

Donegal farmer outlines the benefits of forestry in diversifying land use and income stream.

An award-winning approach to farm forestry in Donegal

A managed forest is a valuable asset to a family and future generations. Timber values outperform inflation, so forestry is better than many other investments and represents a low risk secure pension.

– Ross Buchanan

Steven Meyen

Ross Buchanan, winner of the 2020 RDS-Teagasc Farm Forestry Award, has an innovative approach to farm forestry that offers major potential for on-farm business development. His ability to integrate forestry and agriculture provides a good template for many farmers and other landowners.

Ross manages 48ha of diverse forest, planted in 2006 on an outlying farm in Glentogher, in the heart of the Inishowen Peninsula. Being from traditional Donegal sheep farming stock, Ross continues to farm with his father on the main holding, over 30km away. Prior to establishing his forest, Ross carefully considered his farm resources before deciding on an optimum mix of enterprises for the overall family farm.

He set clear objectives and designed a 24-ha farm forest in Glentogher to cater for both economic and environmental goals. It comprises 14ha of broadleaves and 10ha of diverse conifers, with 11 species. Approximately 40% of the forest contains spruce. Within the spruce area, species such as Scots pine and birch were established on small hills for biodiversity and landscape enhancement. "Sitka spruce is an important component as it will deliver medium-term economic returns," Ross says. "These returns will provide the resources to support our future farm plans."

Recreational plans

Ross is investigating how best to develop the strong on-farm recreational potential, making best use of the beautiful natural landscape features present on the farm. The farm boasts an ancient oak woodland with a stunning 10-metre waterfall. The oak wood is traversed by an ancient road, once an important link between the monastic sites of Donagh and Derry. Open areas have been retained, offering great views over Inishowen and out to the North Atlantic. Ross has designed a series of walkways as part of forest road-building activity.



Ross Buchanan removes the coniferous nurse trees to allow quality oak to form the main crop.

Future plans include the addition of log cabins and interpretive trails that will illuminate the fascinating history of the farm. "The cabin venture will be depend on arranging reasonable insurance cover," Ross says. "The current high insurance premiums charged inhibit access to some of the more interesting parts of Ireland to tourists and locals alike."



Ross Buchanan established 48 hectares of diverse forest in 2006, with 11 coniferous and broadleaved species.

Management approaches

For Ross, forests and timber are 'in the blood'. His great-grandfather on his mother's side operated a sawmill in Carndonagh. His paternal grandfather emigrated from Ireland to North America in the 1920s and worked as a lumberjack in Alaska. Ross studied forestry at UCD and currently works as a forestry consultant.

Ross established the farm forest in 2006, using a range of silvicultural approaches, thereby putting his experience working as a forest manager in Scotland to good use.

A substantial area is planted with a mixture of oak, Scots pine and European larch. He is currently in the process of removing the conifers while selecting and shaping the better oak trees.



Ross Buchanan measuring tree height with a clinometer in his award winning forest, with Martin Regan (left), Forest Service and Steven Meyen, Teagasc.

He recently completed constructing an extensive forest road network. This improved access allows him now to carry out a pre-commercial manual selective thinning of the spruce parcels. The next phase will be to prune selected trees to improve future timber quality.

In another area, he planted a mix of Norway spruce with numerous pockets of oak. The spruce provides side shelter to the young oak. The spruce will be removed gradually as a cash crop so that this area can develop into an oak woodland over time.

Some good advice

Ross strongly believes that it is a good idea to have a forest on the farm. He says, “Many farms in Ireland have suitable ground for planting for a range of objectives from production through to biodiversity and/or recreation. The premium offers a great short-term income that can be focussed on expanding other parts of the farm enterprise while the forest itself represents a source of growing capital. The farm forest in Europe is seen as a bank account where some timber can be felled when machinery is required for the farm.”



Steven Meyen,
Forestry Development
Department
Teagasc

He finishes with a note of caution: “Owners don’t always understand the value of forestry and what the timber is going to be worth. Too many sell off the farm forest once premiums are up allowing someone else to realise the value of the timber for future rotations.”

For more information on the RDS Teagasc Farm Forestry Award visit: www.teagasc.ie/forestry.