

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## REVIEW OF FOREST POLICY FOR THE HERITAGE COUNCIL



Sasha Bosbeer, Huw Denman, Jerry Hawe, David Hickie, Paddy Purser,  
and Patrick Walsh

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This review of Heritage Council forest policy was carried out by a team of six foresters and ecologists at the request of Woodlands of Ireland. The team was asked to review topics including:

- Forest policy, legislation, certification and incentives
- Species and site suitability
- Forest products and silvicultural systems
- Biodiversity
- Recreation
- Protection of water and soil
- Climate change
- International trends and markets, national trends and future forestry potential
- Forestry and the landscape
- Public perception and attitudes toward forestry
- Training and research needs  
(See further Appendix 1).

The review was carried out by collating and analysing published, grey, and oral information relevant to forest management in Ireland. The emphasis was on science-based knowledge, but the team also drew on its considerable collective experience of working in the forestry sector. Submissions were sought from all interested parties, and a public meeting was held to present draft conclusions followed by discussion.

In the last decade, there has been a growing international trend toward recognition of all the functions forests provide to society. The multifunctional approach is the dominant thread in this review. Services forests provide to Irish society include not only timber and fuel, but space for outdoor recreation, landscapes to enjoy, and birdsong to hear. Cultural heritage, carbon sequestration, and conservation of species are other functions provided by forests. All of these functions deserve to be recognised and valued appropriately.

Irish forests are currently dominated by exotic conifer plantations with simple structures that are now part of our heritage, along with broadleaf plantations, native

woodland, grassland, and heath: the landscape created through millennia of land clearance, farming, building, and afforestation. This review supports an increase in the area of forest cover of the type suitable to the site and objectives, with strategic planning of forests considering biodiversity, ecological networks, and product transport. These forests should be managed by qualified professionals following multi-resource management plans. Irish forests need to be protected from both biotic threats and stress caused by climate change.

Six major themes are considered: multifunctional forestry, forest strategy, management of forests, making forests sustainable for owners, legislation and authorities, and training and research.

The main recommendations are:

1. A new National Strategic Plan for Forestry founded on the principles of multifunctional forestry.
2. Continued investment in the expansion of Ireland's forest estate, especially broadleaves and native woodlands, with a review of incentives and administration which support this expansion.
3. Increased delivery of multifunctional forest management, integrating social, environmental, and economic functions of forests on a national scale.
4. A new economic valuation system, which values the ecological, social, and economic functions of forests.
5. Retention of State forests in public ownership.
6. Action on threats to Ireland's forests such as invasive plants, animals, and plant diseases.
7. Planning flexibility in forestry in the landscape and in silvicultural systems to enhance resilience and resistance to stresses arising from climate change.

This is an exciting time in the development of Irish forests and forestry and for the many different services they provide to society. It is important that the appropriate regulatory and policy framework is put in place to facilitate this development to ensure the realisation of a shared vision for the future.