



## **Wicklow and the Proposed Sale of Coillte Harvesting Rights**

Wicklow Uplands Council seeks 'to protect a sustainable forest industry in County Wicklow and to ensure the provision of ongoing public goods, including recreational opportunities throughout the county'.

There is serious concern in Wicklow Uplands Council regarding the proposed sale of Coillte assets. It is understood that, as agreed with the Troika, Ireland must examine the possibility of selling €3 billion worth of state assets. Over the coming months options on the proposed sale of Coillte harvesting rights for a period of 70-80 years will be presented to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Brendan Howlin T.D and Minister for Agriculture Food and the Marine, Simon Coveney T.D., who will make their recommendation to the full cabinet later this year.

It is unclear if the proposal applies to the entire Coillte estate or a portion of it and what, if any, constraints would be conditional on the sale. Wicklow Uplands Council's position on this matter is clear - it is firmly opposed to the sale. It considers the 70-80 year timeframe of the proposed sale totally inappropriate. Conditions of sale cannot be assured for such a long period which could include the sale of up to two rotations of average yield class Sitka spruce. Furthermore, it cannot be guaranteed that any conditions of sale would remain in place throughout multiple governments which are likely during this period. In addition the potential for the new owner(s) to resell harvesting rights would further diminish control over these conditions.

It is difficult to establish the full potential impact of the proposal however, as it currently stands, with so little information available, Wicklow Uplands Council is unanimously opposed to the proposed sale and this position paper raises the key concerns from a Wicklow perspective which also have national relevance.

### **Key Concerns:**

- The protection of local jobs in Coillte and the wider forest and timber industry.
- Timber supply to sawmills, processing plants and smaller operators which are a key sector of Wicklow's rural economy.
- The ongoing maintenance of recreational facilities if the income from harvesting is sold.
- The ongoing implementation and resourcing of associated operations such as replanting, collection of illegal dumping, deer control and research and development if the income from harvesting is sold.
- Continued forest certification.

Wicklow Uplands Council wish to put its concerns clearly on record as this proposal has the potential to have a severe negative impact on the local economy, local employment, on recreational opportunities and other wider public goods across County Wicklow. The Council requests that this position be considered by Minister Brendan Howlin, Minister Simon Coveney and the full Cabinet

who will ultimately make this decision. It also requests an early response to the concerns outlined and full clarification on the proposed sale in advance of a public meeting on this issue which is proposed to take place in Wicklow during June/July.

### **Background - The Wicklow Forest Industry**

County Wicklow has a long association with the forest industry. It is here that state forestry began in 1904 at Avondale with the purchase of the Parnell Estate. A total of 21% of the land area of County Wicklow is forested in comparison with a national figure of 11% for the rest of the country. Wicklow's forests comprise c 43,000 ha of a diverse range of conifers and include 10% of broadleaf species. Approximately two thirds of Wicklow's forests are owned by Coillte. The total volume of timber processed annually in County Wicklow is estimated at 160,000m<sup>3</sup>.

### **KEY CONCERNS:**

#### **Local Economy**

Wicklow has a vibrant forest and timber industry which must be permitted to grow and prosper. Each aspect of the industry is mutually dependent from nurseries to sawmills and manufacturing and continuous supply is critical to its viability. At present Coillte supplies 80% of the commercial timber provided to the sawmill industry in Ireland. Supply to Irish processing plants must remain a priority to ensure their ongoing viability and growth. Any proposed sale of harvesting rights must ensure supply or first refusal to local mills.

#### **Employment**

Local employment should be a key consideration of the proposed sale. An analysis of Wicklow forestry employment carried out in 2001 indicated that c 700 people were employed by the forest and timber industry in Co Wicklow including 171 people directly by Coillte and 204 in Wicklow's sawmills. The 2013 figure for Coillte employment in Co Wicklow is 156 people. The 2001 figure included people employed from sourcing of seed through all aspects of forest growth and management to final harvesting, haulage, timber processing and manufacture of end product. Many small towns and villages in Wicklow thrive on various forest related activities e.g. Aughrim and Tinahely for their nurseries, Glenealy with its successful garden shed industry and the Glen of Imaal for its timber processing mills. It is vital that these jobs are not lost as a result of the sale of harvesting rights.

#### **Public Goods**

A 2009 study placed the public good value of forest recreation at €97 million per annum with a further €270 million of economic activity being generated annually in rural communities as a result of visits to forest recreation areas and trails (Coillte & Irish Sports Council, 2009). Continued open access to Coillte forests is one of the conditions assured to be part of sale of harvesting rights. However, with this open forest policy comes the responsibility to appropriately manage the network of recreational trails and facilities that have painstakingly been provided particularly over the last 10 years [www.coillteoutdoors.ie](http://www.coillteoutdoors.ie). Access to well-maintained recreational facilities is particularly important in Wicklow which is already under significant pressure from the urban shadow of Dublin City with its population of over 1 million people in addition to the many tourists that the area

attracts each year. Erosion of trails is an ongoing issue requiring regular maintenance. Provision of sustainable recreational facilities is particularly important given the health benefits associated with an active lifestyle and the value of recreation to the local economy. Resourcing the ongoing maintenance of the existing recreational infrastructure is a key consideration.

Coillte has developed landscape design plans for sensitive areas which have high landscape value such as the Wicklow Gap. Felling and replanting is an opportunity to redesign some of the poorly designed plantations dating from the 1960s and this should also be considered as part of the proposal.

Wicklow Uplands Council welcomes the assurance that conditional to any sale will be the obligation to replant as required under the Forestry Act 1946. This is desirable for ongoing timber production, mitigation of climate change, carbon storage and recreation. It is important that the species diversity of Wicklow's forests is maintained i.e. that when forests are being replanted that broadleaves replace broadleaves etc.

### **Forest and Timber Certification**

For over 10 years Coillte forests have been independently certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as sustainably managed forests and the company undergoes annual and 5 yearly audits to ensure that the stringent environmental, social and economic standards set by the FSC are met. The standards set through this process allow processing plants to sell their products as sustainably managed products which are FSC certified as long as they too meet the set criteria. The oriented strand-board plant in Waterford depends on this to sell their product. Fortnightly Coillte timber sales also vary in size to allow smaller operators the opportunity to purchase timber according to their needs providing a level of social responsibility to timber sales. Any proposed sale of timber harvesting rights must ensure ongoing certification as a key condition.

### **Conclusion**

Our state forests are a key asset which is most likely to increase in value over the next 70-80 years. Their value for production of forest products and renewable energy is likely to increase as land becomes less available and the world population continues to grow. The Wicklow forest estate is not only a valuable resource, it is part of Wicklow's heritage. It has been an important source of employment to generations of Wicklow families, a tradition which continues today.

Taking the example of our neighbours in Britain, the attempt of the current British Government to privatise British forests less than two years ago resulted in uproar from the general public. The subsequent constraints imposed on the sale resulted in a loss of interest from potential buyers as potential financial return diminished. The economics of the proposed sale of Coillte assets is also questionable especially with conditions attached such as access for the public, associated maintenance of recreational infrastructure and maintenance of a viable timber processing industry.

In summary, it is not yet clear what is being proposed. This needs to be clarified before stakeholders can establish their position and an appropriate opportunity for consultation is provided. The key concerns of Wicklow Uplands Council are clearly outlined in this paper. It therefore requests that the conditions of the proposed sale be clarified and made available both directly to the Uplands Council and to the general public as soon as possible.