

**Forestry Policy Group Meeting**  
**06<sup>th</sup> April 2022**  
**14:30 by Webex**

**Attendance:**

**DAFM:** Minister of State Pippa Hackett, B Gleeson (Secretary General), C Hayes (Asst Secretary General), B Delany (Director of Forestry), P Kelly, S Hona, C Nangle, A Maguire, V Byrne, J Farrell, C Smith, M O'Neill, B Cruise, J Casey, S O'Mahony, J O'Donnell, D O'Rourke, E O'Fahy, E O'Doherty

**Chairs of Project Woodland Working Groups:** M Layde, M Crowe, T Hennessy, M Cantwell

**Stakeholders:** M McAuley (FII), B Murphy (FII), M Conway (FII), J Fleming (IFA), M Carlin (Coillte), D Houlihan (AIFC), A Dunne (ACA), N Ni Fhlatharta, (Teagasc), D Whelan (ITGA), P Purser (Pro Silva), J Roche (NPWS), , T Ryan (None so Hardy), A St Ledger (Environmental Pillar), M Boyden (SWAN), P Fogarty (Irish Wildlife Trust), J Gowran (Woodlands of Ireland), S Boland (Irish Rural Link), L Lennon (Irish Rural Link), E Hendrick (COFORD), M Moroney (FCI), K O'Donoghue (FOCS), N Sweetman (IFO)

**Presenting:** Seamus Boland (Irish Rural Link)  
Alice Whitaker (Philip Lee)

**Apologies:** O Duggan (Birdwatch Ireland), B Hyde (EPA), P Barry (IGBC), I Connolly (FII), E McGoff (An Taisce), S Dunne (DAFM), S Maurus (DAFM)

**Minister Hackett opened the meeting, welcomed all attendees, including the 4 Chairs of the Project Woodland (PW) Working Groups (WGs). Minister Hackett:**

- Thanked members for agreeing to reschedule the meeting and for taking the time to attend.
- Started with an update on licensing targets noting that the output for afforestation for the first quarter of 2022 is up over 30% on the average quarterly figures for 2021. While this is an improvement, there is an ambitious target of increasing the number of afforestation licences by more than 100% year on year and we are working towards this goal. To facilitate this, the number of full-time ecologists focussing on afforestation only has more than doubled from 9 to 20. Once these are trained this should show results in the coming months. The Department is processing applications faster than they are being received so it is important that afforestation applications continue to be submitted.
- Noted that the output for Private Felling licensing for the Quarter 1 is up over 11% on the average quarterly figures for 2021. This year's aim is to deliver an average of 35 private felling licences per week. In Quarter 1 we delivered 29 licences per week, and staff that deal with Coillte felling have been reallocated to allow them work on private felling to help achieve the target of 1,830 private felling licences in 2022.
- Highlighted that last year was an excellent year for forest road approvals and the highest on record. The output this year is up 20% on last year. The Minister mentioned the great effort that was made, particularly by ecologists, to deal with forest roads and there are very few now left with the ecology team.
- Referenced that WG2 are currently developing a new shared vision and strategy for trees and forests in Ireland. Through the Working Group we are engaging with the public, local communities and stakeholders in a series of ways. A Public consultation survey is currently open to all on the Department's website until the 27<sup>th</sup> of April and the Minister encouraged all members to participate.

- Advised that Irish Rural Link have also undertaken a consultation on our behalf, “Assessment of Attitudes by Communities and Interested Parties on Forestry and Woodlands”, and that Seamus Boland would shortly present on their findings.
- Noted that Alice Whittaker from Philip Lee will also give a presentation on the regulatory review.
- Expressed appreciation to the Chairs of each WGs and the progress made to date on a challenging project.

**Presentation by Brendan Gleeson, Secretary General, DAFM, Chair of Project Board (PB), Project Woodland. B Gleeson noted:**

- Extraordinary amount of work being done including Training Needs Analysis, Organisational Review, Communications Plan, Pre-Applications Discussions, Environmental Grant Process Improvements and the public engagement prior to the vision that was mentioned by the Minister whilst also dealing with the backlog and resourcing in the department.
- Philip Lee report is a pivotal piece of work, and it is important that everyone understands it. It deals with main issues raised by WGs which are not simple but there is now an objective report which suggests solutions to the issues. It is now time to work together to review the document and make recommendations to the Minister and make the licensing system better and to ensure full environmental compliance.
- Focus on resourcing and process in order to deal with the issues which are complex and will take time. Department has significantly increased resources and it will take time for these to be trained in but should show dividend quickly.
- Significant inroads will be made this year into the backlog in afforestation, but we need more applications. Accepts that licencing issues have led to people’s reluctance to engage in forestry, but a communications strategy has to be built that encourages people to plant trees. WG3’s communication plan is critically important to develop more positivity around planting trees.

**Presentation by Seamus Boland, Irish Rural Link**

Irish Rural Link carried out a study on the views and attitudes of people and communities towards forests and woodlands to inform a ‘Shared National Vision’. It builds on work done for the “Socio economic study of Forestry in County Leitrim”, which was carried out by Dr. Áine Ní Dhubháin, UCD, in 2019..

- Survey distributed to over 6,000 recipients including IRL members, Farm & Forestry Advisors, ENGOs, members of PW WG4 and Save Leitrim, West Cavan & Kerry groups. 641 responses to the survey, Save groups did not participate in the survey but were part of the focus groups. There was a good geographical spread of respondents and almost even split of landowner and non-landowners.
- 55% of respondents said they would be interested in considering forestry in the future. Almost half of respondents commented that they felt the minimum set back requirements were appropriate.
- 89% of respondents considered themselves to be somewhat or very informed about forestry. 85% would like to see more wood used in construction sector.
- 85% felt there was too little forestry happening and 77% were not satisfied with the current licencing system. 46% would like to see the EU average of 37% of Ireland under forest.
- Focus groups were also held for survey respondents and Save groups.
- Some of the main recommendations from the survey and focus groups were more stakeholder engagement is needed, Local Authority’s should be engaged to develop a

suitable land use policy, Neighbourwood scheme should be reviewed, and mixed tree plantation very strongly recommended.

- The vast majority of people are in favour of a good forestry programme, but they want to be involved in how its decided and managed.



Irish Rural Link  
Presentation to Fore

### **Presentation by Professor Thia Hennessy, Chair of Working Group 3, Organisational Development and Communications, Project Woodland.**

- The remit and objectives of WG 3 were outlined.
- Training Needs Analysis (TNA) split into two parts – training needs for the licencing process and training needs for the general sector. The general sector needs have been deferred. A tender did issue for external consultant for the licencing process for felling, afforestation and forest roads specifically but there were no suitable tenders. Another tender has gone out for this with the closing date of 11<sup>th</sup> of April and a number of tenders have been received so far. These will be reviewed after the closing date and it is hoped a consultant will be in place within a month. The work of the consultant should take 2 months to complete.
- DAFM Organisational Review – Terms of Reference and project governance agreed. An external consultant will be engaged for this and will go for E tender later this week.
- In relation to the Communications strategy a workshop for WG2 and WG3 is taking place next week. Purpose of the workshop is to decide what the key messages will be in relation to strategy and the work of PW.
- Website has been updated and useful feedback was given to Meg Laffan of DAFM and her team from the WG
- Some initial meetings have taken place in relation to the review of respective roles and capabilities of Coford, Teagasc and Coillte. Need to progress to defining scope and objectives.



WG3 update to FPG  
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### **Presentation by Alice Whitaker, Philip Lee and Associates**

Alice has prepared a draft regulatory review report which sets out some recommendations on foot of specific questions that were to be addressed as part of her research.

- Review of case law carried out and 3 directives that have a direct consequence in terms of what can be done with a regulatory system. They are the Water Framework Directive, Birds Directive and the Habitat Directive which all dictate the outcome that must be achieved when dealing with licencing.
- In relation to the Water Framework if it can be shown that a project will have a material negative effect on water body then the regulatory authority must refuse it. There are steps that can be taken to prevent water deterioration.

- There is some uncertainty in relation to the interpretation by the European Court of the Birds directive. More judgements in this area should provide clarity. There must be an authorization regime that enables the Department to check for potential significant adverse effects on birds before projects proceed.
- The People over Wind case has had profound implications across all consent frameworks. As a result, a much greater proportion of applications are going to full appropriate assessment which is causing a significant burden on the system.
- No legal issue with time limits in relation to decisions for individual stages but there can't be default permission granted if time runs out. There would have to be a deemed refusal or a deemed right to appeal if time ran out. Therefore, outer time limit not recommended
- No issue with differentiated procedures once the requirements of the Directive are met. Different elements of the approval process could vary depending on risk.
- Single consent licence question is legally problematic as the appropriate assessment is carried out at the start of the process and the Department would have to be able to demonstrate that the project when implemented will not have significant effects on a European site. Very difficult to do this when looking 5, 10 or 15 years into the future. Alternative to break it up into more manageable pieces with a means to separately assess emergency activities such as storm damage or fire damage. For thinning it was suggested that a forest management plan covering a period of 3-5 years would be submitted and this would not require repeat felling applications.
- There is some merit in keeping roads as a separate process but maybe combining with felling or afforestation licence and applications would be dealt with in tandem.
- Very little law around natural regeneration. Does not appear to constitute afforestation and would generally not constitute a change in land use and is not a project as defined under EIA directive. Clarity needs to be made in relation to policy around this area.
- EIA threshold currently at 50 hectares and is at the upper end of the scale among Member states. Scotland's threshold is 20 hectares. EIA directive requires either a set threshold for screening or to carry out screening on a case-by-case basis or both. Ireland has opted for both which meets the legal test required.
- It may be possible to change the 15km radius requirement. There is no correct distance, distance needs to be assessed on case-by-case basis. The radius requirement is there as a starting point to enable information to be submitted and screening to be carried out. Decision on radius needs to be made by DAFM based on ecological advice received as to what is the appropriate amount of information they are going to need to carry out screening.
- Plan led approach is recommended and is consistent with what other Member states are doing. It is possible to develop site suitability criteria collectively among all of the stakeholders in order to assess does it meet most or all of the criteria required.
- Recommends adoption of standard conditions similar to planning to generate more certainty and clarity and make licences more robust and enforceable.
- If 80% of applications need to go for AA very hard to do this quickly or in a pro forma way. Recommends generic conditions being incorporated into projects.
- Next steps are to get feedback from everyone on the report which will be issued as soon as possible.



## **Presentation by Dr Matt Crowe, Chair of Working Group 2- A Shared National Approach, Project Woodland.**

- Reminded the Group why we are here, also need to start imagining a very different Ireland with a lot more trees.
- Vision is out for public consultation and a lot of different processes in place in relation to this. Public attitude survey has now been completed and published. IRL work is well advanced. 20 bi lateral meetings have been held so far with a lot of rich information coming from that.
- The new Forest Strategy will deliver a vision for the next 50-100 years and the new Forestry Programme will align with it. It must be implementable (i.e., focusing on the what, who, how and when and a manageable number of key strategic actions) and deal decisively with long standing barriers to progress and policy conflicts. Youth forum held in late January and report has been received on that.
- Department has engaged a company called M-CO to manage the public consultation survey and the public forum and they are both well advanced. Public Forum is set to take place in May over 2 days on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. The 2 issues the forum will be asked to consider are value and ambition.
- In relation to Strategy keeping it at high strategic level, up to 2030. A good bit of work is being done now on the drivers for change. Draft strategic objectives for the 3 pillars, People, Planet & Prosperity are being discussed in the WG at the moment. They will also set goals for the value propositions of climate, wood, people, nature and economic development and the key supporting enablers.
- General consensus that we need to plant more trees and make it easier to do so and include all stakeholders in plans.
- Next steps are to complete the public and stakeholder consultation and draft vision. First cut of strategic action plan is expected towards the end of next week which will be worked on by WG first and then shared with everyone else.



WG2 update to FPG  
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## **Presentation by Michael Layde, Chair of Working Group 4 - Process Improvement, Project Woodland.**

- Workstreams of the Group include a Business Process Analysis, Regulatory Review, Pre-Application Discussions, Environment Report/Grant and Longer-Term Solutions.
- Business Process Analysis and complementary systems analysis reports have generated a number of recommendations and DAFM have set up an Agile Implementation Group to implement these recommendations. WG want to see these taken forward as quickly as possible. Document to be provided to the WG providing update on progress being made.
- A lengthy discussion took place in relation to regulatory review based on a quick analysis. It will be reviewed in detail, and they will give their observations.
- Pre-Application Discussions – this will be extended to other regions to try generate more volume. Hopeful that PAD can make improvements to overall licencing process.
- Environment Report/Grant –Original proposal was for payments of grants at much earlier stage, but DAFM are shortly going to start paying grants at form 2 stage. Awaiting PB mandate from DAFM to produce further analysis of WG proposals and how they might be taken forward. Welcomes commitment from the PB to ensure a timeline is prepared for

consideration of the feasibility of the Group's original proposals. Timing of the payment of grant is key.

- Longer Term Solutions - Business Process Analysis and Regulatory Review together should permit the Group to arrive at recommendations for both early administrative improvements to the licensing system and potentially more invasive changes requiring legislation.



WG4 update to FPG  
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### **Presentation by Michael Cantwell, Chair of Working Group 1 - Reducing the Backlog, Project Woodland**

- Objectives of WG1 are to reduce the current backlog of all types of licence to an acceptable level, whilst ensuring that regulatory standards are maintained and to ensure that any future growth of a backlog is identified and managed expeditiously.
- The Group have met on 24 occasions and there have been a number of changes in the members with new members being welcomed and those who have left thanked for their work.
- Key issues in progress include the Regulatory Review, licencing plan and afforestation licence approvals.
- They will review the regulatory review and meet next week and come back with their report on it. They have requested sufficient time to do this.
- There is concern with the level of ambition in the licensing plan and that it recognises that there will still be a significant backlog at the end of 2022. The rate of the reduction of the backlog is slowing down despite increased resources in the department and reducing number of applications being made. The Minister accepted frustrations in relation to this but there should be significant output once the 20 ecologists are trained. A cleaning up exercise is also taking place to clear all felling files pre 2021 before end of Q2.
- WG had asked that the Department achieve a minimum amount of 20 afforestation licences weekly but that has not happened. They are disappointed with this.
- Licencing report – the numbers have reduced very significantly and is very positive. In the last 8 months 2,000 cases have been cleared from the system and this trend needs to continue.



WG1 update to FPG  
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### **Topic raised and discussion**

There was discussion throughout on topics on the agenda and clarifications given and views noted.

### **Conclusion**

Minister Hackett concluded the meeting by thanking all participants, acknowledging the huge amount of work that has been done by all.

**END**