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Submission: SUBMISSION FROM THE IRISH NATURA AND HILL FARMERS ASSOCIATION (INHFA)

5.9 FORESTRY AND WOODLANDS

Our forestry is diverse in its make-up and encompasses large areas of native woodland which are both privately, and publicly owned, as well as commercially planted swathes of our countryside. Coniferous forest comprise around 3.7 percent land covering our region with transitional woodland scrub making up approximately 4.5 percent. This is below the national level of 10.7 percent and substantially below the EU average of 38%.

These facts require attention:

- According to Teagasc's 2017 forestry report statistics the forest estate comprises 472 830ha of conifers (68.6% of which 52.4% are Sitka Spruce), broadleaves 164 310ha (17.5% comprising of willow, ash, oak and birch) and mixed broadleaves 13.9%.
- 18.9% of County Leitrim is planted, substantially higher than the national average. There is definitely more than 3.7 land cover under Sitka Spruce and non-native conifers.
- The EU average of 38% includes a high percentage of older mixed native woodland / forests. This contrasts with the Industrial approach favoured by the Irish where the forests are planted with fast growing conifers and clear felled in short rotation.

The Region's forests are primarily planted for their economic value, but they are also of value in terms of biodiversity and climate change, through the sequestration of carbon in our forests (and bogs), recreational value and tourism potential. Ireland's forestry sector is striving to increase forestry cover and whilst there have been forestry practices that have contributed to water quality issues such as release of suspended solids, acidification of water courses, flooding, loss and disturbance of riverine habitat, there is growing concern regarding its potential impact upon rural communities.

This includes concern that afforestation is having an impact upon the economic viability of farming practices, as land values increase beyond the economic viability of indigenous farming enterprises;

As already mentioned, it is critical to make a distinction between commercial stands of non-native conifers and mixed predominantly native woodland forests. The latter has a much higher value in terms of habitat for biodiversity and carbon sequestration.

They are seen to be adversely impacting upon community cohesion, with the perception that forestry is resulting in rural communities being isolated and on occasion enclosed by forestry plantations.

Rural communities experiencing the isolation and darkness / depression when surrounded by plantations of conifers know this to be a fact, not a perception.

These issues are not easily resolved within the land use planning framework, as afforestation does not require consent under the planning acts.

It is time to bring for planning permission for land use change and environmental impact assessments for plantations.

Nonetheless, the issues need to be addressed if the Ireland's forest industry is to meet its targets. It is appropriate that the RSES provide a platform for this to be considered, through a Regional Fora/ Working Group, thus ensuring that a framework is available to safeguard rural communities, and maximise the potential of forests to add value, through rural jobs, directly and indirectly and to provide environmental benefits to this region.

Meeting Ireland's emission and renewable energy targets is a priority. It is critical that we reassess how we are going about meeting them. Farmers and local land owners are

generally aware of both the environment and the needs of the day. However, asking them to put in stands of commercial conifers is not what most farmers want to do. There is more interest in agroforestry and soil sequestration or long-term native woodlands than commercial plantations. Unfortunately, because the farmer is not doing what the industry wants them to do, the focus is now to incentivise the investment market. This is disastrous for the environment, the local communities and the local economy as the money generated from the investment will not circulate in the counties the conifers are planted in.

Minister of State Andrew Doyle's recent announcement of an independent study into forestry in Leitrim is welcomed by the Irish Natura and Hill Farmers Association. Stakeholders from the local community and environmental sector must contribute to the terms of reference of the report, says Gerry Loftus, spokesperson for the Forestry and Climate Change Committee of the INHFA.

'We want this report to address the impact of the current industrial forestry model on local communities, the environment and the local economy. We don't need it to be an exercise telling us about the state of the current forestry sector.

We need research to quantify the true cost of our approach to planting, growing and clear felling – its impact on community life, mental health, soil health, habitat and the corresponding effect on wildlife and biodiversity.

We need research into what other options exist for meeting the needs of the wood industry into the future (for example hemp) and whether pursuing those options will provide a better outcome for those who live and farm in Leitrim (and we would argue the same for Sligo, Cavan, Roscommon, Donegal, Mayo and Galway). The better outcomes we refer to are better mental health, better and more livelihood opportunities, clean air and water, a thriving natural environment, and a dynamic economy.

Where certain options might provide these better outcomes, the report must detail the support and assistance existing businesses will need to transition over to a different way of working. We want to invest in long term business in the area. We want to explore what opportunities having a stock of native hardwoods might present to local trades and craftsmen to produce quality furniture and goods.

We want to see the report assess the financial and other benefits of replanting mixed predominantly native woodlands once the non-native conifers have been felled. This includes setting up local nurseries to raise the stock for replanting. Where planting has occurred on peatlands or soils rich in carbon stocks, we want the report to suggest options for restoration where possible. It would be useful to know the age profile and state of the public and privately-owned forests, so that local communities can factor the change around felling and the transition to forest or peatland restoration into their future strategic land use plans.

'The study needs to be participatory and include all stake holders and community members', says Mary Rooney, Leitrim County Chair of the INHFA. 'There must be public meetings early in the process providing information about the study and these meetings must include a substantial question and answer session to allow community members to clarify all issues. The current trend of information drop-in-days is neither community participation nor consultation.'

The outcomes of the research study needs to be discussed at the proposed Regional Fora/ Working Group before continuing with the current approach.