



FORESTRY LICENCE EMERGENCY

The forest sector is in a state of emergency. There is a backlog of approximately 2,500 licences that are pending a decision by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine. This is in addition to the nearly 500 licences that are under appeal.

The Forestry Act 2014 specifies that “it shall be the objective of the Minister to ensure that every application under section 17 for a licence (a “felling licence application”) is determined within a period of 4 months beginning on the date of receipt by the Minister of the application”.

The reality for farmers is very different. Farmers are facing delays of up to 2 years, and in some instances significantly longer, to get licences to manage their forests. This is unacceptable and the delays are jeopardising:

- the commercial value of their forest, forcing many farmers into a non-thin policy that will devalue of their crop;
- 12,000 jobs and businesses in the forest sector that have been built up over the last 40 years to support the expansion of the private forest sector; not to mention
- jobs in the construction sector as domestic timber supplies tightens and costs increase.

Farmers are very frustrated and are disengaging from forestry as a viable land use option, due to the excessive bureaucracy, ineffective administration and spiraling costs associated with planting and managing forests.

It is estimated that the afforestation programme for 2020 will be less than 2,500 hectares. This is only 30% of the 8,000 hectares annual afforestation target set out in the Climate Action Plan.

If the system is not made more farmer friendly, the proposals set out in the *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future* and the Climate Action Plan will not be achieved.

IFA is proposing the following 6 emergency measures: -

1. The system must ensure that **no farmer has to wait longer than 4 months for a forestry licence** as set out in the Forestry Act 2014 Section 18(1), irrespective of the application size.
2. Forest road and felling/thinning licence applications that are in the system for more than this period (four months) should be **automatically approved under an amnesty provision**.
3. **Amend the Forestry Act 2014 to introduce new exemptions** for activities, such as forest road construction and thinning operations, that do not present a significant landscape change and present a low risk from an environmental perspective.
4. **Review the current appropriate assessment (AA) screening process, associated rules and thresholds.** In particular, introduce a threshold, that forests less than 15 hectares, should be exempt from the AA screening requirement. Only forests over 15 hectares would be screened to determine if they need to submit a Natura Impact Statement (NIS), while forests over 50 hectares must submit a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as is currently the situation.
5. A **cost-based planning support grant should be introduced**, as referenced in the Mackinnon report, to assist with increased costs and requirements associated with applying for a felling and afforestation licence.
6. The **appointment of an external Project Manager** within the Department to implement the operational changes recommended in the Mackinnon report to develop an appropriate and effective licensing system.

Ends.

November 2020