

The Future is Forestry

A MANIFESTO FOR TREES AND TIMBER IN NORTHERN IRELAND

CONFOR NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY ELECTION MANIFESTO 2022



Time to seize the opportunity for trees

James Hamilton Stubber, Northern Ireland Chair of Confor: promoting forestry and wood

In Northern Ireland, the creation of productive forestry – and the annual rate of other tree planting – have fallen well behind activity seen in the rest of the United Kingdom.

In England, Wales and Scotland, governments have all looked afresh at increasing tree planting in order to combat climate change, create green jobs for rural communities and use more wood in construction. Despite some recent encouraging signs, forestry policy in Northern Ireland has not kept pace with emerging thinking.

Forestry and woodlands in general are not considered seriously within any future rural land use policies in Northern Ireland, demonstrated by the fact that they were mentioned only in passing in the recent Draft Environmental Strategy.

In both Scotland and England comprehensive strategies, setting out long-term visions for trees, woodland and productive forestry, have been published and endorsed. Here in Northern Ireland, the most recent strategy was published in 2006 with a target for the expansion of tree cover to 12% by 2056. Ever since, the annual level of planting to achieve this has been woefully short of the 2,000 hectares per annum required and the current tree cover of 8.6% remains not only the lowest in the UK but amongst the lowest in Europe.

Northern Ireland's most recent modest target, set within the Forests for our Future initiative, announced by Edwin Poots, Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in 2020, is to plant 900 hectares of new woodland annually from 2019 to 2029, in line with recommendations by the independent Climate



Change Committee. Currently, only 200 to 300 hectares of new woodland are being planted each year.

This is occurring in the face of a growing understanding of the environmental, economic and social benefits of tree planting, the last of which was perfectly demonstrated during the pandemic when huge numbers of people rediscovered the beauty of our woodlands as they took their daily exercise.

Northern Ireland is simply not doing enough and needs a refreshed strategy to put forests and woodlands at the heart of rural policy-making. This must not be impaired by the lack of joined-up thinking or the different agendas currently being adopted within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Northern Ireland has recently signed up to the global wood manifesto Time for Timber, but wood use is only part of the story; we need to plant more trees, make it both economically viable and simpler to do so and use more wood in construction.

This manifesto sets out a five-point plan of how we can achieve this and offers case studies from the forestry industry in Northern Ireland. They demonstrate why our elected representatives must seize this opportunity and ensure the development of a clear strategy – and why collaboration between the departments charged with delivering it is so crucial.

Radical action to hit planting target

In its 2019 report, Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland, the Committee on Climate Change said: *“The cost-effective path to meeting the UK’s legal carbon emissions targets requires...afforestation of 15,000 hectares per year across the UK.”*

It said Northern Ireland should plant 900 hectares per year - but noted current planting fell well short of this, and of the average rate targeted in the Forestry Strategy.

In March 2020, Edwin Poots backed the Committee’s 900-hectare annual target. However, the UK-wide tree planting target had doubled by then – to 30,000 hectares per year – while planting in Northern Ireland is flat at 200-300 hectares each year.

Industry is positive about Minister Poots’ promotion of forestry, and his Small Woodland Scheme to encourage planting. However, areas of land planted by the scheme are too small to make a real impact. Radical action is needed to get even close to 900 hectares annually.

This should include a new Forestry Strategy, and a review of barriers to tree planting and the application/approval processes - similar to that conducted by James Mackinnon in his native Scotland, and later in the Republic of Ireland.

Increased planting can help tackle climate change (trees soak up carbon as they grow) and provide more home-grown timber for construction. The UK faces a ‘timber gap’ from the late 2030s and with global demand soaring, prices are set to continue rising and more wood will have to be imported. The UK imports 80% of the timber it uses and

must take responsibility to grow more of its own. Scotland leads the way, while Northern Ireland lags behind.

When Minister Poots launched Forests for our Future in 2020, he said: *“Tree planting is one of the most simple and low-cost options open to us (to mitigate carbon emissions) and is a great step in the right direction. Furthermore, planting more trees will make a significant contribution to Northern Ireland’s sustainable economic growth - the sector generates about £60 million per annum from timber production, sustaining around 1000 rural jobs.”*

In February 2022, promoting a global timber manifesto, he linked wood use to tree planting: *“Supply of renewable timber from our local forests for commercial processing into high-quality and high-value building products generates significant economic activity in predominantly rural areas. Expanding this high-value market for locally-grown timber is an important element to underpin the forestry expansion programme here in Northern Ireland necessary to address our climate change challenges and deliver the wider biodiversity and health and well-being benefits that forests and woodlands provide.”*

This is welcome, but Northern Ireland must match words with actions - and put strategies and policies in place to push up planting rates. The UK and Northern Ireland targets (30,000 hectares and 900 hectares per year by 2024-5) have no chance of being hit without acting on the recommendations in this manifesto.

New woodland creation in Northern Ireland

2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
208	200	240	200	280

New woodland creation across the United Kingdom

	England	Scotland	Wales	N Ireland	Total
2018-19	1,420	11,210	520	240	13,400
2019-20	2,330	10,860	80	200	13,460
2020-21	2,180	10,660	290	280	13,410

Figures (in hectares) are rounded up so the totals might not add up exactly

CASE STUDY

RJ Woodland Services Ltd

Ross Jamieson, Director,
RJ Woodland Services Ltd

My business carries out all aspects of forestry - planting, management and harvesting - and we have 12 staff working across Northern Ireland. We planted around 100 hectares (ha) of new woodland in the winter of 2020-21, and about 80ha in 2021-22, plus about 30ha under the new Small Woodland Scheme.

The challenge is that forestry is not promoted strongly enough as a land use option. Many landowners and farmers think forestry means state-owned forestry - they don't realise there is an opportunity to plant trees themselves, supported by the private forestry industry.

That means we tend to plant small patches of woodland, which have little value when trees mature and are ready to harvest - feeding the impression that forestry has no value.

At scale, it does have value - both economic and environmental - but it's hard to shift that perception. So it's seen as a land use of last resort.

We need to shift that perception, and the Northern Ireland Forest Service has a big role to play in showing the benefits of forestry. At the moment, there is little linkage between planting trees, using wood and climate change.

There is also little understanding that grants are available for tree planting, which can be a profitable investment. The Forest Service attends the big agricultural shows and hand out leaflets, but there is little beyond that.

Minister Edwin Poots' Small Woodland Grant scheme is mainly environmental planting and won't deliver any timber. We need environmental planting AND wood-producing forests.

If we can get people to put schemes forward, I find the application process is straightforward - but the approvals system can be slow and cumbersome.

We need to find the right places for planting. Good-quality agricultural land will ideally remain for food production, with marginal upland ground planted. However, in most cases, ground deemed suitable is the upland farmer's best ground and can't be set aside for forestry.

Relaxing rules on priority habitat would make it simpler to get planting schemes through. This season we had six mixed commercial woodlands approved, including two sites (18ha and 9ha) for the same landowner in Co Fermanagh, planted with 60% of Sitka/Norway Spruce, 15% Scots Pine and 25% native broadleaves. Another site for the same landowner was refused on the basis of priority habitat - small areas of heather and cotton grass.

We need consistency - and more flexibility. It tends to be a flat yes or no to a scheme and the appeals process is complex and lengthy. I'd like more negotiation between Forest Service staff, and landowners who want to plant. That means early conversations - to discuss the mix of species, boundaries of a scheme and environmental considerations.

It's about the Forest Service working with farmers and landowners - and the private forestry sector - and not against them. We really must promote forestry as a positive land use option that is good for our economy and our environment.





CASE STUDY

Balcas Timber Ltd

**Nigel Manley, Supply Manager,
Balcas Timber Ltd**

Balcas employs more than 370 people and processed around 630,000 tonnes of round timber in 2021 at its factory near Enniskillen. Nothing is wasted; Balcas takes in the whole of the tree and uses it all.

Balcas cuts wood for use in construction, for domestic and agricultural fencing and for wooden pallets. It uses the sawmill co-products to generate its own electricity, whilst waste heat from generation is captured and used in the business's timber drying kilns, and in the manufacture of wood pellets for heating fuel.

More than 50% of raw material comes from the Republic of Ireland, which has developed its forestry industry very effectively. Northern Ireland is well behind. Overall, Balcas would really like to see more timber grown throughout the island that can help guarantee future timber supplies to its own factories and also to other wood processors.

The Northern Ireland Forest Service provides about

one-third of Balcas's timber. It's an important and valued supplier to the business, but also contributes enormous social, economic, and environmental benefits throughout the north of Ireland. However, forestry and wood processing is a very long-term business and we would like to see more planting happening now in Northern Ireland, in the public and private sectors, to secure long-term supplies.

This means giving farmers and landowners clear information about the benefits of planting trees - AND giving them confidence in the application and approval processes. It is currently too complex and difficult - and as a result, many applicants drop out before planting a single tree. For those who do stick with it, the process takes far too long.

Balcas is encouraged by the positive attitude towards forestry shown in the recent past by Minister Poots - but Northern Ireland needs all parties to understand that planting trees and then harvesting them for wood products is a win-win for both the economy and environment. In return, firms like Balcas provide large numbers of jobs and support the local economy (in Balcas's case, the Enniskillen area), and the products Balcas makes are locking up carbon and supporting Northern Ireland's climate change ambitions.

There remains opposition to planting wood-producing forests and it's important for Balcas and other businesses, supported by Confor as the trade body, to get across the message that this industry really matters - to our economy and our environment. We are missing an opportunity and we can, and must, do better.

CASE STUDY

Scottish Woodlands Ltd

Dessy Henry, Operational Director
with Scottish Woodlands Ltd

The challenge is a lack of financial incentive to plant on poorer-quality ground - marginal areas between good productive agriculture and boggy, rocky, unplantable land. The best land is rightly reserved for agriculture, but annual payments are much higher for good land than poor. Better incentives would see more trees planted on poorer, rushy hill land. Weak incentives mean very little planting, so Northern Ireland is unlikely to get near 900 hectares (ha) of new woodland every year in the decade to 2029.

Edwin Poots has made a difference with the Small Woodland Scheme, but it's tiny areas - and forestry is still low priority. People want to farm, and live on the land; it's rare for tree planting to be in their thinking. We must change that mindset. Scottish Woodlands was involved in the largest planting scheme in Northern Ireland for years, 45ha near Bushmills by the North Antrim coast. An individual was retiring from dairy farming and diversifying into glamping. He wanted to plant trees as an investment and for carbon benefits. He planted mainly productive forestry but the main push is for broadleaves. We need a mix - including commercial species to deliver a timber crop, and income for the landowner. We need to grow more timber to build sustainably and meet our climate change ambitions. Carbon benefits are better understood, but ultimately, it's about the bottom line.

Land is expensive and to push up planting, landowners need good reasons to do it. At the moment, the financial incentives aren't there. We must change that, and allow landowners and farmers to put lower-value land to good use - to benefit them, the environment and the rural economy.

CASE STUDY

Premier Woodlands Ltd

John Hetherington, Managing
Director of Premier Woodlands Ltd

Premier Woodlands is an indigenous woodland management company celebrating 30 years in business this year.

I remember, about 20-25 years ago the private sector was planting around 800-900 hectares of new woodland each year in Northern Ireland - with positive and active support from the Northern Ireland Forest Service.

In one example, Premier was able to plant a new woodland of more than 1000 hectares.

This was largely down to the Forest Service encouraging and supporting the private sector as grant aid was a lot lower than the current planting grant levels.

One of the main obstacles to increasing levels of tree planting is how 'priority habitats' are defined and interpreted by Forest Service staff. A lot of non-improved grassland or grazing land will be assessed as a 'priority habitat' and therefore ineligible for tree planting - although such land is not particularly scarce or rare, with hundreds of thousands of hectares in Northern Ireland.

A balance must be struck between competing environmental interests, but the current balance means a presumption against tree planting on non-improved grassland or grazing land. All recent Agricultural Ministers have failed to direct the Forest Service to interpret the 'priority habitat' in a less stringent way.

What is more important - more tree planting to help reduce carbon dioxide and mitigate climate change with slightly reduced areas of 'priority habitat' - or to allow climate change to negatively alter the 'priority habitat' anyway?

FIVE-POINT PLAN FOR FORESTRY AND WOOD IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1 CREATE A NEW FOREST STRATEGY

The current strategy is more than 25 years old. The Northern Ireland Executive should ask the Forest Service to produce a new 10-year strategy based on the economic, environmental and social value of forestry and wood processing. This should be prepared collaboratively by the public and private sectors, then debated and endorsed by the Assembly.

2 HIT TREE PLANTING TARGETS

We ask all political parties to support, with funding and political will, the target of 900 hectares of new woodland creation each year until 2029 - the target set by the Climate Change Committee to help meet Northern Ireland's net zero ambitions. At least 50 % should be wood-producing trees to provide timber to help decarbonise construction.

4 ENSURE THE SYSTEMS ARE WORKING

The Forest Service should work with industry to ensure the application and approval processes for creating new woodland are working effectively - including how priority habitats are defined and interpreted. It should consider a 'Mackinnon Review', which looked at barriers to tree planting in Scotland, and later the Republic of Ireland.

3 PROMOTE THE BENEFITS OF TREE PLANTING

The Forest Service should actively promote opportunities for tree planting to landowners and farmers - as a viable land use option to be considered as part of a diverse rural business. This should include improving financial incentives to develop marginal land for tree planting, and stressing the economic and environmental benefits it delivers.

5 PROMOTE GREATER USE OF WOOD

More timber must be used in construction to decarbonise the built environment - both in new buildings and retrofitting existing buildings. The new Forestry Strategy should include clear links between tree planting and wood use, and targets on using home-grown wood to build on Ministerial support for the *Time for Timber* global wood use manifesto.

THE FUTURE IS FORESTRY



Confor is the voice of the forestry and wood-using industry and represents businesses from all along the supply chain - from nurseries growing young trees, through companies designing, planting, managing and harvesting forests to wood processors and users.

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