

## **The Woodland League Call for the Review of Coillte Report to be made Public as a Matter of Urgency**

The Woodland League call on the Minister for Agriculture, Simon Coveney, to publish the long overdue report of the review of Coillte, initiated by the last government in 2010. This call follows on from the presentation by Coillte (The Irish Forestry Board) of their 2012 Annual Report to the Oireachtas Agriculture Committee on Tuesday, 19th November 2013. The Woodland League provided questions for Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett to ask at the meeting, focussing on a number of key issues related to Coillte: the inability to increase our tree cover, the failure to supply an existing lucrative domestic market demand, the facilitation of wind farms, the non-viability of half of the Public forest estate, and the role of pension funds.

Deputy Barrett asked Coillte's CEO, Gerry Britchfield, to clarify who was now responsible for the review and why had it not been published. Mr. Britchfield said they had facilitated the review process, and the Minister for Agriculture, Simon Coveney, was now responsible. Coillte were unaware as to what had become of the review. Deputy Barrett replied, saying "***In that case, the new Forestry bill should be suspended until the report of the review of Coillte is forthcoming and it should include a cost benefit analysis to ensure the long term sustainability of any new forest law/forest policy***".

In response to questioning regards the plan to increase Ireland's low tree cover of 11% (Ireland is committed to reaching the EU average of 33% tree cover), he said they only reforest sites after clear-felling to satisfy their replanting obligations and quoted market constraints caused by ineligibility for grant aid for the shortfall, conceding that Coillte are unable to plant new forests.

In other words, the Irish Forestry Board, Coillte, which was established to develop public forestry, cannot contribute to the targets set out in the Government Strategic Plan for Forestry 1996, which set a target of 17% tree cover by 2030. The Plan requires the planting of 15,000 to 20,000 ha per year. The average planting is only reaching approx 7,000 ha, mostly by the private sector. More planting would lead to more management which would lead to more jobs in forestry.

When asked why Coillte were not supplying wooden poles for the ESB's ongoing replacement pole program, involving an average of 40 - 50,000 poles per year, at a cost of 600 euro per pole ( 24 – 30 million euro per annum ), Mr. Britchfield replied they did not have the right species planted. One could argue in this case that Coillte had failed to plan properly. The species required for the poles are the native Scots pine and Douglas fir, both of which have been grown successfully on Coillte lands in the past. The demand is there, and the price is set at a premium: approximately 100 euro per cubic meter for coniferous softwood, allowing for transport and creosote treatment. It's still way higher than what is being achieved per cubic meter for softwood in the Industry in general.

ESB Networks supplied the information regarding the replacement pole programme, a spokesman stating that there was an issue of quality, species, and age requirements that Coillte could not deliver on. At one point, the ESB were requiring 100,000 poles per annum in the early 2000's boom time, reduced to 30,000 this year. Most of their poles are imported from Scandinavian countries.

Coillte Secretary, Gerry Egan, repeatedly stated that Coillte are fully supportive of the government's 40% renewable energy policy, despite having no wood use energy programme of any consequence or an energy supply remit. We were informed they have advanced plans to facilitate wind farms on public forest lands which will replace trees with concrete and steel - a bizarre scenario for the largest forest manager in Ireland whose remit is to sustainably manage the Public forests, and whose latest corporate slogan is "***Trees are only the start of it***".

The public benefits from these wind farms will be minimal. Previous wind farms on Coillte sites have resulted in landslides: at Derrybrien, co. Galway, the Stacks mountains, co. Kerry, and Corrie mountains, co. Leitrim. The sites chosen tend to be on fragile upland bogs. The Derrybrien environmental disaster resulted in a 2008 EU court judgment against Ireland for failure to conduct a proper Environmental Impact Assessment. See: [www.rte.ie/news/2008/0703/derrybrien.html](http://www.rte.ie/news/2008/0703/derrybrien.html)

In his review of state assets report, Colm McCarthy stated that approximately half of the Coillte estate was not commercially viable; that's approximately 500,000 acres of failed exotic conifer plantations. See: <http://www.thejournal.ie/mccarthy-report-sale-of-state-assets-should-focus-on-long-term-growth-124356-Apr2011/>

Andrew St Ledger of the Woodland League said: "***These wastelands should be converted back to mixed native woodlands managed by local community co-ops after training. This could provide hundreds of jobs to begin with, leading to thousands being employed in the long term. This, coupled with an expansion of the public forest estate to try to catch up on the Coillte lost years, would provide the backbone for a thriving rural economy. The issues we continue to raise highlight the short term unsustainable management of our Public forest resource***".

The funding for such a proposal would come from the 400 million euro loan facility approved for Coillte by the Oireachtas via the 2009 Forestry Amendment Act. Innovative use of social welfare funding, national pension reserve funding, and other EU funding could be combined to ensure this common sense, truly Green, and Smart economic plan for Public forests can be implemented very quickly.

In relation to the other Woodland League questions asked by Deputy Barrett, no answers were forthcoming. These were as follows: whether Coillte have conducted water and soil analysis of the forest estate, the proportion of the 400 million euro loan facility which will be earmarked for Sustainable Forest Management, and the exact role of Coillte in IFORUT (Irish Forest Unit Trust), the pension fund company Coillte are partners in, with AIB and Bank of Ireland.

Coillte have sold large amounts of public forests to IFORUT over the years with very little accountability, and the absence of any tendering process. Gerry Egan said "***There is nothing to hide regards IFORUT; the unit holders' information and accounts are all available in the public domain***". The CEO, Gerry Britchfield, made no comment when asked for his own opinion regards Ireland ever reaching the forestry policy 17% afforestation target by 2030 when the meeting was concluding.

ENDS

Please Contact for more information and quotes...

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