implementation Plan. It will be important that communities, forest owners, farmers are all engaged with and it must become a viable option for them to open up access to land. Issues on insurance have prevented farmers and small forest owners opening up their forests to date. Clarification on who pays insurance and public liability is needed. If this is not covered by Local Authorities, it will continue to discourage farmers to take up scheme.

More clarification on supports for applications is also needed and the application process must be straightforward and not laborious or too bureaucratic.

Goal – Access to Forests

Action 73 - Maintain an Open Forest Policy for on foot access to public forest estate.

Action 74 - Provide targeted support for the development of public access, education and recreation in forests in or near villages, towns and cities.

Response – amenities – make them accessible to all – wheelchair users etc.

Goal – Building Confidence and Trust

We see this as a vital goal if the new Strategy is to be successfully implemented. Continued engagement throughout the strategy is needed and those who are often seen as hard objectors to the types of forestry of old must be engaged with also and their views considered. Where views are not taken on board, an explanation why could help resolve any grievances. This is mainly where there were large forest investment companies who had no engagement with the local area.

Action 75 - Roll out of pre-application discussions on forest licence applications nationwide.

This is important for small farmers engaged in or considering forestry in the future as well as small forest owners and landowners. Space must be given so they have a better understanding of the process but also that lines of communication remain open throughout the application process. In some instances, for e.g. where there is a large plantation being applied for, we would like to see engagement with local communities to make sure that the forest will suit and be beneficial to the local area.

Action 76 - Implement supports to enhance the cultural, social and heritage value of forests through a combination of methods including the creation of new access, recreational facilities and potential for eco-tourism.

This goes back to previous actions similar to this and if farmers and small forest owners will be able to participate in these schemes. The issue of insurance and public liability remains one of the main reasons farmers and small private foresters did not open up their forests before now. This should be addressed before schemes begin as it may continue to discourage farmers and small forest owners to open up their forests.

Action 77 - Facilitate and encourage forest projects developed in partnership between landowners, communities and where appropriate local authorities.

This action is welcome and came out strongly in our survey and focus groups. Having a bottom-up approach to such projects has worked well in other areas such as in restoration of peatlands and wetlands and lessons learnt from this approach could be applied to the development of partnership projects in forestry.

Action 78 - DAFM to develop a new forestry customer service charter

More detail on what this would look like will be needed. Who forestry customers are will also need to be defined and if it will include communities and general public. Will there be engagement with communities and the public on this charter?

Action 79 - Establishment of a number of pilot areas to develop a plan led approach to afforestation in collaboration with stakeholders. These pilot areas will help inform a national approach to plan led afforestation.

This is welcome and IRL would suggest that some of these pilots occur in those counties where dense plantations have occurred over the years. Engagement with groups that have been seen as objectors will be important to ensure their success and roll out to other areas.

Goal – Learning and Awareness

Action 80 - Develop and implement support initiatives that aim to increase public awareness of the multi benefits of forests and the multi-functional use of the resource through school curriculums, training educators, forest walks, demonstrations, etc.

This must be done at both national and local level. Getting local community groups will be important to promote the use of local forests in the area.

Goal – Supporting a Thriving Rural Economy

This Goal is another very important goal and is a way of ensuring Forestry can become part of the wider rural economy and society. The creation of jobs will be an important part of this but also how forests can integrate better into rural communities and vice versa. Better knowledge and understanding of the importance of the forestry industry, the many uses of forestry and timber products will need to be effectively communicated at both national and local level. It would be important that this goal aligns with objectives and actions in other policies and strategies including Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, Local and County Development Plans, Enterprise Plans and Action Plans for Jobs.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'