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ITGA submission on the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine’s Statement of Strategy 2020 - 2023

Donal Whelan

The Irish Timber Growers Association (ITGA) made a formal submission to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the Department’s Statement of Strategy 2020-2023.

As part of this submission, ITGA reviewed the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine’s (DAFM) published, *Steps to Success 2019*, the fourth annual progress report of Food Wise 2025. The Department outlined the broad achievements in assessing the progress of *Food Wise 2025* in this report. Afforestation targets were a notable exception to these achievements, however, and in relation to the current Forestry Programme 2014 - 2020 only approximately half of the Programme’s afforestation targets were achieved over each of the past two years with a similar outturn expected this year.

In its submission ITGA highlighted how the Department’s Statement of Strategy 2020-2023 must strengthen its Policy & Strategy and its Sectoral Development Programme to focus more on the forestry sector to achieve its future policy targets and the related Food Wise 2025 Implementation Plan.

An important strategic step that the Department could make is to recognise the forestry sector in the Department’s title and in the titles of its framework documents. The title of the agricultural sectors strategic plan ‘Food Wise 2025’ does not reflect the importance or significance of the forestry sector within the Department or its potential contribution to the rural economy, sustainable agriculture, or its central role in Ireland’s Climate Action Plan.

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wider economy (as highlighted in the “*Challenges and Objectives of the CAP-post 2020*”, presentation made by the EU Commission on the future of CAP). Forestry income will be critical in bridging the gap between Irish farmers’ incomes and incomes in the wider economy in the future. Forestry income is direct market income and is a source of long-term sustainable revenue for farmers and landowners. Such direct market income from forestry will also ensure a better balance between the operating subsidies and market income per farm and will help ensure the longer-term economic sustainability of the wider agriculture sector through reduced reliance on subsidies and through the generation of a more diverse income source.

Over 70% of our sawn timber and in excess of 80% of panel-board forest products which were produced in Ireland are exported. To date, the main limiting factor to increasing our exports of finished timber and panelboards was the supply of raw material (roundwood) and this remains a critical issue which must also be addressed in the Statement of Strategy.

Only 10.5% of ‘Cattle rearing’ farms are economically viable, with 19.7% of ‘Sheep’ and 26.5% of ‘Cattle other’ family farms viable according to Teagasc’s National Farm Survey 2018.

The recent Fact Sheet on Irish Agriculture outlines that, ‘Total public expenditure by Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine was over €3 billion in 2018.’ Of this €3 billion spend, forestry received less than €98 million or c. 3% of the total Department budget.



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In any analysis and in preparing an updated Statement of Strategy for the Department this imbalance in supports should be examined, particularly when one considers that according to Teagasc's National Farm Survey 2018 only 10.5% of 'Cattle rearing' farms are economically viable, with 19.7% of 'Sheep' and 26.5% of 'Cattle other' family farms viable. These three farming systems account for over 73% of our 92,720 farms.

The recent (2019) Report on the Socio-Economic Impact of Forestry in Co. Leitrim, which was commissioned by the Department, outlined an economic modelling approach which highlighted the significant percentage of farms where the return from forestry would be higher than from other agriculture systems over all counties. For example, for cattle rearing 56.8% of farms nationally would return more from forestry.

With regards to the metrics that could be employed to measure performance and monitor achievement of the Departments strategic goals, a metric that should be employed in preparing an updated Statement of Strategy by the Department would be to maximise the percentage of farms that optimise their economic returns.

Also, in relation to both goals and related metrics that could be employed in the Department's Statement of Strategy for within the forestry sector itself, the Forest Policy document, *'Forests, products and people - Ireland's forest policy – a renewed vision'* (Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, 2014), should be a primary document referenced and employed in updating the Statement of Strategy. An appropriate way to assess performance would be to monitor progress in the implementation of the stated Strategic Actions in this Forest Policy document so as to achieve the Policy Statements detailed.

As can be seen from research literature and from the COFORD Forestry 2030 Papers, the sector has much to offer our economy, environment, in climate change mitigation, biodiversity, renewable energy and recreation. Ireland possesses the climate and soils to grow forests at a faster rate than most of the developed world, yet only 11% of our land area is under forest compared with almost 40% for the rest of Europe. Our forestry and timber sectors hold significant potential to support the growth of the Irish economy and can provide a range of services to Irish society into the future. The Department's Statement of Strategy 2020-2023 must commit to delivery on an effective strategy for the forestry and timber sector in order to ensure it achieves this potential.



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