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# NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND CAUTIONARY STEPS? FARMERS, FORESTRY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN IRELAND

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**Abstract:** It is argued that European agriculture is currently confronted with a multitude of critical challenges and developmental changes, in which the viability of farms based solely on traditional forms of production applies only to a minority who can compete at the level and scale of global markets. The challenge to the remaining majority of farmers and to wider agricultural communities is to remain viable through adoption of alternative farm activities and enterprises under what is described as a multifunctional model of agriculture. One activity that is emerging as a realistic economic option under this rural restructuring is forestry. From an increasing range of policy perspectives within agriculture, rural development, environment, tourism and industry, forestry is becoming redefined as much more than a resource for primary production. It is also an activity which offers enormous potential as a secondary resource, particularly when its significance as an ecological, amenity, recreational and environmental reserve is successfully realised. However, evidence would suggest that Irish farmers have been particularly slow to embrace forestry as a potential resource. In what is generally accepted as a time of economic crisis for the agricultural sector, this paper explores the perceptions, attitudes and apparent reluctance of Irish farmers to engage in forestry as a viable farm enterprise. We assess this evidence against the prevailing EU and national policy context for forestry, particularly the range of incentives and/or barriers to forestry, and seek to establish if, and to what extent, reasons lie within the policy context, or whether farmers contest the notion of forestry as an agricultural activity for other, more ideological or practical, reasons.

**Key words:** Forestry; Rural Development; Ireland; Land use change

## 1. Introduction

The goal of sustainable rural development, of which agriculture remains a vital part, has become a key dimension of EU, national, regional, and local policy in recent years. This is particularly salient given the broader challenges of globalisation, the rapidly changing

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commodification of the countryside and the increasing and often competing demands on rural resources. The scale and accelerating pace of rural change has been a remarkable feature of recent decades. Rural Ireland is particularly exposed to the considerable challenges from agricultural restructuring, declining service provision, depopulation and counter-urbanisation, communication and infrastructural deficits and the degradation of the natural environment (McDonagh, 2007). Irish agriculture has undergone extensive restructuring since the country's accession to the EEC (now the EU) in 1973, from early expansion to farm numbers falling by almost 40% between 1985 and 2005. Agriculture's contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which stood at 10% in 1989, dropped to less than 2% by 2005 (Hubbard and Ward, 2008). Despite this downward trend, agriculture continues to be seen as key to the social and economic viability of rural areas even though Marsden (2006) argues that at EU level, the ongoing status and function of agriculture and the question of what and how much support it should continue to receive and to what ends, has become increasingly linked to wider debates around food and energy security, environmental sustainability and economic efficiencies. Related debates on development of the rural emphasise the potential new production and consumption roles within the countryside and the place of farmers in creating and benefiting from such roles as part of a multifunctional model of agriculture (Feehan and O'Connor, 2009). Cognizant of the way in which the 'global, EU and national regulations impact significantly on the environmental, social and economic choices being made by rural actors particularly in relation to land use', Varley et al. (2009, p.8) argue that rural Ireland is functioning less and less as a purely production orientated space with consumption-type demands on the countryside increasing all the time. These new demands, ranging from the supply of leisure and recreation to the provision of a living space for many urban commuters and migrants who choose to live in rural areas, present arenas in which forestry is increasingly considered as a potential resource/solution.

## **2. Context and methodology**

EU rural development policy has placed a strong emphasis on the generation of alternative activities to those related to more traditional agriculture. Forestry is regarded as one such alternative activity and described as an integral part of rural development (EC No 1698/2005) not only in terms of being an important natural asset and renewable resource but also in terms of the platform it can provide for a more diversified rural economy. Important questions therefore include the reasons why Irish farmers display an apparent reluctance to become engaged in forestry production, and why the promotion of a resource that delivers on so many of the EU's stated policy objectives for sustainable rural development generates seemingly little appeal within the Irish farming community. Indeed Barbier et al. (2010) suggest that not only can changes in forest cover in a country or region not 'be separated from the overall pattern of land-use change' (p.98) but more significantly such changes are very much related to issues of land values, attitudes and the changing value of one land-use relative to another. This paper seeks to contribute to this discussion in the context of Ireland and what is emerging in terms of changing relationships between society and forestry and between farmers and forestry, by drawing on a range of evidence from both primary and secondary sources. The main primary source has been derived through the addition of supplementary questions relating specifically to forestry, appended to the 2006 National Farm Survey (NFS) while secondary data sources include a range of reports and working papers produced by Teagasc (the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority), Coillte (the State Forestry Board) and COFORD (the National Council for Forest Research and Development), with EU and national policy strategies for forestry and rural development providing other valuable insights.

## **3. The evolution of forestry policy as a strategy for sustainable rural development**

The principal framework for development of the forestry sector falls within the EU's Rural Development Regulation (EC No 1698/2005), signifying a clear policy direction for the sector at this level. In the EU's Forestry Strategy 1998 (Council Resolution 1999/C 56/01) and

subsequent documents such as 'Sustainable Forestry and the EU'<sup>5</sup> the important role for forestry in realising rural development objectives and the contribution it makes towards the promotion of employment, well-being and the environment are all emphasised and identified as priority areas. The review of actions taken and activities implemented in the context of the EU Forestry Strategy since its adoption in 1998 has shown that forests and forestry can successfully provide multiple benefits to society. This report underlines that forests and forestry have a potential to contribute both to the Lisbon objectives of sustainable economic growth and competitiveness, and to the Gothenburg objectives of safeguarding the quantity and quality of the rural resource base. At the same time, forests are seen as crucial to the fulfilment of Community commitments in halting the loss of biodiversity and in mitigating climate change. Indeed the Rural Development Regulation is seen as an important vehicle for implementing the EU's forestry strategy in that it seeks not only to improve forest protection values and the land under afforestation but it also seeks to improve the multifunctional role of forestry (ibid, p.17). The emergence of a new rural development paradigm, which emphasises the need to take account of a wider range of identified stakeholders and associated demands on the rural, and where issues of environmental awareness and quality of life supersede former sector-specific and subsidised production regimes (Evans et al. 2002) further promotes change in policy and practice along with increased importance of the role farmers play in landscape management and rural sustainability. As part of this broader conceptualisation, there are concerted attempts to bring forestry in from the margins of previous agricultural debates, enabling its multifunctional dimensions to become incorporated as key components of European rural development policy. Critically this comes at a time when the issue of climate change is central to political discourse, with the take-up or decline in forest cover having the potential to enhance a country's ability to meet climate change targets through carbon sequestration (see Kula, 2010) or conversely result in losses to biodiversity due either to a reluctance to plant or the encroachment of human populations (see Rudel et al. 2010). The association of forestry with an earlier modernisation regime that focused on the production of timber as a primary resource has changed to one that recognises a multi-use (e.g. carbon sinks, biodiversity, wood production) and multi-benefit (e.g. tourism, recreation, quality of life) resource. This post-productivist shift sees sectors such as forestry being reconfigured in terms of a scaling back in the significance of 'material production relative to other objectives' (Mather et al. 2006 p.454). In this way the concept of multifunctionality is seen as a method of 'producing not only food but also sustaining rural landscapes, protecting biodiversity, generating employment and contributing to the viability of rural areas' (Potter and Burney 2002 p.35); its practice acknowledging the value and existence of the multitude of roles assigned to agriculture and in turn acknowledging the role of the farming community in the execution of such practices. In economic terms, there is recognition of the value of non-productive outputs from forestry such as tourism, recreation and other amenity uses. It has been argued that direct and indirect income for local rural economies from such 'shadow values' (Slee, 2006) often exceed those yielded through primary production. Burton and Wilson (2006) argue that this conceptualisation of agricultural change is largely focused on 'structural exogenous factors' such as policy changes, the political economy and attempts by the farmer to make strategic adjustments to increase viability (see also Farrell et al. 2008), rather than on 'agency-related endogenous characteristics' that may accompany changes such as attitudes, perceptions and the behaviours of specific agricultural and rural actors. In fact while the recognition of forestry's potential role in the stimulation of rural development is clear at EU and national policy level, with its potential within a multifunctional model of agriculture recognised and promoted at this level, the reaction to it as an agricultural activity, particularly by farmers, appears to be mixed. The contention here is that, although the farming community may choose to engage in farm diversification and environmental farm practices which might include forestry, the 'mindset' of the farming community is still strongly entrenched in the need for productivist and more conventional farming practices (Mahon et al. 2010), which, if even partially the case, holds particular implications for the promotion of forestry in Ireland.

The reality and, it could be argued, the uniqueness of the Irish context is complex. It relates in part to an absence of a farm forestry tradition within agriculture (Malone, 2008). There is also

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<sup>5</sup> European Communities, (2003). Sustainable Forestry and the European Union – Initiatives of the European Union. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publication of the European Communities.

evidence to indicate that where opportunities afforded by forestry development exist, these are very often overlooked or dismissed by farmers due to emotional attachment to the land and/or perceived ideas of failure. Work conducted by Ni Dhubhain and Gardiner (1994) found that Irish farmers were largely unwilling to plant land and of the 10% of those farmers surveyed who stated an intention to plant, 58 % of that group said that their land was “good for nothing else” while 39% of those who said they would not plant said they did not have suitable land (i.e. they felt their land was “too good for forestry”). Frawley and Leavy’s (2001) study of farmers’ main motivations for not planting forestry indicates that 88% of the farmers surveyed were not considering afforestation and 51% percent of those who stated they would not plant perceived the main difficulty with farm forestry being due to the small size of their land and/or needing their land for other forms of production. Malone (2008), in the report for the Minister of State with responsibility for Forestry, outlined a number of other common themes that impact levels of afforestation including; the value of land; the need for land for farming purposes; historical negative attitudes to forestry; environmental conditions attached to afforestation; requirement to reafforest and a lack of forest culture (p.8). Elands and Wiersum (2001) and Elands et al. (2004) suggest that the notion of ‘failure’ or needing the land for other uses often relates to the historic conviction of farmers that ‘taming the wilderness’ or removing forests enables the creation of ‘productive’ lands. Malone (2008) confirmed this aspect also in the case of Ireland, where forestry has ‘traditionally been seen as suitable for bad or marginal land and in that sense, a departure from traditional agriculture’ (p.11). Further while Barbier et al. (2010) argue that demand for agricultural land may taper off ‘as the limits of land suitability are reached, farming modernizes and .... economies reach an advanced stage of economic development such that the demand for food rises less rapidly’ (p.99), this does not seem to permeate the Irish psyche with examples in recent times suggesting that farmers, particularly in the western region, are selling forests once premiums have been claimed, to buy better quality agricultural land (O’Brien, 2010). In some ways this demonstrates the lack of attachment that farmers have toward forestry as a ‘farming practice’ and in some ways reinforces the view that afforestation is regarded, not from economic or environmental perspectives, but more in terms of loss; loss of open agrarian space, undermining of an ability to farm and in some cases loss of rural identity.

In broadening out this contextualisation, Elands and Wiersum (2001) express how attitudes to forestry can be identified within different rural discourses – agri-ruralist, utilitarian, nature conservation and increasing community sustainability. What becomes apparent is how the agri-ruralist discourse for example proposes a new social contract between farmers and society whereby the emphasis is clearly on broader future sustainability and quality issues. This is seen as increasingly important with the emerging crisis in farming and the move from farmer as producer to farmers as landscape managers and/or custodians of the countryside. In terms of forestry, both positive and negative discourses consequently emerge. In one form, forestry can be viewed as an ideal way in which both production and consumption can be aligned. Forestry is seen not only as a primary resource, i.e. timber, but also as an ideal vehicle for multifunctional farming enterprises incorporating a range of leisure activities. In another form, forestry represents a set of more negative values reflected by a strong reluctance to see forests become dominant in the agricultural landscape. The historical legacy of clearing trees to create ‘productive’ lands, particularly embedded in the Irish farming psyche, is still powerful enough to depict forestry plantations in a negative way. Bulfin (1993) suggested that there was ‘little doubt that much of the land currently planted is ‘waste land’ – land which has been unused and which is unusable for agriculture’ ultimately perpetuating the notion that in planting trees farmers were essentially failing in their primary objective.

In exploring other discourses, for example the utilitarian discourse, Elands and Wiersum (2001) make the argument that in remote rural areas in particular ‘forest production techniques should be optimised so as to be economically competitive with (marginal) farm production’ (p.13). This would lead presumably to increases in income-earning capacities which would help stabilise very marginal rural economies, help stem out-migration and rural depopulation from such areas, and play a part in improving biodiversity while achieving other environmental goals (e.g. carbon sinks). This stresses the multifunctional character of European agriculture and forestry (Wilson, 2007) and provides a justification for governments’ role in support of agriculture and forestry in the context of their provision of public goods such as recreation and leisure, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, water supply and health. While such possibilities seem reasonable

and indeed have strong benefits, the argument seems unable to steer Irish farmers down this path, a point which is discussed in more detail below.

#### 4. The Irish context for forestry

The EU Forest Action Plan (2005) has a common vision of forestry and the contribution which forests and forestry make to modern society<sup>6</sup>. Covering more than one third (37%) of the European land surface (155 million hectares of the EU 27 land area<sup>7</sup> and with diminishing prospects for agriculture in many regions of rural Europe, it is easy to see how hundreds of thousands of workers find employment in forestry and forestry related industries. In terms of employment, Germany leads the way with close to one million working in the forestry sector, while countries such as France, Spain, Sweden, Austria, Portugal and Finland all having substantial numbers of people employed in forestry (see Hyttinen et al. 2000). In Ireland there are thought to be 22,500 direct and indirect jobs created in the forestry sector<sup>8</sup>. Ní Dhubháin et al. (2009) estimate that for every 100 jobs in the sector, an extra 90 full-time equivalent jobs are provided in other sectors of the economy. The overall value of forestry to the Irish economy was measured at €472 million in 2003 (Ní Dhubháin et al. 2009) with an estimated contribution to GNP of just under €700 million in 2004. Figures advanced by the Irish Farmers' Association in 2009 suggest a considerable increase in value added, with forestry making a direct contribution to the Irish economy of €1.65 billion<sup>9</sup>.

In Ireland, forestry is seen as an expanding and developing sector in the rural economy, with forests now covering 10.5% (733,400 ha) of the land area<sup>10</sup> up from < 7% (< 5,000 ha) in 1990. However, Ireland still has among the lowest forest cover in the EU, with the largest forest and wooded land areas being in Sweden, Spain and Finland<sup>11</sup>. Ireland's annual planting was 15,815 ha between 1986 and 1999 and 11,560 ha between 1997 and 2007 with a peak of 23,710 ha in 1995 and a trend generally downwards since (Malone, 2008). It could subsequently be argued that there is stagnation in terms of forestry development in Ireland. A stagnation that is fuelled by a variety of market and policy failures; inappropriate or uncertainty in terms of incentives and, a lack of understanding of the value-laden relationship between farmer and land-use (see Barbier et al. 2010). The publication in 1996 of Ireland's strategic policy document, 'Growing for the Future', focused on expansion of the sector and envisaged an increase in the area under forestry to 17% by 2035. A review of this strategic plan for forestry (Peter Bacon & Associates, 2003) recommended that a national planting target of 20,000 ha per year be maintained to secure a sustainable commercial processing sector in Ireland. Failure to attain this target would result in a shortfall in supply of raw materials to the timber-processing sector by 2020. The report also emphasised the importance of the non-timber value of wood for carbon sequestration, biodiversity, amenity and recreation. In the Foresight 2025 study Fennessy (2005) also highlighted the importance of Irish forestry as a provider of public goods into the future, particularly in the areas of carbon sequestration, biodiversity, recreation and water quality.

In terms of competitive advantage the rate of tree growth in Ireland is over twice as fast as in mainland Europe and three times as fast as in Scandinavian countries (see Gardiner, 1993), giving Ireland's forest owners a strong platform (Farrelly, 2010). As stated, there are approximately 733,400 ha of land under forestry in Ireland (see Table 1). Over half is State owned (54.5%) and the remainder (45.5% - compared with 28% in 1990) is in private

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<sup>6</sup> Commission of the European Communities (CEC), (2005). Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the implementation of the EU Forestry Strategy. COM (2005) 84.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, (2009). Report on implementation of Forestry measures under the Rural Development Regulation 1698/2005 for the period 2007-2013. Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development, AGRI H4.

<sup>8</sup> [www.ifa.ie/Sectors/Forestry.aspx](http://www.ifa.ie/Sectors/Forestry.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Forest Service, (2010). Annual Statistics 2009. Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (DAFF) Ireland.

Available at:

<http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/media/migration/forestry/forestservicgeneralinformation/2009%20Afforestation%20statistics%20300310.xls>.

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat, (2009). Europe in Figures – Eurostat Yearbook 2009. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publication of the European Communities.

ownership, even though as much as 30% of this privately owned forestry has been grant-aided by the State (Mac Connell, 2007). In terms of spatial distribution, the south and southeast of the country have both the largest area under forestry (86,000 ha planted in County Cork) and the highest percentage of forest cover per county (18% in County Wicklow). It is interesting to note that 90% of the new planting (since 1990) has been by farmers. In addition, approximately 700 farmers/landowners plant an extra 6,000 to 7,000 ha annually. Although this is well below the current government target, which remains at 20,000 ha of afforestation annually<sup>12</sup>, an interim target of 10,000 ha annually has been set for the period of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. Consequently forestry represents the single biggest land use change in Ireland over the past decade. After several decades in which the State has been the dominant force in Irish forestry (Malone, 2008) a critical mass of private forestry is now developing with almost all planting in recent years being carried out by farmers and expectations that all future planting in Ireland will continue to be carried out by farmers. While various schemes (for example, the EU Agricultural Development Programme and the Western Package, 1985) have been implemented to support forestry over the last 20 years, more recently, the changing nature of the policy environment sees forestry support under CAP moving from an alternative use for land taken out of agricultural production in the 1992 reforms to becoming a means of delivering EU environmental objectives which has parity with agriculture in all three axes of the EAFRD.

Total forest cover in Republic of Ireland (2009)	10.7%
Total area of privately owned forest (2009)	339,341 hectares
Number of forest owners	15,000 individuals approx.
Average size of plantation	8.2 hectares
Total timber production (2008)	2.4 million m <sup>3</sup> (Private: 0.12 mill. m <sup>3</sup> )
Value of forest premium (2008)	€72 million

Tab 1. Forestry in Ireland, 2008

Source: Forest Service, 2010

These apparently positive trends are challenged, however, by a series of Irish studies of farm forestry which variously indicate an underlying reluctance of farmers to plant their land in spite of the clear indications that Irish agriculture was a sector under pressure from globalizing trends ((Ní Dhubháin and Gardiner (1994); Gillmor (1998); Frawley and Leavy (2001); Wiemers and Behan (2004); Behan and McQuinn (2005)). However Malone (2008) suggests that it is important to highlight the fact that a 'decision to convert a parcel of land or a farm to a forest is not a decision taken in isolation but is based on a variety of factors, family and personal circumstances as well as the relative attraction of premiums available (as well as being) a major long term decision which is irreversible and removes other options for land use .... has implications for (this) generation and ... the next generation (and) impacts neighbours and or a locality' (p.7). Since the early 1980s the Irish farming community has been involved in an ongoing process of reform and agricultural change. By the time of the Mid-Term review of the CAP, Irish agriculture had already undergone dramatic change. The number of farms declined by 17% and the persons recorded as full time farmers fell by 24%. Although population figures in rural areas experienced unprecedented growth and national labour force figures within the same period grew by 57%, the percentage of people employed in agriculture fell from 14% to 5% (Crowley 2003). An examination of trends in family farm income (FFI) following the mid-term review showed an average 16% decline, from €14,236 in 1995 to €11,998 in 2002 (Connolly et al., 2003), providing a clear indication of the downturn in Irish agriculture. Research charting the rise in part-time farming and the increase in off-farm employment also provides clear evidence of the fundamental changes taking place within the farming community. The National Farm Survey of 2008 established that on 56% of all farms the farmer or/and spouse depended to some extent on off-farm jobs, on 40% of farms a job was held by

<sup>12</sup> Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (DAFF), (1996). Growing for the Future – A Strategic Plan for the Development of the Forestry Sector in Ireland. Government Publications Office.

the farmer and, overall, on 81% of farms, the farmer and/or spouse had some source of off-farm income in the form of employment, pension or social assistance (Connolly, et al. 2008). An examination of these figures shows that in order to sustain the farm household income the spouse or the farmer or both have to engage in off-farm employment.

If one accepts the predictions by Commins (2005), Riordan (2005) and Carton et al. (2005) of a dramatic drop in commercial farmer numbers by 2025, particularly in the East and South East, along with a significant overall increase in part-time farmer numbers, it seems likely that the Irish policy environment will be challenged in new ways. One of these challenges, for example, is reflected in the recent cutbacks in terms of the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) - which rewarded farmers for undertaking environmental options on the farm and the associated Forest Environment Protection Scheme (FEPS) - which rewarded forest owners in REPS for also undertaking environmental options in their forests. Here, the former emphasis on the environmental role of the farmer, as opposed to the traditional productivist role, has been undermined by cutbacks and uncertainty, raising new questions about the place of forestry in the rural landscape. Indeed recognising that the current WTO negotiations are likely to impact on land use decisions in Ireland over the coming years it can also be argued that in the future ‘the distinction between “farmers” and “foresters” is likely to become less and less clear’<sup>13</sup> (Rural Europe, June 2006) with it no longer being tenable to think of farmers and foresters as two distinct sectors but more appropriately as ‘one diverse group of rural land managers’ (ibid).

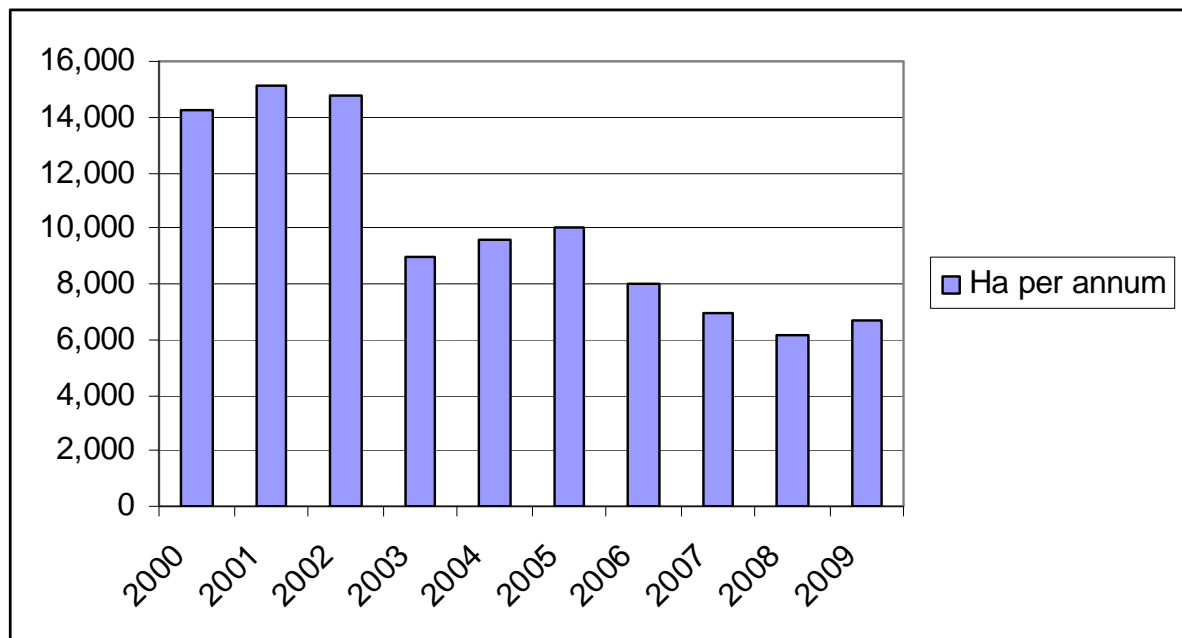


Fig 1. Annual Planted Area (ha) 2000 – 2009  
Source: Forest Service 2010

## 5. Discussion

Rural Ireland has a history of farmers and communities engaging in traditional forms of farming and agricultural production. In what can be seen as a contemporary post-productivist countryside (although this is contested by some commentators, for example, Wilson 2007), rural communities and agricultural actors find themselves in an increasingly expanding service-based economy with activities more aligned toward amenity, recreation and/or other tourism possibilities. Part of this shift also involves the stimulation of potential rural development opportunities presented by forestry. The challenge this latter position poses, and what sets the Irish situation apart from its wider EU context, is the strong agricultural heritage connected particularly to more traditional animal or crop production and perhaps even more so, the resilient ties between land owner and land-use. The following discussion unpacks these

<sup>13</sup> Rural Europe (2006). Rural Europe – Newsletter of the Rural Development Information Centre. Galway, DG Press.



concerns by drawing from the results of the National Farm Survey 2006, specifically that section which focused on farm forestry, and critiquing the broader policy environment (national and European) in terms of how land-use decisions and the plantation (or not) of forestry can become bound up in a range of issues from the utilisation of marginal or abandoned lands to those of good farming practices and indeed to perceived threats to rural identity. Coupled with discussion on the results from the empirical data generated through the NFS survey this section also delves into the three main themes which became apparent during the research, namely; a) the freedom to farm; b) land-use values; and, c) incentives and trust.

### ***The National Farm Survey***

The following discussion focuses on the results of the National Farm Survey (NFS) 2006, specifically the National Farm Summer Supplementary Survey which focused on farm forestry. The NFS is a member of FADN, the Farm Accountancy Data Network of Europe, and it surveys approximately 1,200 farms nationally that are weighted to represent the total population of over 130,000 farms. The NFS aims to determine the financial situation of Irish farms by measuring the level of gross output, costs, income, investment and indebtedness across the spectrum of farming systems and sizes, to provide data on Irish farm output, costs and incomes to the EU Commission, measure the current levels of, and variation in, farm performance for use as standards for farm management purposes, and to provide a database for economic and rural development research and policy analysis. To achieve these objectives, a farm accounts book is recorded for each year on a nationwide random sample of farms, selected by the Central Statistics Office. The information required by the NFS is collected on a national basis by approximately eighteen farm recorders on a face-to-face basis. This face-to-face medium has the advantage of personal contact with each farm family which, in this survey, resulted in a high response rate (1,016 out of 1,200 [84.7 %]). In providing a database for agricultural economic and rural development research projects the NFS carries out a Summer Supplementary Survey.

In 2006, following an annual decline in the area of land planted, a trend that continues and which the Association of Irish Forestry Consultants (AIFC) suggest will see 2011 as having the lowest planted forestry area since 1947 (Murphy, 2010), and a concern to establish the underlying reasons (see Figure 1) the NFS accepted questions relating to forestry. A series of questions were submitted in relation to:

- the farmer's perception of the future viability of their farm without assistance of off-farm employment or without considering alternative on-farm options such as forestry;
- the level of farm forestry currently taking place;
- the future intentions of farmers in relation to planting land; and
- farmers were asked to rank the importance of potential barriers to farm forestry.

Building on the issues raised in the literature, the designing of the survey questions utilised a number of variables to explore the perceived attitudes and barriers to forestry. These variables in particular dealt with issues of land-use, perception, financial gain and/or impact on farm entitlements. The field survey was carried out in 2006 as part of the NFS with a total of 1,016 farmers surveyed. A number of patterns emerged from the data and, in exploring the variables in turn, a useful picture of farmers' attitudes and cautionary approach toward forestry becomes evident. In addition to this quantifiable data, follow up insights, in the form of personal communications with key stakeholders involved in forestry and semi-structured interviews with farmers, were sought in terms of what these responses meant and why farmers would have given a ranking of such replies in the survey (only some of this data is used in the context of this paper).

### ***Emerging issues***

With farmers asked to rank in order of significance the main barriers to afforestation, one of the key variables to emerge in the survey was the response by farmers that they needed all of their land for agriculture. Ranked as the largest barrier to afforestation, this response would seem to have its roots in the lack of tradition of forestry in Ireland and even more so in the historic view of forestry being associated with marginal and less productive lands. This historic legacy and the small size and fragmented nature of Irish farm holdings seems to have acted as a barrier to

any attempt at large scale afforestation programmes and consequently contemporary promotion of forestry as an alternative land use is slow to be accepted. Indeed Flécharde et al. (2006, p.82) describe what they term a 'land hunger' by many farmers and a 'lingering mistrust of 'outside' organisations or experts suggesting land use changes including afforestation'. This notion was further reinforced by emphasis in government policy post WWI when there was encouragement to plant forestry yet equally there were restrictions on the land used so as 'to ensure that good and even marginal land was retained for agriculture' (ibid.). This view, albeit some 80 years old, seems to permeate the current reluctance to plant forestry in that the second greatest barrier indicated in the survey also referred to the potential value of unplanted land. It is not too surprising then to see that forestry remains a complex land use alternative in the Irish countryside; a situation reinforced in discussions with those involved in promoting forestry in the present day whereby advice is often given to farmers that they should plant only on marginal lands as returns are still good and better agricultural lands should be left for more traditional forms of production (pers. comm.).

A further significant variable that emerged in the survey is the perception of forestry plantation being viewed as a permanent decision. As the law stands currently, once land has been afforested it can not revert back to agriculture or any other land use (see Forestry Act 1946 and amendments). The percentage of farms ranking the permanency of forestry as a barrier, indicates that the decision to plant is a very difficult one - rising from almost 10% as a first order barrier to 24% and 30% as a second and third order barrier respectively. The long term nature of these decisions seems to force some farmers into a more cautionary approach lest they find that having made such decisions the economic and/or political landscape subsequently changes and decisions affecting forestry become less supportive (the notion of incentives and trust is dealt with later in this paper). Allied to this is the preference of farmers to have an inheritance to leave to their son/daughter. This succession in terms of farming practice seems to favour lands on which traditional agricultural practices can continue as opposed to lands under forestry. Again discussions with farmers have revealed concerns that their decision to plant trees would effectively be making a decision for the future generation in terms of what farming they could conduct. Such is the length of time required for forestry to mature, and indeed the difficulty of reverting planted lands back to traditional production practices, farmers felt they had to be cautious about such a decision. Farmers were particularly concerned that making such a decision now could ultimately lead their successor opting out of farming altogether. The 'dislike of forestry' and 'other' variable seem to relate to this issue of succession also but even more to the association of forestry with the monoculture approach promoted in Ireland's recent past (it is estimated that Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis* (Bong.) Carr.) represented 80% of the coniferous cover, with conifers representing 97% of the total forest cover in 2003 (Flécharde et al., 2006). In addition, comments by farmers on why these variables would be ranked so high suggested that there was a perception that the planting of forestry signalled the decline of rural communities with trees effectively replacing people (pers. comm.).

The final barrier identified is the link between REPS payments and afforestation, as originally farmers had to forfeit REPS payments on planted land. This has since been addressed to a certain extent by the introduction of an associated scheme, the Forest Environment Protection Scheme (FEPS), which was introduced in 2007 to promote environmentally-friendly planting practices and to compensate farmers for loss of income from REPS. What seemed to have been a missed opportunity in the drive toward more environmentally friendly farming practices and the promotion of measures to address issues such as climate change (where afforestation is central), was the lack of fit between REPS payments and payments for those engaged in forestry (particularly new plantations) thereby providing a disincentive to farmers from pursuing such a trajectory pre 2007. Indeed of the 1,016 farmers surveyed only 10% stated that they had planted forestry on their farms, with only 42 farmers (4%) indicating that they were considering planting some of their land in the near future.

Further, contrary to what one might expect, we see from the survey results that the lack of financial incentives is not the main barrier to afforestation. The farmer's continuing productivist ethos and consideration of successors and how they may want to farm, seems to engender a cautionary approach to changing farm practices particularly if such changes are related to one dominated by forestry. This seems even more contradictory at a time when we see

an accelerated shift to part-time farming and the inherent logic that forestry would be ideally suited to a part-time farming approach.

In drawing these responses together it is clear that a number of themes of concern emerge. In the following sections some of these themes are explored further in an effort to advance our understanding of whether farmers contest the notion of forestry for practical, agricultural reasons or whether their reluctance is more ideologically driven.

### **Freedom to farm**

Since implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy, land use options were driven by agricultural premium payments. Tillage land was required to grow crops in order to draw down arable payments. Grassland was needed to keep livestock, on which livestock payments were collected. The decoupled era has changed the regulations governing farming and there is now a new “freedom to farm”. Farmers are now free to develop a mix of enterprises or a single enterprise best suited to their individual requirements, rather than running enterprises to comply with regulations incentivised by subsidies. Since the advent of the Single Farm Payment (SFP) in 2005 and in particular the “stacking” of entitlements, and more recently the inclusion of forestry as ‘eligible’ for full SFP, forestry has become a serious land use option for thousands of farmers. This freedom to farm and to explore other farm enterprises however has not accelerated at the pace first anticipated. The expectation that farmers would no longer wish to productively work the land, maintain crop production or retain livestock has not materialised. In 2004, it was suggested that the introduction of full decoupling and the SFP scheme would impact significantly on the decisions taken by many farmers to produce (Lucey, 2004). Decisions would be heavily influenced by market signals and unless market returns were acceptable there would be little or no incentive for farmers to maintain current production levels. In 2005, Breen et al.’s economic assessment of the impact of decoupling on farming in Ireland revealed another picture. This model projected the number of farmers who would financially benefit from disengaging from production and compared this with the results of a survey of farmers’ production intentions. The comparison showed that even though there were significant changes in profitability arising from decoupling, 7 out of 10 farmers surveyed fully intended to continue as before and were unlikely to change their production patterns (ibid. p. 16). Following the Luxembourg Agreement, a mass exodus from the land was anticipated, yet the evidence would indicate farmers retaining a significant attachment to production. This is highly significant in understanding farmers’ attitudes to planting forestry, with over 55% signalling that one of the main reasons they did not take up forestry was that they needed all their land for agriculture (figure 2).

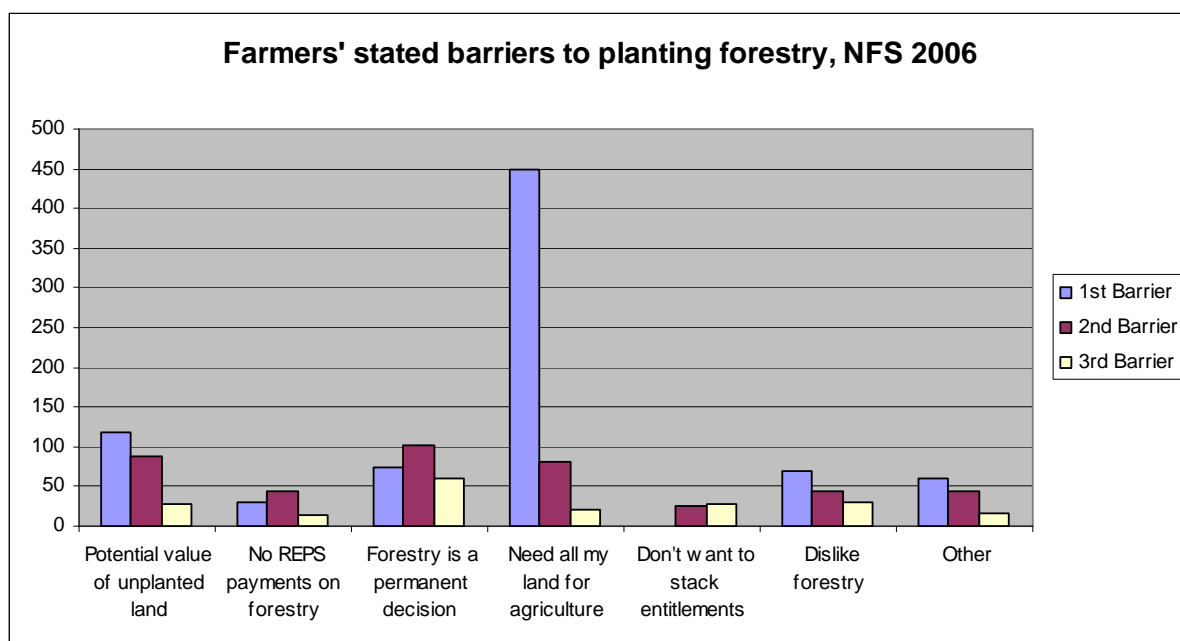


Fig 2. Barriers to planting forestry  
Source: National Farm Survey 2006 (N=1017)

### ***Land-use values***

Another concern that emerges from this research is the way in which traditional land-use values remain or at least cast a shadow on alternative land uses such as forestry. Values and/or engagement with new forestry developments is often contextualised within traditional land-use values as mirrored by Elands et al. (2004) whose study suggests a strong correlation between geographical positioning and attitudes to forestry and Ní Dhubháin et al. (2009a) who put forward a similar position. It is argued in particular that attitudes expressing negative aspects of forests are mostly observed in Atlantic countries and especially those with a short history of forestry while the more positive and beneficial aspects of forestry are more clearly recognised in Central and Eastern Europe whose countries have a longer forestry tradition. In Ireland the lack of a tradition of forestry and the frequent association of planting trees with marginal or otherwise 'unproductive' lands has promoted a mind-set that militates against farmers planting some or all of their farm holdings. Furthermore, while there is an appreciable shift from industrial forestry production to a post industrial forestry akin to the Post Productivist Transition (PPT) in agriculture, it is clear that many Irish farmers remain unconvinced by the possibilities for multi-functional uses of forestry, whether linked to amenity, conservation or environmental dimensions. This is particularly so when the 'complex connections between different facets of multi-functionality, forestry and rural economic well-being' are less easy to measure than the 'income and employment effects of production forestry' (Slee and Wiersum, 2001 p.3). While the rhetoric of a new rural paradigm and the drive towards a multifunctional countryside seeks a holistic engagement with rural development discourses, the notion of a viable forestry sector in Ireland is still very much challenged by the uncertainty that surrounds the contribution forestry can make to rural economies, a situation that has been seriously tested by cuts in national budgets during 2009. Neither is there any convincing evidence to suggest that in the absence of an economic rationale, forests are appreciated in Ireland for their 'symbolic value', signifying a point of rural identity (Elands et al. 2004, p.470). Rather, the suggestion is of forestry as a challenge to rural identity and the Irish farmers' long association with more traditional forms of farming and agriculture.

### ***Incentives and Trust***

The bulk of private planting in Ireland was carried out after the Forest Premium payments came into being, when farmers were compensated for the loss of agricultural income on their land. However, as the level of planting has subsequently diminished it would appear that the incentives in place may not be sufficient to overcome some of the barriers that prevent farmers from investing their land in forestry. This situation is further complicated by changes in agricultural supports under decoupling and the SFP scheme. A new multifunctional thinking places sectors like forestry in the realm of being a public good, not only in terms of providing raw materials but more significantly in providing ecological, aesthetic, amenity and recreational spaces that heretofore were largely ignored. The motivation for farmers to engage with this level of providing a 'public good' is less appealing when the question of incentives or payment emerges. This is even more pertinent in terms of contemporary decisions by farmers on whether they should plant or not. As we move toward 2013 the uncertainty that surrounds the SFP and indeed the more recent announcements by the Irish government in relation to cutting back, and, in some cases, suspending REPS involvement and Disadvantaged Area payments, all lend to a very uncertain time in which farmers are making decisions about future land-use options. Recent comments by the former Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) President, Pádraig Walshe (2009), suggested that farmers should be wary of undertaking any new planting of forestry in the current circumstances. Referring to the permanency of this land-use conversion once land is planted, he argued that the Irish government's concern was merely one of increasing the rate of afforestation with little or no regard to the farmers who had invested in this change. Walshe referred in particular to how farmers had been attracted to forestry by government promises that forest premiums were guaranteed and tax free for twenty years only to now see cuts to forest premiums imposed in the supplementary budget (April 2009) representing 'a breach of contract between government and farmer'. Walsh argued furthermore that those who 'enter into the afforestation programme must be mindful that .... the terms and conditions can be changed at the whim of the Government' (Walshe, 2009).

The permanency of the decision to plant forestry also engenders a cautionary approach, something that is borne out not only in the responses to the survey which indicate that this is the second greatest barrier to their engaging in this line of investment (Figure 2), but is also highlighted in comments by the IFA Farm Forestry Chairman, Pat Hennessy. Hennessy suggested that many farmers, while having approval to plant and considering doing so, are stalling their decision on the one hand because of the lack of assurances around the 8% cut to the forest premium payment (the 20 year forest premium payment was reduced by 8% in 2009 as a result of budget cuts (premium payment is now paid in full from the Irish exchequer even though it is still an EU scheme) with this cut carried into 2011) and on the other, more significantly, because they see 'forestry is a permanent land-use conversion' (2009). This reluctance undoubtedly will have repercussions not only in terms of renewable energy and climate change strategies but also in the services sector, nurseries, forestry companies and wood energy providers (Walshe, 2009).

The breakdown in trust between farmer and state that seems apparent at the present time reinforces an already cautious approach by farmers to planting trees. This is reflected in the 10 years up to 2009 of a decline in planting rates. It is consequently argued by Hennessy (2009) that if the government is serious about achieving their 17% forest cover target by 2030, not only will an annual afforestation rate of 20,000 ha be required but a rebuilding of trust between farmer and government will be essential. This, Hennessy believes, can only begin by the reinstatement of the 8% government initiated cut in the premium and any arguments that refer to the increase in afforestation rates in 2009 are merely reflective of the economic downturn and the difficulty that farmers have in getting finance for other ventures. The idea that there is a shift in mind-set with farmers warming to the notion of forestry as an alternative farm enterprise does not appear to be the case (ibid).

## 6. Concluding comments

In the current climate, making a viable living from agriculture is increasingly difficult. The closing of the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) to new applicants in 2009, the possibility of a switch from the current Single Farm Payment (SFP) to a flat area-based payment and the recent volatility in the price of agricultural outputs and inputs, all indicate that Irish farmers may be heading into a period of lower farm incomes and greater uncertainty (Breen et al., 2010). Over the past 15 years the incomes of many farmers were buoyed by off-farm employment and the one-off sale of land for construction. However, the decline in the construction sector would suggest that such sales in the future are likely to be at substantially reduced prices. In their Spring 2009 Land Market Review, Irish auctioneers Knight Frank estimated that the Irish property market is now tracking 2004 levels and they saw 'no reason why agricultural land prices will not follow this trend' (Ganly, 2009). The likelihood is therefore that given the increased uncertainty regarding the returns to traditional agriculture; the collapse in land prices, budgetary cuts anticipated and already in progress, the fall-back for farmers on schemes such as REPS and the Disadvantaged Area Scheme no longer guaranteed, changes in land use will be approached with far greater caution by Irish farmers.

Forestry's conceptualisation as an environmental and public good, with European and international policy seeking to improve recognition of its social, economic and ecological value, sees this sector being presented as an opportunity for farmers. It provides not only social, economic and ecological returns but in terms of farming practices it is not labour intensive; is a good investment and can free up time for farmers to work off the farm. Using a discounted cash flow model, Breen et al. (2010) have calculated that over a 40 year period, the returns from conifer and broadleaf forests exceed the returns from each of four superseded agricultural enterprises, except in the case of ash (*Fraxinus excelsior* L.) superseded by winter wheat. Coillte, the State Forestry Board in Ireland, have reiterated this message and suggest that the return from forestry to farmers compares favourably if not exceeds that of traditional farming practices. Their various forestry advertisements outline the opportunities and advantages to farmers engaging in forestry from being good investment returns; an 'ideal retirement enterprise'; the lack of initial outlay (the afforestation grant covers initial plantation and maintenance for first 4 years); premium payments for 20 years (which are tax free) to the fact

that farmers can still draw down their Single Farm Payment as this is not affected by planting forestry (Coillte, 2009) all being posited as major attractions.

However, despite this positivity, making a decision to plant forestry can be difficult for farmers. Some farmers plant land as part of lifestyle changes, albeit these tend to be older farmers who have decided to scale down their farming activities. Other farmers, mainly younger farmers, plant land as part of a career change, deciding to combine an off-farm job or a business enterprise with farming to meet the family demand for increased income. While this very much equates with the change from the traditional productive ethos typified in rural Ireland, to the new multifunctional countryside as conceptualised in the emerging new rural development paradigm, the process of strengthening the role of forestry in rural development in Ireland is not as straightforward as some of the policy and forestry advertisements suggest. Undoubtedly there is a strong push towards increasing forest cover across Europe and a recognition of its social, economic and environmental benefits, but 'new questions are (being) asked about the multiple and complex impacts of forestry on rural development' (Slee and Wiersum, 2001, p.4). In the case of Ireland, questions in particular are being asked about how the commitment to forestry is quickly undermined by the way in which future strategies and policy decisions for the sector are both negotiated and resourced. In the context of this research it is apparent that not only is there a lack of trust between farmer and government but there are also more nuanced challenges in terms of tradition, history, perceived threats to rural identity and contested understandings of rural development. Indeed the emotional value and attachment between farmer and land is something not always considered. It is apparent in this discussion that a large percentage of the farmers surveyed are reluctant to plant their land not only due to the permanency of forestry but also because of their attachment to their farms and their desire to continue agricultural production. Further, that spatial variation in an island as small as Ireland is clearly evident emphasises the complex challenge that afforestation presents. During the late 1980s and 1990s much of the planting took place in the western counties on so called unproductive or marginal lands. Currently while 50% of planted areas under the Forest Environment Protection Scheme (FEPS) have been concentrated in the south-western counties, in 2009, there has been an increase in planting in Western counties and a decrease in the level of planting in eastern and northern counties. Consequently the drawing up of any generally applicable policy may not achieve the required impact if the difference in attitudes to forestry, not only between countries but between regions within countries, is not considered.

In determining whether Irish farmers are missing an opportunity in terms of forestry investment, this research suggests that on one level this is very much the case, but equally on another, the cautious approach displayed by many farmers seems prudent in present times of economic turmoil and uncertainty. While the reluctance to plant because of the permanent nature of forestry may well be reduced in time as forestry legislation is currently under review, other important factors such as the continuance of grant aid will undoubtedly have a major impact going forward. To this end the reiteration of support for forestry in the Renewed Programme for Government published in October 2009 and its promise to enhance the current range of programmes and supports to facilitate the attainment of the target of 17% forest cover by 2030 and contribute to meeting our Climate Change commitments is certainly a positive step. Further, the promised review of State forestry policy to take account of its critical role not only in relation to climate change but also its importance to construction, bio-energy, biodiversity and its potential to deliver long-term employment in other downstream industries, including eco-tourism, furniture and crafts seems to indicate a more determined policy approach. These initiatives, if followed through on, will help to potentially counterbalance a host of others seen as affecting the involvement of farmers in forestry including: REPS, the Forest Environment Protection Scheme (FEPS), the Nitrates Directive, Less Favoured Area payments, Water Framework Directive, CAP Post 2013, the introduction of carbon taxes, the Copenhagen agreement, social welfare entitlements, and the inadequacy of the forestry premium to compensate for the risk associated with the permanency of forestry and the loss in income from farming. Currently the Single Farm Payment and other supports enable farmers to continue farming even when the farm enterprise in itself is losing money. This in effect, buffers farmers from having to consider a serious land use change such as forestry in the short to medium term. It is unlikely, however, that farmers will continue to farm at a loss in the long term. Moreover, when or if farmers become more attuned to forest-derived income possibilities outside of

the traditional production route, in the form of wood energy, amenity, recreation and tourism for example, then the multifunctional role of forests may become central to rural development policy and form part of the farming landscape rather than an alternative farming landscape. If the cautionary approach on the part of farmers remains and the perceived lack of commitment on the part of government continues, not only will farmers and rural economies potentially lose out but importantly the challenges facing the wider community in terms of energy, ecosystems, carbon emissions and climate change will continue.

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