

The forest industry is unlikely to be accused of taking a short-term view on anything; we are familiar with the concept of talking in years or decades rather than weeks or months, and policy decisions and the procedures and processes which evolve from them are rarely hasty, but rather are they collected, considered and circumspect. However, the current and emerging threats from landscape-scale plant health issues have somewhat challenged that view and has required the harvesting sector to move with pace and purpose to seize an opportunity that in the short-term will provide benefit to the entire supply chain.

There are currently many insects and diseases with potential to cause significant damage to our forest and woodlands. The three most significant are already having a pronounced effect both visually and operationally: *Phytophthora ramorum* in Larches and increasingly Noble fir and other species, *Dothistroma septosporum* (needle blight) particularly affecting Lodgepole pine in north Scotland, and Ash dieback potentially reducing Ash numbers by 95% across the UK. The potential for all three to significantly reduce the return on a landowner's investment is very real and any return that can be realised will be diminished by delay, furthering a need for prudent harvesting and targeted marketing strategies.

Euroforest Ltd, the UK's largest independent timber harvesting company, has been at the forefront in terms of developing solutions which optimise return for landowners and deliver viable raw material into the processing and energy sectors. A comparatively lean and flat management structure through the company promotes an empowerment which allows local managers to respond to opportunities with expediency.

As *Phytophthora ramorum* manifested itself across the southwest of England and south Wales, Euroforest were quick to recognise that if the value in the timber was to be realised we would need to grow both our own capacity in terms of management and supervision and at the same time develop additional capacity within the contracting sector.

Since 2014, in south Wales alone we have harvested over one million tonnes of infected material through



## Every Cloud... a plant health perspective from the harvesting sector



**Simon Wallis**  
compliance manager at Euroforest Ltd

standing sales (long and short-term contracts with both the public and private suppliers), and through our management of close market relationships this material has been delivered successfully into the processing sector. The volume and scale of these operations enabled a number of local professional contractors to confidently invest in their businesses. Harvesters, forwarders and several specialist winching units developed specifically to work the difficult steep and small-scale landscapes of the South Wales Valleys were either purchased or replaced to recover this timber. Personnel at

these businesses were provided with training opportunities and valuable new employees were attracted into an industry which too often struggles to recruit.

The discovery of *Dothistroma septosporum* needle blight (DNS) as a major disease affecting Lodgepole pine in north Scotland brought different challenges but also was accompanied by a piece of fortunate timing, coinciding with the Balcas CHP and pellet plant going into production and generating a sharp rise in demand (350,000t P.A.) for wood fuel.

For Euroforest, this meant an

increase of ca 100,000 tonnes of small round wood (SRW) per annum. Initially, 'standard' harvesting machinery was used (John Deere 1470's/1510's), which evolved into more specialist machinery and work methods in order to recover maximum fibre from the deep peat sites in Caithness/Sutherland. With the inland provenances of Lodgepole pine, the worst affected by DNB, and these crops providing only minimum brush to protect soils and aid machine floatation over this challenging ground, it was clear some development was required. Working in conjunction with Roland Forestry, we devised a system of work using a wide padded track machine with extended long reach, capable of harvesting 3-4 additional rows per drift thus maximising brush material under the machine and maximising recoverable stem-wood.

Initial concerns that DNB would have a significant effect on native pine woods has not at this time been borne out, the thinking being that

DNB has been present at low levels in Scots pine for many years and that healthy trees, although slowed in terms of growth rates, can survive the disease. The reaction of Lodgepole pine to DNB may be a symptom general poor health due to wet, poorly drained sites with very low nutrient levels, DNB may simply have hastened the inevitable.

In 2016, just as the wider significance of Ash dieback was being realised, Euroforest Ltd signed an exclusive supply contract to a new Biomass power-station in Sandwich, Kent. The plant demands 240,000 tonnes of wood fibre per annum of which 205,000 tonnes is derived from forest production including roundwood and wood chips and in return provides electricity for 50,000 homes and heat for the local science and Innovation Park. The project has provided a significant opportunity to bring back into management the deciduous woodlands of southeast England, and in this context, the only viable outlet for the millions of tonnes of infected Ash material that would otherwise have overwhelmed local firewood markets.

The National Forest Inventory estimates 44 million cubic metres of standing Ash across the UK at least eight million of which is in Southeast England. Potentially 95- 98% of these trees will become infected and die within the next five to ten years. Euroforest is leading work to salvage this material whilst it holds a merchantable value and potential return



for the landowner. We have focused on innovative ways of harvesting Ash in particularly around roadside trees where a primary objective has to be a reduction in landowner liabilities. The result of this managed and focused response has seen the proportion of Ash delivered rise from 5% in 2018 to 57% by the end of Q2 2020.

Whilst undoubtedly, Ash dieback, *Dothistroma septosporum* and *Phytophthora ramorum* will continue to play a significant part in the supply chain in the years to come, more than half an eye must be kept on the other tree pests and diseases looming. Whatever, the future brings in terms of similar challenges, the experience gained during the last eight to ten years in dealing with the situations briefly described above should allow landowners and processors to be confident that the harvesting sector will seek every opportunity to provide a little silver lining to the plant health cloud.

