

Timber mobilisation – an Irish and EU challenge

An EU delegation visits the southeast to see progress in privately owned forests



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Maximising crop yield is second nature for farmers in Ireland unless the crop is timber. Farmers have a tradition of managing annual rotation crops, but not forestry, which requires a different approach.

Forests don't provide seasonal visual indicators of maturity, such as crop ripening or signs of dieback, if harvesting isn't carried out at the appropriate time. To the uninitiated, the forest grows on, but tree crops – like all crops – respond positively to management. Without it, they underperform, resulting in the loss of income for the grower and raw material for timber processing and manufacture, as well as bioenergy.

As a result of poor management – or non-management – up to 300 million cubic metres (m³) of timber are lost to the European forest industry annually. Data produced for Forest Europe in 2009 showed that the annual increment in European forests in 2005 was 800 million m³, while harvest was 480 million m³.

Sustainable Innovative Mobilisation of Wood (SIMWOOD) – an EU initiative – estimates that total expected demand for timber will increase to 853 million m³ by 2030 in Europe with the highest demand expected in bioenergy. So, getting the

timber from the forest to the marketplace will be a major challenge in Europe, including Ireland, where private timber harvesting is also below forest yield.

SIMWOOD, established in 2013 aims to address this issue by mobilising not just the timber, but also forest owners to “promote collaborative forest management and ensure sustainable forest functions”. I have a personal interest in the project as the Irish representative on the SIMWOOD Advisory Board, which is a voluntary non-executive position.

The challenge facing the project is enormous considering the fragmented nature of forest ownership in many European countries. It is estimated that there are 16 million private forest owners in Europe. Approximately 159 million ha, or 37% of the land area is under forest, while forest-based industries provide four to five million jobs in 600,000 enterprises, with an annual turnover of €550bn.

The main challenge is motivating growers to actively manage their forests. For a significant number of forest owners, timber is no longer their first priority as recreation, nature conservation and other non-wood services take precedence.

Compatible
SIMWOOD maintains that wood and non-wood objectives are compatible as the project aims to “unlock substantial forest resources in a sustainable manner”.

The information gathering process has taken place but the major challenge of changing owners' attitudes to timber harvesting lies ahead as outlined last week when SIMWOOD held its midterm conference in Kilkenny.



The FEL project aims to increase forest revenue by harvesting and chipping branches and tree tops for wood energy.

A key element of the SIMWOOD programme will be the performance of 24 pilot projects being carried out in 11 countries across 16 model regions from Latvia to southern Portugal and from Romania to southeast Ireland.

Why Irish involvement in SIMWOOD? Dr Áine Ní Dhubhain, senior forestry lecturer at UCD, and one of the SIMWOOD leaders says that Ireland can benefit from the project.

“Many of the regions represented in the project have a much longer history of forest ownership than Ireland, yet they too face wood mobilisation challenges as an increasing number of forests are now owned by a generation who no longer live near the

forest and who have no experience of management and harvesting,” she says.

“Because of this, steps are being taken in these countries to address the wood mobilisation challenge. In this project we can learn from these initiatives and other SIMWOOD countries can also learn from what we are doing in Ireland.”



Alex Kelly,
manager,
IWP.

The SIMWOOD partners visited forests in Kilkenny and Wexford where they saw two pilot case studies cur-

rently being carried out by: ➤ Irish Wood Producers (IWP) the not-for-profit company based in New Ross; and ➤ Forest Enterprises Limited (FEL), in association with University College Dublin (UCD) Forestry.

IWP is a recent amalgamation of producer groups in Kilkenny, Wexford, Laois and Waterford with plans to expand further into Munster and Leinster.

“Membership of active forest owners has increased from 55 to 650 since the original groups were established with the help of Teagasc,” says Alex Kelly, manager, IWP. “Membership has expanded with promotion of best practice at IWP field days and other events.”

Larger groups such as IWP allow for the employment of full-time foresters. In addition to Alex, Coin Greaney is employed as the IWP forester.

However, IWP depends largely on committed volunteers who are involved in a wide range of activities, according to Alex. “An important measure is the promotion of harvesting clusters, whereby owners invest in integrated harvesting, timber sales, wood energy and other projects,” she says. For example, IWP members have gained access to wood energy markets by providing continuity of biomass supply as well as allowing sufficient drying time of timber before usage.

This approach provides

markets for small, low-value logs and residue in biomass initiatives such as the Danone Ecosystem project. IWP will demonstrate to the SIMWOOD project over the next two years how timber mobilisation can be further increased among its members.

Increase income
FEL's pilot project aims to increase income for the forest owner through whole-tree harvesting to provide biomass for the wood energy market. “One of the main barriers to wood mobilisation is the low income forest owners get from first thinning,” maintains Daragh Little, managing director, FEL. “The solution involves

ACCESS

Access to forests was identified as a major issue in timber harvesting, haulage and marketing in the COFORD report *Mobilising Ireland's Forest Resource*. Construction of forest roads has decreased in recent years (Table 1) and this is now seen as an inhibiting factor in timber mobilisation.

However, it is difficult to fully assess the effect reduced roading has on timber mobility as forest owners still harvest despite reduced road density.

For example, roading grants which previously funded 20m of road construction per hectare, are now lower than 10m/ha in many instances. But even with this reduced funding, forest owners can gain harvesting access to forests but the reduction from 240km of roading in 2007 to 87km last year is far too severe at a time when timber removal should be increasing.

A worrying downward trend in road making has emerged in 31 counties. For example, afforestation in Donegal which averaged 1,500ha during the 1990s

should now be experiencing major forest road construction as forests reach first thinning. However, annual road construction in the county has fallen from 40km to 4km last year with no road building in 2013 and less than a kilometre the previous year (Table 1).

There have been dramatic decreases in forest road construction in Clare, Cork, Laois, Offaly and Waterford.

The COFORD report made a number of recommendations to maximise timber mobility cost effectively, including the introduction of a standard for “access tracks of a lower grade than forest roads”.

The report outlined that timber harvesting will double to 6.4 million m³ by 2018, with almost all of the increase coming from private forests. This scale of harvest, if it is to be realised, will need further investment in forest and many county roads. It will require co-operation between stakeholders, including local authorities, the Forest Service, processors, forest owners and foresters.

Table 1: Forest harvesting roads completed from 2007 to 2014 (metres)

County	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Carlow	0	479	1,152	618	807	494	60	883
Cavan	4,819	5,542	3,079	6,957	2,477	1,777	2,478	3,187
Clare	22,417	21,740	10,566	5,564	5,783	3,418	4,238	2,768
Cork	32,330	17,844	7,265	7,399	13,028	11,614	6,534	8,969
Donegal	39,963	11,168	17,958	4,329	460	80	0	1,376
Dublin	560	0	190	900	200	0	480	800
Galway	13,302	16,571	7,348	6,898	7,554	3,123	2,360	4,329
Kerry	17,073	12,676	8,403	8,665	10,666	6,037	10,937	11,755
Kildare	315	2,841	313	2,796	2,790	1,158	1,324	80
Kilkenny	4,206	5,306	7,217	3,785	3,764	6,894	8,984	5,664
Laois	16,092	4,260	8,287	9,737	7,889	6,412	3,812	739
Leitrim	10,261	7,758	8,281	4,166	6,441	2,750	5,049	6,426
Limerick	9,076	7,234	5,349	5,745	5,042	3,137	6,134	4,927
Longford	4,556	865	1,605	475	652	2,606	552	3,116
Louth	280	500	670	0	1,427	787	0	0
Mayo	3,183	10,181	9,616	2,005	3,339	3,355	2,000	3,480
Meath	1,005	1,230	0	220	1,815	1,105	2,791	384
Monaghan	1,713	1,403	530	1,080	470	200	170	0
Offaly	10,002	3,761	3,666	1,333	10,460	1,919	1,468	2,839
Roscommon	7,228	17,657	4,659	4,734	10,094	5,968	2,856	4,422
Sligo	10,898	5,403	3,203	4,926	1,305	2,286	2,805	5,354
Tipperary	14,337	19,793	9,505	8,342	7,970	5,243	7,847	6,051
Waterford	10,175	11,812	2,620	1,635	4,522	1,099	2,266	2,649
Westmeath	4,250	2,953	1,099	2,655	1,703	3,234	2,602	3,218
Wexford	0	1,200	2,667	990	2,036	1,692	882	1,121
Wicklow	2,342	1,928	4,127	2,964	3,400	4,723	4,455	2,148
Total	240,383	192,105	129,375	98,918	116,094	81,111	83,084	86,685

Source: Forest Service (2015)

Note: The Forest Service grant aids forest harvesting roads up to 20m per hectare. Forest owners may construct additional roads without grant aid.

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SIMWOOD held its midterm conference in Kilkenny last week. Plans to increase timber mobilisation were outlined while delegates visited privately owned forests in the southeast, hosted by the Irish Wood Producers and Forest Enterprises Limited.