

Timber can be vital resource for rural communities in Wales

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An article written by Andrew Heald, Technical Director of Confor, for the Western Mail, explaining how modern breeding techniques are helping to improve the timber yield from woodland in Wales.

Forest manager Andrew Bronwin thought his figures must be wrong: there was more than double the quantity of timber he expected. Thinning around 30 per cent of the trees in his small, 15-year-old woodland in Llangoed, Powys, had yielded more than 150 tonnes per hectare. And with current timber prices at over £50 per tonne, his five hectares (12.5 acres) had proved a gold mine.

Many farmers and landowners are put off planting trees because of the long-term investment required, as it often takes 35 years even for faster-growing trees like Sitka Spruce to be harvested. However, Llangoed might signal the future; what if you could take a first thinning from the crop in 10-15 years and harvest in 20-25 years?

Andrew Bronwin expected maybe 75 tonnes per hectare, when he thinned his trees on fertile land at Llangoed (thinning is a process of removing some trees to allow the remainder to grow taller and stronger).

So when the 150-tonne figure came back, asked it to be double-checked. This showed the original figure was correct, so he contacted Forest Research to tell them he had some exceptional, fast-growing trees.

Andrew will probably harvest the site in around a decade and predicts this could bring in 500 tonnes of timber – and at current prices, £25,000 - per hectare.

So what has changed?

Productivity from arable crops has increased massively in the last 50 years, for a variety of reasons including better farming practice, use of fertilisers and improved genetics from plant breeding. Forestry is no different.

The forests now being harvested were planted in the 1970s, with seed often collected in Oregon or Washington State. Fast forward to now and we are growing conifers from seed developed from trials of breeding two good trees together, not in North-west America but here in the UK. Often, seedlings from these 'crosses' are propagated by taking cuttings (as you would in your garden) to produce groups of young trees with identical genetics, delivering a much more consistent crop.

Quicker and better-growing trees means we can get “more from less” - more timber and fibre from the same hectare of ground and without doubt, better use of our limited land.

Some people will raise concerns about timber strength from such fast-growing trees. In reality, speed of growth and timber 'density' are among numerous factors contributing to the strength of a piece of timber. Size and frequency of knots is arguably a bigger issue, while the strength of a piece of timber is not a major issue for some large timber users - including Kronospan at Chirk in north Wales, which buys more than one million tonnes of wood every year to make panels.

There is a huge demand for wood in Wales. Clifford Jones at Ruthin said it could double or triple production of its main products - fencing and wood pellets for fuel - if it could get the raw material.

Planting rates have dropped off in Wales, partly through lack of political will and a failure to understand that modern, multi-purpose forestry can benefit our environment and communities as well as our economy. However, there is a welcome shift back towards an understanding of the need for more trees.

This makes sense when short, medium and long-term demand for wood looks certain to rise steadily. Prices for standing timber (trees not yet harvested) have risen by 30 per cent in the last year and several studies have predicted that global demand for forest products will more than double by 2050.

We need to plant more trees now to ensure we meet more demand with home-grown trees – and not increase imports when the UK is already the world’s second-largest net importer of timber after China.

We normally associate timber crops with poorer ground not best suited to agriculture, but what Llangoed shows us is that on better soils and with good quality trees, exceptional results can be achieved.

This income is tax-free, so having a timber crop to be harvested when the market is right and money is needed in other parts of a rural business is a good insurance policy for farmers or landowners. With a winter coming where hay and silage is in short supply, being able to raise additional money from a timber crop could make a big difference.

So if we can now produce fast-growing trees in Wales, with significant local demand, strong prices and a growing market, one question remains: why aren’t more farmers planting trees?

** Andrew Heald is Technical Director of Confor, which represents 1500 UK forestry and wood-using businesses. This article first appeared in The Western Mail, which publishes regular articles from Confor and other rural stakeholders in its countryside supplement on Tuesdays.*