

Save Our Forests Save Our Lands Alliance Letter Outlining Our Concerns Regarding Coillte  
Remit to Coillte Directors

February 24th 2023

To the Board of Directors of Coillte CLG, the Irish State Forestry Board.

On behalf from, The Save Our Forests Save Our Lands Alliance

Dia dhaoibh a chairde,

On behalf of 38 national Environment NGO's, Community Groups, Political Parties, Independent TD's and numerous Individuals. We now wish to place on record the following concerns regarding Coillte CLG , The Irish Forestry Board.

Since your inception in 1989 following on from and facilitated by the 1988 Coillte Forestry Act, the main thrust of your business model and profits has revolved around Land Sales and Development for Factories, Oil and Gas facilities, Landfills, Wind farms, Nursing homes, Motorway access, Telecommunications masts, Housing clusters and one off Houses, etc, all of which has diminished the Public forest estate of 1.1 million acres you were gifted in 1989.

Since 1989 you have made no serious effort to restore our native Woodland resource, the authentic western atlantic woodland landscape, instead concentrating on the old Clearfell and Replanting of mainly monoculture sitka spruce model with its all of its recorded damaging consequences for Nature, Water, Soil, and Communities. Approximately 600,000 acres of this is on blanket peat soils, which the EPA show is now emitting 1.68 tons of Carbon per annum.

This is all the more shocking in a Climate and Biodiversity Emergency declared by the Irish State in 2019, when the prevalent Science regarding mitigation points to restoration of native woodlands focused first on Ancient woodland fragments. Using connectivity to create a permanent linear riparian and hedgerow woodland matrix to avoid fragmentation and aiming for 30% National area to allow Biodiversity to move across the landscape and repair itself with assistance. This will also lock up the most forest carbon, mitigate flooding, manage and filter water courses, stabilise riverbanks and soil, create windbreaks and wildlife habitat creation.

When you inherited the gift of 1.1 million acres of public forests which had been created by the work of the old Forest Service foresters built up over decades of decent management, it has to be said, given the fact they were supplying the ESB with quality larch, douglas fir and scots pine of 50 yrs plus, to a standard they required with tight grain. This was due to a regime of thinning and pruning lower branches etc, you still had a monoculture of sitka spruce as the main forest area but it was managed allowing light to penetrate the forest floor to allow some biodiversity etc.

However, the main difference was the rotation of the sitka plantations between 45 to 60 years with an average size tree of 1.3cu metres. You have taken much of the best of the Forest service trees, and replanted areas with sitka, introduced a denser stocking rate with less thinning and no pruning, with a rotation length of 25 to 35 years and average size tree of 0.3cu metres.

Since the 1990's when the last stocks of Forest Service pole timber was harvested, Coillte have been unable to supply a transmission pole for the ESB who are importing poles from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Canada and USA to the tune of an average of 45 million euros per year which should be invested in the Irish forestry Industry. However due to poor management and lack of Coillte management vision/expertise this public funding is leaving our economy every year.

In a nutshell, you have left the Public forest estate in a poorer condition than when you inherited it. One other consequence of the race to the bottom type Corporate low cost Industrial tree farming model introduced by Coillte is the reduction in forestry employees, we understand that

in 1989 Coillte had approximately 1,500 employees that has been whittled down to 840, half of which are in administration. This translates to approximately one full time job per 523 acres, accepting most of the work is done by subcontractors who are employed at start of rotation to plant and at end to harvest, numbering 1200, which equates to one part time job per 366 acres, this is still a very poor employment figure for a forestry company managing 1.1million acres.

Leaving aside the positive Bord Failte subsidised Coillte Public forest parks, created by the old Land Commission woodlands in the care of the Forest Service, to coincide with the 1970 year of Nature and our EU membership application which required a commitment to protect Nature etc. This was followed by EU membership in 1972 and the 1976 Wild life Act , Ireland's first environmental protection law. Despite some dubious Coillte management practices in some of these forest parks such as Gougane Barra, county Cork which is recorded, overall these forest parks have been a success and point to the direction that a reformed Coillte needs to move.

Your farm forestry partnerships have been a disaster with evidence emerging of no consistency of contract or fair terms, eg, farm partners were not told that they would have to carry the burden of the cost of replanting after clear felling and Coillte extracting all of their expenses etc, we understand there are at least 9 court cases resulting from bad farm partnerships. This has destroyed farmer confidence in forestry at the very time when we need farmers to step up and support forestry.

By investing in two board plants, and relying on profits from these two plants in Clonmel and Belview respectively, and the recent 2017 UK partnership with BP British Petroleum for a new board called Tricoya with Coillte positioned to supply pulpwood. You have effectively locked us into a continuation of this cheap Industrial pulpwood production forestry model that is dependent on fast growing sitka spruce. Sitka is now being shown to be invasive in many Natura, SAC, (Special Areas of Conservation) areas after 3 rotations, this will also end up costing the taxpayer to fix or Coillte through the Environmental Liabilities Directive .

It is also susceptible to the pine weevil problem and bark beetle infestation, either of which could wipe out most of the Public and Private forest estate, as we have put all of our eggs in one

basket and not diversified the estate. The recent Project Woodland Public consultation on the new forestry programme results showed the public overwhelmingly against more sitka tree farms.

Your reckless pursuit of profit via wind farm development has led to the largest environmental disaster in Irish history, at Derrybrien in Galway which also cost the taxpayer approximately 20 million in fines, followed closely by Meenbog, in Donegal, landslide which may also lead to EU fines and a number of smaller landslides in similar upland peat sites, in Kerry, Leitrim and Longford. Related to taxpayer costs is the fact that you had drawn down 9 million euros in EU forestry grants in the 1990's and took out a 30 million euros loan to buy land for forestry.

The 9 million forestry grants were subsequently found to be only eligible for small farmers and a EU court case in 2003 judged Coillte to have not been eligible as it was a wholly owned Public body. This led to the Department of Agriculture refunding the 9 million using taxpayer funding and you enjoying the benefit of the 9 million which is a clear anti competition market distortion.

This highlights yet more management lack of vision or expertise that landed you with a 30 million euros loan debt. Further to that are the numerous failed Coillte enterprises down the years, such as Coillte Landscaping, Coillte Christmas trees, Coillte/Griffner Haus timber house building company, Coillte hardwoods sawmill operation in Dundrum county Tipperary, etc all of which have failed.

We would also like to know what has become of the Coillte equity stake of 15 million punts worth of forestry invested in IFORUT Irish Forestry Unit Trust pension fund company which Coillte co-founded in 1993 and are no longer in the partnership. How come there was no tendering for the subsequent forward sales by Coillte of public forest assets to IFORUT amounting to approximately 112 million euros plus and no evidence that you even obtained the best value for the public forest assets which you agreed to manage as a subcontractor for IFORUT.

We are also aware that 35 million euros of the National Pension Reserve Fund in 2011 was invested in Coillte via IFORUT again with no Oireachtas oversight etc. This all points to a

fundamental flaw with Coillte, that is the complete lack of forestry expertise or experience and oversight by Coillte management boards down the years.

The final straw for those who have been looking in to this unfolding state forestry disaster has been your ill conceived decision to partner with Gresham house vulture funds to further exploit and diminish the overall national forest estate using public forestry funds that should be allocated for farmers and community sustainable forestry for climate/biodiversity/economic resilience investing wisely in the future of rural Ireland. This half baked Coillte/Gresham vulture funds plan is completely unacceptable to the Citizens of Ireland.

We are therefore convinced you are not fit for purpose to manage the gift of the Public forest estate assets and you need to be reined in and reformed to fulfill a mostly Public/Biodiversity, Public Good role. A Public -Public Partnership. This role would include more community engagement/training and awareness raising with more participation in local forest management for Carbon Sequestration, Nature Conservation and Public Benefits.

A close to home example would be the UK version of Coillte which was called Forestry Enterprises this was reformed to become Forestry England with a Public Good remit replacing their commercial mandate. This example is for guidance only as obviously we would be looking at a similar role for Coillte that would not be an exact copy. The Public forests should be the inheritance of Ireland's children, managed wisely they can be an infinitely sustainable natural resource, providing multiple known benefits for climate mitigation, nature and people, that will help our collective future.

In the face of the twin threat of Climate and Biodiversity breakdown we urgently need an integrated ecological focus across all state land bodies especially for our public forests, this requires a radically new approach to forestry management that includes transition of unviable commercial conifer plantations for peat and native woodlands restoration, the conservation and expansion of our most valuable Ancient rainforests fragments less than .002% area.

To do this we need sustainable diverse natural forests where biodiversity exists at several levels of biological organisation, genetic diversity, species diversity, community/ecosystem diversity and landscape diversity.

"Natural forests are self sustaining systems, natural forests can exist without humans, forest based economies, on the other hand cannot exist without forests, good ecology is good economics" Herb Hammond, Canadian ecologically focused forester.

Le gach dea-ghuì,

Andrew St Ledger and Richard Boyd Barrett TD

On behalf of Save Our Forests Save Our Lands

Contact [info@saveourforests.ie](mailto:info@saveourforests.ie)

**"A culture" the poet W.H. Auden said, "Is no better than its woods." A place without trees, he implied, has no roots, no strength and no shelter.**

Further info:

[Questionable disposal and management of public forest assets | The Woodland League](#)

[Ireland's tree-planting policies are bad news for biodiversity \(noteworthy.ie\)](#)

[EU letter slating Irish forestry missing from files released - Friends of the Irish Environment](#)

<https://www.farmersjournal.ie/environmental-lobby-seeks-mandate-changes-for-coillte-and-bord-na-mona-749904>

[Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate Action publishes final report – 29 Mar 2019, 10:31 – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

[Ireland's native woodlands are quietly disappearing | The Woodland League](#)

The “Save Our Forests Save Our Lands” Alliance was initiated by the groups and individuals involved in the organising of the large and successful protests against the Government – EU Troika plan to sell the harvesting rights of Coillte in 2013, such as Andrew St Ledger (The Woodland League) and Richard Boyd Barrett TD.

The Save Our Forests – Save Our Lands group believes the Coillte/Gresham House deal amounts to public grants and funds being used to facilitate to a corporate take-over of huge swathes of land and forestry that will negatively impact small farmers and rural communities and further exacerbate the failed Sitka spruce industrial model of forestry that is damaging biodiversity, water and soil quality and is failing to promote sustainable afforestation. The Alliance is also calling for the New Era review report to be put in the public domain to assist public debate on this issue.

The Alliance has also launched a national petition making the following demands of the government. Membership of the Alliance involves agreeing to these three Aims

1. Abandon the Coillte/Gresham House deal and other similar deals

2. Reform the Coillte 1988 Forestry Act and fundamentally alter the mandate of Coillte for Public/Biodiversity Good.

3. Urgently develop a new sustainable forestry model that moves away from the monocultural Sitka spruce plantations and towards a model that supports farmers, communities and those working in forestry to make a just transition to forestry model that increases biodiversity, assists climate mitigation, provides sustainable timber production, with restoration of native and broadleaf forests and the common good.

The petition on [www.saveourforests.ie](http://www.saveourforests.ie) has already been signed by approximately 7000 people.

List of 39 groups and organisations in the growing “Save Our Forests Save Our Lands” Alliance

The Woodland League

Indigenous Ireland

FIE (Friends of the Irish Environment)

Save Leitrim

Love Leitrim

Save Kerry

Hellfire Massey Res Association

Extinction Rebellion Ireland

Rural Ireland Organisation

Croí na Chré

People Before Profit



The Labour Party

Social Democrats

Aontu

CELT (Centre for environmental living and training)

Rural Ireland Organisation

Extinction Rebellion Ireland

Futureproof Clare

Save the Sperrins

Macroom and District Environment Group,

Kinvara Climate Action,

Kinvara Ballinderreen Tree Gang,

Connaught One Future

Talamh Beo

Dunsany Nature Reserve,

V-Wilding CLG

Hearthstone Veganic Sanctuary,

Mote Park Conservation Group

Ecojustice Ireland

Earth Restore

Protect Moylisha Hill

Bantry Bay Kelp Forest

West Cork Sudbury School

80 Max

Wolfgang Reforest

Roots Party Ireland

Trees Please

We Are the Ark

Third Space Galway



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