



10th June 2020

Circular 07/2020

To all Registered Foresters

Re: Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (RUS) (Ash Dieback)

The purpose of this Circular is to announce the re-introduction of the revised reconstitution scheme for plantations affected by Ash Dieback, known as the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (Ash Dieback) or RUS. Form 1 applications can be submitted from the 22nd June 2020.

Background

1. In April 2018 Minister of State Doyle announced a review of the national response to Ash Dieback Disease as it was increasingly evident from experience and the latest scientific advice that eradication of Ash Dieback disease was no longer feasible. Pending completion of the review, the Department moved away from a mandatory sanitation requirement approach while continuing annual premium payments to the forest owner, the Reconstitution Scheme was suspended (although the Woodland Improvement Scheme (WIS) remained available).
2. The focus of the review was on the policy approach and associated support schemes, considering the move away from Ash Dieback eradication and bringing ash plantation management into focus. The review included further consideration of damage level evaluation together with inclusion of a broader range of silvicultural and management options. This new approach was circulated for stakeholder consultation in December 2019 and a total of 18 submissions were received in reply.
3. All submissions were carefully considered, and meetings held with stakeholders to finalise a revised scheme document. RUS offers significant support on top of the €7m already spent since the first support scheme for Ash Dieback was introduced in 2013. The scheme provides a suite of options that will give owners the opportunity to recover the maximum economic value possible from their affected ash plantations.
4. Plantations can be managed through thinning interventions under the existing Woodland Improvement Scheme (WIS), or if they choose to do so, replant the entire site under a reconstitution option. RUS, for the first time introduces a new silvicultural technique to handling the issue of Ash Dieback in Ireland, underplanting. This novel approach allows owners to retain just under 40% of their plantation while replanting the spaces created; remaining trees providing shelter for the younger trees as they emerge from competing vegetation. The scheme offers maximum flexibility with all 12 planting options available to landowners where appropriate including agroforestry; the option of Continuous Cover Forestry under WIS is also permitted although site conditions that would suit this management approach may be very limited. While eradication is not deemed achievable, these measures are aimed at reducing disease levels and the rate of spread of the disease.
5. Forest owners affected by Ash Dieback are no longer required to report these occurrences to the Department. This means that notifications letters will no longer be issued.



Payment of outstanding forest premiums

6. As a general policy, owners of grant aided forests in receipt of premiums under an Afforestation Scheme (which includes FEPS and NWS Establishment) will be reminded that the requirement to abide by the terms and conditions of the scheme includes the obligation to satisfactorily maintain the plantation to Department standards. This includes the need to support and maintain vigorous growth in the plantation and to take reasonable steps to prevent the entry and/or establishment of destructive forest pests and diseases. Failure to adequately protect and maintain a grant-aided forest can result in the cessation of premium payment and may ultimately result in the recoupment of all grant and premium monies received, unless remedial work is, or other required interventions are satisfactorily carried out.
7. Owners of grant-aided forests will be advised that in respect of continued payment of forest premiums, failure to;
 - a) Submit a Form 2 within six months of Form 1 approval in respect of either one of the management options available; and
 - b) To complete the first thinning intervention in respect of WIS or clearance operation in respect of reconstitution or underplanting within six months;will result in an automatic stop being placed on the processing of the next premium payment, that is, the next payment due after the six-month deadline, or result in a stop being placed on the processing of the second next premium payment. This stop will remain in place until a Form 2 is submitted in respect of WIS works and submission and payment of the First Instalment grant for reconstitution and underplanting.
8. When choosing to avail of RUS, premium payments that have been stopped will be restarted from the last premium payment. The premium payments will be restarted at the same time the First Instalment of the reconstitution/underplanting grant is paid. For the reconstitution premium, the rate will be that applicable to the new Grant Premium Category (GPC) whereas premium payments for underplanting will remain at the original rate for ash.

Plantation Categories – Management Options

9. As with the previous Reconstitution Scheme, there are three categories (Category 1, 2 & 3), based on the height and age of the plantation. Different management and support scheme options are presented within these three categories of plantation. For Category 1, plantations under 7m tall, underplanting and reconstitution options are available. For Category 2 plantations, a new approach has been developed to evaluate stand level damage based on a visual assessment for the presence of symptoms on the stem as an indicator of the overall health of the stand and on the severity and degree of infection. Field trialling and verification of stem lesion focused stand damage assessment has been carried out with a view to understanding and recognising the symptoms and stage of progression of the disease at a tree and stand level. Arising from this work, the following were established as thresholds of infection, for Category 2 plantations;
 - a) <4% stem infection – low level of infection;
 - b) ≥4% and <10% stem infection – medium level of infection.
 - c) ≥10% stem infection – high level of infection.
10. A Standard Operating Procedures manual has been prepared to assist foresters and forest owners with this classification.



11. The WIS option is available for a-c, whereas underplanting is available for b and c while reconstitution is available for c only. Reconstitution and underplanting applications for Categories 2b and 2c sites must be accompanied by an appropriate damage assessment, carried out as described in Standard Operating Procedure “Assessing Stem Damage *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* Ash dieback”.
12. Category 3 refers to plantations greater than >17m top height or greater than 18cm dbh or greater than 25 years old. WIS is the only option available for this category.

General provisions

13. The exemption for felling licences for reconstitution and underplanting will apply for ash only under this scheme in accordance with article 19(1)(c)(i) of the [Forestry Act 2014](#). Applications will be screened for Appropriate Assessment. A replanting obligation exists under this scheme. Where replanting does not take place within four years of site clearance/clear fell, the Department may recoup all payments made under this scheme, the Afforestation Scheme, FEPS, Native Woodland Scheme and the Woodland Improvement Scheme (WIS), where appropriate and the site replanted. Felling licence is still required for WIS operations.
14. Eligible sites under this scheme will have access to Section 2 of the [Deer Tree Shelters and Deer/Hare fencing scheme](#). RUS also provides for a contribution of €2.50/m up to a maximum of 140m/ha (€350/ha) for fencing repairs. In relation to fencing costs funding is available up to an annual budget ceiling set each year by the Department. Therefore, it may be the case that some applications for fencing costs may not be approved.
15. Form 1 applications received prior to suspension of the previous scheme (April 2018), can have their applications processed under the conditions of the earlier scheme. Under this scenario the details given in the original Form 1, that is, the category the plantation fell under at the time the application was submitted, will apply. Applicants under this scenario can also choose to apply under RUS. Applying under this scheme will mean a smaller clearance grant (€1,000 instead of €1,500) but they will have access to support for underplanting. Applicants submitting under RUS must apply the revised approach and options without recourse to the original Form 1. This means that the category under which the plantation will now fall will be based on the current height, age and dbh.
16. Applicants may decide to apply different options to different plots, in which case separate applications must be submitted. Furthermore, landowners in Category 2 who choose to adopt WIS can subsequently choose either underplanting or reconstitution once they are classified as category 2a or 2b. Landowners who choose to adopt underplanting cannot subsequently adopt the reconstitution option.

Ann Cunningham
Assistant Principal
Forestry Division