

Planting and optimism grow but Brexit brings uncertainty

There has been some improvement in optimism and planting rates in Northern Ireland in the last year but this is starting from a relatively low level. With nearly 12 months without an Assembly in Stormont, the Northern Ireland Forest Service has been working to continue to support and administer new applications as well as dealing with the uncertainties of Brexit.

Planting The FES Scheme has been popular, with 410ha planted so far, with this year 38 applications received for 350ha. The planting target for this RDP programme has now been doubled to 1200ha. It is hoped and assumed that FES will continue post Brexit, potentially under national funding alone.

There are some concerns that a significant percentage of proposed schemes are declined, with approximately 150ha turned down last year. A variety of reasons have been suggested including proposed costs being higher than the FC standard cost lists, failure to fully identify constraints and in some cases owners simply withdrawing the schemes.



John Hetherington of Premier Woodlands recently planted a new productive woodland of nearly 40ha near Garvagh, which is one of the largest new commercial woodlands in Northern Ireland in recent years. The site was mainly improved grassland, with significant area of rushes. Approximately half the site (17has) was planted with Sitka spruce, with Lodgepole Pine used as a nurse crop in an intimate mix in some areas. Picture shows birch/alder ending at excluded deep peat area (photo Premier Woodlands)

Brexit

Brexit is a major issue for Northern Ireland and the lack of an Assembly has made discussions challenging. Confor's Northern Ireland Chairman James Hamilton Stubber and representative Andrew Heald, have held a number of meetings with key stakeholders to identify the main challenges and share the concerns of processors, growers and agents.

Biosecurity

Plant health controls is a recurring issue, particularly as there are no major tree nurseries in Northern Ireland, so the majority of plants are imported from Ireland. However, the conversations and proposals in other parts of the UK is to significantly restrict the importation of plants from Europe, Confor has repeatedly raised the concerns as to how this could impact new planting in Ireland. There appears to be no appetite for a return to a hard border, so one

suggestion has been to recognise the island of Ireland as one plant health zone.

Timber trade

There is also significant timber and forest product movement both from Scotland to Ireland, and from Ireland to Northern Ireland. It remains unclear how this trade will be impacted, whether by tighter import controls or tariffs on cross border movement.

Workforce

The challenges of skilled labour is also significant with many people travelling across the border in both directions to work each day. The 'Common Travel Area' covers the whole of the island of Ireland and the UK, and predates any EU agreements for the free movement of people. It is assumed that this will not change regardless of any Brexit negotiations.



CONFOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND



Confor will continue to speak with the Northern Ireland Forest Service and others, to inform and hopefully influence the Brexit discussions and negotiations. We will be circulating a short survey to all members in Northern Ireland in the next few weeks, to further clarify and quantify key

Brexit challenges. If you have any specific concerns about how Brexit will impact your business do not hesitate to speak to James Hamilton Stubber or Andrew Heald.

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