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Forest certification – the case for a national strategy

Mechteld Schuller

Forestry has been receiving some unfavourable comment in recent years and it is sometimes difficult for growers to provide assurances to wider society that their woodlands are sustainably managed.

Forest certification is a useful tool for forest owners to provide independent verification that their woodlands are sustainably managed and that all environmental requirements are being met. It could also assist in assuring society that forest biodiversity concerns are being addressed.

The introduction of the European Green Deal and its requirement to reduce chemical use by 50%, will lead to further record keeping requirements for forest owners and managers. Employing forest certification systems will also assist in this regard, as adhering to certification requirements, requires reducing and ultimately eliminating chemical use.

Fortunately chemical use in forestry is relatively low due to its very nature. Pest and vegetation control is generally only required in the establishment phase and where chemical use is required, it generally is only applied as spot applications.

As there are no entirely harmless pesticides or herbicides, risk mitigation is key. This is very much recognised in the documentary requirements for forest certification, which centre around justification and recording of pesticide use as well as the implementation of mitigation measures set out in the Integrated Pest Management Strategy (IPMS) and Environmental and Social Risk Assessments (ESRAs).

The development of such detailed documentation is time and resource consuming and subject to regular updates and would be best addressed in co-operation with others, rather than at an individual owner, company or consultant level.

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Forest certification does require meticulous record keeping, which can be quite onerous, and the need for annual external audits can make the certification process prohibitively costly for individual owners, consultants and companies.

The need for a National Certification Co-ordinator was one of the key conclusions of the DAFM funded Pilot project 'Services to Develop a Group Certification Template for Private Forest Owners', in addition to the need for national certification expertise.

There is now a growing interest in the potential for a national co-ordinated response to assist foresters and owner groups in achieving forest certification and a growing view that dual-certification might be the most cost-effective and logical way forward.

For forest owners to buy into forest certification, a co-ordinated and cost-effective approach to group certification must be put in place, together with a vision for forest certification at both sectoral and government level, including supportive measures.

Two Irish national certification standards were endorsed by their international parent organisations back in 2011 and 2012 respectively and their mandatory revisions are now overdue. The PEFC Irish Forest Certification Standard (IFCS) underwent interim revision in 2014 and has now commenced the mandatory revision process. The Technical Working Group, consisting of balanced stakeholder representation and tasked with revising the IFCS standard, have been working to produce a revised standard, which then will be submitted for public consultation. The Irish Forest Stewardship Standard now also requires revision.

There is clearly a need for a long-term co-ordinated plan for forest certification, that is backed by sectoral and government support and national policy. In order to achieve economies of scale in forest certification, the wider sector must take the initiative and start working together by embracing certification as a common goal and setting up systems and structures to achieve these aims. Such co-operation and co-ordination will require vision and leadership and will benefit the wider sector into the future.



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