

FEPS – increased biodiversity and income

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The Forest Environment Protection Scheme (FEPS) is now into its second year with over 2,000 hectares already planted. An interesting trend has emerged over the last four years, which shows that 60% of all FEPS planting took place in Munster. Cork leads the field for FEPS planting with Kerry second followed by Limerick, Tipperary and Clare.

The predominance of these counties suggests that better land is being planted and this is borne out by the greater percentage of broadleaves planted in recent years.

In addition, many more REPS farmers are considering putting some of their land into FEPS as a total of 6,248 hectares have been approved by the Forest Service to date. Up to now, the average area planted is 12.2 hectares. The scheme can be very lucrative for larger farms as may be seen in Table 1. This shows that a farmer who opts for a REPS/FEPS mix could increase his or her annual income by €6,200 of which €7,200 is tax-free.

Many small to medium sized farmers felt that the 8 ha minimum area for FEPS was too high and the Forest Service acknowledged this during their review of the scheme. The new minimum area of 5 ha (for farms less than 30 ha) should result in a greater number of applications in western counties, where average farm sizes are smaller.

Feedback from REPS planners indicates that farmers like the scope offered by FEPS to improve biodiversity and create potential for future amenity and recreational use of the farm and the forest. There are a total of 20 optional FEPS

TABLE 1. Income comparisons between REPS and FEPS in a 60 hectare holding (€)

REPS only – no planting	€	REPS & FEPS	€
Total annual income for 60 ha	10,060	REPS 4 income for 50 ha	9,600
		20 year forest premium for 10ha	5,200
		Annual FEPS payment	2,000
	10,600		16,800



One energy option that is likely to become more popular in future is the provision of fuel wood. Modern wood-fuelled heating systems offer similar levels of comfort, convenience and reliability as oil or gas boiler systems.

environmental measures from which forest owners must choose 6. These measures range from creating ponds, joining up existing habitats by creating wildlife corridors, providing food or bird boxes, and providing access for local school children. The top 10 options chosen in FEPS are:]

1. Plant fruiting/berry-bearing species or crab apple etc. in ABE areas.
2. In broadleaf plantations, include holly, Scots Pine or native shrubs.
3. Install bat boxes, bird boxes, badger gates in rabbit fencing.
4. Create wildlife corridors between habitats.
5. Increase riparian zone and plant with suitable species.
6. Widen internal hedgerows.
7. Leave 20m unplanted corridors for future harvest road development.
8. Create new habitat such as ponds, or extend existing ponds or wet areas.
9. Register with Birdwatch Ireland and participate in surveys.
10. Increase average set back from road and/or houses by 5 metres and establish undulating edges.

One option that is likely to become more popular in future is the provision of fuel wood, particularly in the light of the recent SEI announcement of a grant of €2,000 for log gasification boilers. These central heating boilers only need to be filled once a day and installers claim that although the initial capital cost is more expensive than oil or gas, the payback time is four to five years.

Whether you want to have an on-farm pension fund, provide habitats for wildlife or leave an environmentally sustainable legacy for future generations, the FEPS scheme provides for all of these objectives, while giving farm income a welcome tax-free boost.



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