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## Forest Sector Response to NPWS Draft Document

### “Hen Harrier Conservation and the Forestry Sector in Ireland”

November 2015

Forests cover just 10.6% of Ireland’s land area, the lowest forest cover in Europe where 42% of the EU land area is forested. The Forest Sector comprising the growing, harvesting and processing of forest products contributes €2.2 billion to the Irish economy and creates over 12,000 jobs. Many of these jobs are in rural areas and the Forest Sector plays an important role in supporting rural life in Ireland. To support the long-term sustainable supply of round wood for the Forestry Sector, it is national policy to increase forest area to 18% by 2046.

Irish forests will sequester in excess of 4.8 million tonnes of carbon by 2020, making an important contribution towards meeting national greenhouse gas reduction commitments. Over 20% of the public forest estate is managed primarily for biodiversity, making our forests an important habitat for a wide variety of species. Forests are used increasingly for recreation and it is estimated that there are in excess of 18 million recreational visits to Irish forests each year.

The Forest Sector has been given access to a draft document published by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, “*Hen Harrier Conservation and the Forestry Sector in Ireland*” at a consultative meeting in March 2015 in Dublin as part of a draft threat response plan for Hen Harrier conservation in Ireland. The Forest Sector in Ireland remains of the firm belief that responsible forest management practices and Hen Harrier conservation are wholly compatible. The Forest Sector wish to outline their grave concerns with the proposed

measures described within the NPWS draft document, and also offer practical solutions to permit sustainable forest practices and encourage Hen Harrier conservation.

Currently there are six Special Protected Areas (SPAs) for Hen Harrier conservation distributed across Ireland amounting to a total area of some 167,117 hectares of land. Since 2011, and despite assurances given at the time of designation of these areas, bans on afforestation have been implemented and restrictions have been imposed on forest operations during the bird breeding season, April to August annually, within the SPAs through the use of Hen Harrier “red zones”.

The Forest Sector has examined the conservation measures that exist both in Northern Ireland and in Scotland for Hen Harrier conservation, and note that no bans are in place on afforestation and that neither jurisdiction operates a system of red zones which appears unique to Ireland. The Forest Sector urgently requests a review of the policy associated with Hen Harrier and forestry in Ireland and proposes the measures below, which we believe will benefit Hen Harrier conservation in Ireland and permit sustainable forestry practices to continue.

The Forest Sector questions whether the NPWS policy to designate areas for Hen Harriers conservation is protecting the bird, when you consider that the breeding population has decreased by over 18% within the SPAs. This decrease in the breeding population is not reflected nationally, where the breeding population has remained relatively static. The conservation policy of designating Hen Harrier areas is not functioning and needs to be re-evaluated.

### **Removal of the Ban on Afforestation and Replacement with an Assessment Process**

Currently, and since 2011 there has been a ban imposed on afforestation within the six SPAs designated for Hen Harrier conservation. The afforestation ban has marginalised stakeholders and has unnecessarily damaged the perception of conservation, with many local landowners who see the sterilisation of their land and loss of livelihood their reward for protecting the Hen Harrier.

The NPWS document mentions imposing a further seven regional zones for Hen Harrier conservation distributed throughout the countryside and proposes developing “afforestation thresholds” in these areas. Imposing bans and restrictions on afforestation significantly diminishes the value to the landowner of all lands within these areas. We believe that not only will a ban on afforestation offer no benefit to Hen Harrier conservation, there is a genuine concern that this initiative may lead to the persecution of the Hen Harrier. The Forest Sector proposes that the ban on afforestation should be removed immediately and replaced with an assessment process, which would be designed to assess the impacts of any new planting on Hen Harrier conservation and habitat availability in the area. The assessment, operated by the Department within an agreed framework and an agreed set of measures, could deliver a reasonable level of afforestation proportionate to any risks identified to the species. The assessment could consider

landscape factors, such as timing and scale of nearby clear-felling activities, and other locally suitable habitat available for Hen Harrier. This would ensure a landscape designed to be continuously compatible with Hen Harrier conservation requirements and allow afforestation to continue at a reasonable level.

Removal of the ban and replacement with an assessment process would return the value of the land to the landowner; reduce the risk of persecution to the species while permitting a reasonable level of afforestation to proceed and protect the Hen Harrier. We call for the afforestation ban to be lifted at the earliest opportunity and replaced with an agreed assessment process.

### **Removal of the Hen Harrier Red Zones and replacement with Inter-Agency Funded Annual Surveys.**

There are approximately 126 red zones designated for Hen Harrier located within the six SPAs nationwide. These are areas where restrictions are placed on forest operations during the bird breeding season, from April 1<sup>st</sup> to August 15<sup>th</sup> annually. At present, there is a five year national survey for Hen Harrier and these surveys are used to estimate national population trends of the species and determine nest locations used to establish red zones within the SPA.

The Forest Sector has examined the conservation measures in operation in our nearest neighbours, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Neither jurisdiction operates a system of red zones for Hen Harrier and both undertake an annual survey of the species using a combination of trained wildlife wardens and non-governmental organisations. The Forest Sector note that the National Hen Harrier survey in Ireland in 2015 was undertaken by a combination of The Golden Eagle Trust, The Irish Raptor Study Group and Birdwatch Ireland.

The red zone approach is designed to protect nesting Hen Harrier from potential disturbance from forest operations, yet there are far more red zones than nesting Hen Harrier within each SPA. New red zones can be constantly added during the five years between national surveys, but none are removed during this time.

The Forest Sector proposes that the five year National survey of Hen Harrier be replaced with an inter-agency funded annual survey of the species on a five year trial basis, until the next scheduled National survey in 2020. This would deliver much more accurate conservation information on the species on a yearly basis, rather than five yearly intervals. With annual nest locations provided to the Forest Sector by the Departments, there would no longer be any need for red zones. Hen Harrier protection measures and agreed buffer zones could be applied to actual nest sites annually, thus affording protection precisely where it is required to benefit Hen Harrier conservation and allowing forest operations to proceed safely in other areas known to be absent of Hen Harrier. This approach we feel

would be a good example of proportionate regulation, which would apply restrictions to forest operations only to where the bird is nesting, coupled with the conservation benefits of having annual figures on Hen Harrier numbers. The value of the annual survey approach, both for Hen Harrier conservation purposes and for forestry operations could be assessed and reviewed at the end of this proposed five year implementation period.

**Complete Removal of the proposed new Hen Harrier Regional Zones and re-examination of the SPA concept as a conservation measure for highly mobile species such as Hen Harrier.**

Currently there are six Special Protected Areas (SPAs) for Hen Harrier conservation distributed across Ireland amounting to a total area of some 167,117 hectares of land. Since 2011, and despite assurances given at the time of designation of these areas, bans on afforestation have been implemented and restrictions have been imposed on forest operations during the bird breeding season, April to August annually within the SPAs through the use of Hen Harrier “red zones”.

The NPWS draft document proposes the implementation of a further seven regional zones for Hen Harrier conservation, where restrictions on afforestation would apply and red zones for Hen Harrier would be enforced for existing forest operations. The Forest Sector strongly opposes this initiative and remain convinced it will not deliver benefits for Hen Harrier conservation, but will impose unnecessary restrictions upon the forest sector in Ireland.

Hen Harrier numbers across Ireland between 2005 and 2010 have been described by the NPWS as broadly stable, with an estimated decline of just 6% between the surveys. Despite the national stability of the population, numbers of Hen Harrier within the designated SPAs have declined, with the birds moving to other forested landscapes outside of the SPA for breeding purposes. Despite serious restrictions being enforced on forest operations and bans on afforestation within the SPAs, Hen Harrier numbers have decreased in the SPAs, yet the numbers of Hen Harriers have increased in other non-designated areas, where no restrictions or bans have been enforced.

The Forest Sector is of the view that the concept of fixed protection areas for highly mobile species such as Hen Harrier should be reviewed. It would appear that the SPA concept is not delivering protection to the Hen Harrier as numbers have declined within the SPAs, yet with a stable population nationally the reality appears to be that the bird has simply selected alternative areas to breed and that population numbers of the species remain broadly unthreatened. The Forest Sector utterly rejects the proposal of seven new protection areas for Hen Harrier and requests that this approach be dropped immediately. Furthermore, the Forest Sector remains genuinely concerned that if this new approach is enacted, and seven new areas are designated for Hen Harrier protection with associated restrictions on afforestation and forest operations in place, that this policy would likely lead

to increased persecution of the Hen Harrier and threaten the conservation of the species in Ireland.

Persecution, as a factor affecting the distribution, abundance and productivity of Hen Harriers, needs to be recognised and addressed if the conservation status of the Hen Harrier is to improve.

### **Review of Areas of Biodiversity Enhancement and Examination of Landscape Level Solutions to benefit Hen Harrier Conservation.**

The Forest Sector holds a strong view that current forestry practices are wholly compatible with Hen Harrier conservation. However, within the current systems there are opportunities to make improvements to benefit Hen Harrier conservation. Areas of biodiversity enhancement (ABE) at both the afforestation and reforestation phases of forestry could be addressed to provide improved habitat opportunities to benefit Hen Harrier conservation. One simple solution might be to remove the requirement for broadleaf planting in ABEs within forest areas known to be important for Hen Harrier, and instead leave this as open unplanted land for the purposes of Hen Harrier habitat creation.

Hen Harriers are known to favour second rotation pre-thicket forests for breeding purposes and have been shown to actively select this habitat, even when other favourable habitat types are available within the landscape. Landscape level planning could ensure that forests are felled in a scheduled manner and scale, which would ensure sufficient availability of this habitat to Hen Harrier. Such planning approaches could deliver solutions for Hen Harrier conservation, such that a rolling forest landscape is delivered, ensuring a continuous mix of open lands and optimising the pre-thicket habitat and felled areas known to be useful habitats for Hen Harrier conservation on an ongoing basis.

### **Complete Removal of the Proposed Maximum Upper Threshold of 40% for Total Forest Cover within Special Protected Areas for Hen Harrier.**

The draft NPWS document proposes that establishing a maximum threshold of 40% for total forest cover in the landscape within the SPAs could benefit Hen Harrier conservation. Forest cover within the seven regional zones ranges from 27% to 51%; this is at odds with the proposed maximum upper threshold of 40%. It should also be noted that the forest age class distribution within the regional zones shows that 14% of the forest area is pre-thicket (less than 15 years old), which is inconsistent with some of the assumptions in the NPWS document.

The Forest Sector does not accept that this threshold is a useful benchmark for Hen Harrier conservation and questions the science behind establishing this as a target for the six SPAs

nationwide. Furthermore, with five of the six SPAs above the 40% threshold for total forest cover, achieving this target would require extensive deforestation in these areas with associated impacts on carbon, landscape and amenity values. In addition, significant economic impacts and difficulty would accrue to local landowners and the local rural economies through the implementation of this benchmark, which again, the Forest Sector does not believe will in fact benefit Hen Harrier conservation.

Potential financial estimates of implementing the reduced forest cover, including income foregone from afforestation premiums, loss in future timber revenue, restoration costs and costs of carbon foregone are estimated to be in excess of €215 million. Much of this revenue is recycled through local rural communities, contractors, landowners and farmers where there is little other alternative source of income available.

### **Thorough Investigation of Other Issues Relevant to Hen Harrier Conservation in Ireland.**

The Forest Sector believes many factors impact upon Hen Harrier conservation in Ireland, ranging from prey availability for adult birds to predation; whilst adverse summer weather affects juvenile birds and nest productivity. The Forest Sector believes a thorough review of the impact of predation on nest success and viability should be produced in order to fully understand this impact on overall Hen Harrier numbers in Ireland. In Scotland, predation has been identified as one of the biggest conservation threats to the Hen Harrier and is not addressed within the NPWS document. Likewise, it is conceivable that the poor weather conditions, low temperatures and extensive rainfall at critical periods during the bird breeding season may have had an adverse effect on Hen Harrier productivity and numbers this year. These could be the driving factors of Hen Harrier numbers decline in Ireland and focus should be placed on them and removed from the Forest Sector.

In addition, there may be opportunities to convert some forested areas through restoration programmes and appropriate recompensing mechanisms into natural wet heath and bog habitats, known to be favourable to Hen Harrier.

### **Conclusion**

Successful conservation of the Hen Harrier in Ireland requires effective and meaningful consultation of all affected parties to ensure their buy-in to the process. In addition it requires practical and effective conservation solutions which are balanced, well informed and proportionate to the risks involved. Without this in place, the process is unlikely to have a successful outcome. The Forest Sector welcomes the opportunity to engage and

shape future of sustainable forest practices, which are wholly compatible with Hen Harrier conservation.