**Plan to sell rights to Coillte trees criticised** 

ALISON HEALY, Food and Farming Correspondent

THE GOVERNMENT’S decision to sell the harvesting rights to Coillte’s forests for 50-80 years was sharply criticised by members of the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine yesterday.

Sinn Féin deputy Martin Ferris said he had “very, very serious reservations” about the sale and that it was “politically irresponsible” to sell the harvesting rights.

He said Coillte had been turned into a very profitable enterprise but “all this [is] to be given away to some multinational speculator so they can reap the benefits out of the hard-earned investment by the Irish taxpayer”.

Independent Senator Mary Ann O’Brien said the decision was “profoundly depressing, even though it is only the harvesting rights”.

Fianna Fáil’s Éamon Ó Cuív also had “serious reservations” about the decision. He said the money from the sale of the rights was “in the great scheme of things quite modest”.

In the Dáil last week, Minister for Agriculture Simon Coveney said the value of the harvesting rights would not be known until it went to market but the most recent valuation was between €400 million and €600 million.

The Government announced in June that it had made a decision to sell the harvesting rights. It was made as part of its commitment to the troika to realise value from State assets that strategically did not have to be in State ownership.

Coillte is responsible for the management of some 442,000 hectares – or 1.2 million acres – of State forest. It is also responsible for 90 per cent of the supply of logs to the State’s timber industry.

David Gunning, Coillte chief executive, told the committee the board and management of Coillte and management had been fully engaged with the Government in the discussions over the proposed sale of harvesting rights.

He said the Government was a shareholder in Coillte and therefore had the right to make decisions about its future.

Fine Gael deputy Tom Barry asked if approaches to purchase Coillte land had been made by Helvetia Wealth AG, a company with links to Bertie Ahern, the former taoiseach. Mr Ahern is chairman of the International Forestry Fund, a joint venture between the Irish Forestry Fund and Helvetia Wealth AG.

Mr Gunning said due to strict protocol, companies expressing an interest in buying harvesting rights would not deal directly with Coillte, but with the staff of the New Era project, the Government’s investment programme.

“I have no knowledge of any meeting, certainly from my own point of view, or any of the Coillte staff, with the organisation that you named,” he said.

Mr Gunning also told the committee Coillte was making significant strides in the development of new products. Coillte had delivered more than €12.5 million of revenue last year from products that didn’t exist four years ago, he said. “And we are setting ourselves challenging targets to increase that amount of revenue from new products.” Oireachtas email policy and disclaimer. <http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/about/oireachtasemailpolicyanddisclaimer/> Beartas ríomhphoist an Oireachtais agus séanadh. <http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/ga/eolas/beartasriomhphoistanoireachtaisagusseanadh/>