

WOODLAND LEAGUE PRESS RELEASE – 4 OCT 2012

The Woodland League vehemently opposes the plan to sell Public Forest harvesting rights to Private Investors.

The Woodland League a not for profit environment NGO, are deeply concerned by the imminent loss of public forest resources to speculators for very little return. They wish to express solidarity with the members of the Oireachtas committee on Agriculture Food and Marine who met with Coillte, on Tues the 2nd October, criticising the plans to sell the rights to the Public Forest estate managed by Coillte. These assets belong to the people of Ireland who need access now to their natural resources more than ever as we face into an uncertain future.

The valuation of €600 million by New Era, a State body, is equivalent to a once off payment of €500 per acre for the 1.2 million acres of public forests, is clearly undervalued. This needs an Independent valuation that takes full account of the mineral resources beneath the ground. This would require a thorough examination of the leasing proposal and that Coillte publish the Geological survey in their possession. This is the survey Coillte were evasive about when questioned at the hearing on October 2nd.

The Woodland League PRO Andrew St Ledger said: “There is a clear danger that the true value of these assets will not be realised until too late. Coillte in 1989, did extensive geological surveying of the Public Forest estate which they were ‘*gifted*’, by a Forestry Act in 1988, which embodies Coillte and its remit. The results of this geological survey are not in the public domain. The granting of 80 year leases to the forests, gives rights of ownership to these hidden assets. This latest asset stripping exercise could become a rerun of the Great Corrib Gas and Oil Giveaway. When Coillte were formed, Ray Burke was Minister for Energy and Forestry in 1987/88, he would have drafted the 1988 Forestry Act. Ray Mc Sharry, as Minister for Finance in 1987/88, became the main shareholder in Coillte with 99 shares. He also became chairman of Coillte for a time. This is indicative of the close political stewardship Coillte has enjoyed down the years that should cause alarm for the public”.

This government is now proposing granting exploratory licenses for fracking (a controversial method of extracting oil and gas on land using high pressure water and chemical mixes). How can the *Irish People* be assured that the sale of rights to the *Public Forest* estate will not be exploited by fracking companies? In a worst case scenario, fracking could occur on leased forestry lands, effectively diminishing public participation and right to protest. It may well facilitate an easier passage through the planning process. This foot in the door approach worked well for Shell in Rosport when they secretly purchased 400 acres of public forestry from Coillte to build their refinery, in advance of seeking full planning.

<http://woodlandleague.org/documents/ForestryInIreland/ForestryInIreland.pdf>)

Another model could be created for the uncommercial plots identified in the Mc Carthy report, (approx 500,000 acres) www.irishtimes.com/focus/2011/mccarthy/index.pdf with low cost leases of €200 per acre per year, given to local community co-operatives and individuals to manage. This would involve training in the managing of a new model based on conversion of conifers to our native hardwoods. These plots could also be provided as part of a compensation package for turf cutters under pressure to relinquish their rights to cut turf in order to protect bogs. The Indigenous status of many turf cutters has not been respected or acknowledged in their ongoing dispute with the State.

Andrew St Ledger went on to say, “The key to protecting our remaining natural resources is the recognition of Indigenous Peoples Rights in Ireland. Coillte possess an eco-label, called FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification. This implies they sustainably manage the Public forests according to an FSC set of criteria, based on ten Principles. FSC Principle 3: Indigenous peoples’ rights, during the Irish FSC process, was deemed to not apply in Ireland. This decision was decided upon by an FSC- Ireland committee. This effectively denies the existence of Indigenous people in Ireland thereby removing a set of rights recognised by the United Nations. It also facilitates the continuation of unbridled exploitation of public forests, should leases be granted to private investors who may include fracking companies. This allows them to inherit the shield of eco-label status, denying and weakening Indigenous peoples’ rights to protect their environment and resources. The key question here is who actually owns the forests and the rights associated with them?”

The Woodland League have consistently and vigorously protested against the dilution of Principle 3, in the FSC process and have formally notified FSC international in 2011 of their concerns regards the FSC process in Ireland. To date there has been no response.

ENDS

Notes for editors

Swiss TV interviews with Enda Kenny, Eamonn Gilmore, Bertie Ahern regards sale of Irelands forests during the election in 2011

[..http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSJZu6PdJzs&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSJZu6PdJzs&feature=related)

Woodlandleague FSC protest letter <http://www.woodlandleague.org/fscprotestletterjan11.doc>

FSC-Ireland Forest Standard <http://www.woodlandleague.org/finaldraftfsc.pdf>

Selection of quotes from our petition containing 32000 signatures against the sale of Irish forests and reform of current forest

model <http://www.woodlandleague.org/saveirelandforestspetitionquotes.docx>

Visit our website for more information at www.woodlandleague.org

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