

FOREST CERTIFICATION AND PRIVATE FORESTS

As production from private forests increases, certification will facilitate market access, writes Marie Doyle of UCD.

Speakers and organisers of the SFMI conference with Minister of State Andrew Doyle TD



Photo courtesy of Eoin O'Driscoll

CERTIFICATION FOR PRIVATE FOREST OWNERS IN IRELAND

A recent conference on the topic of "Forest Certification for the Private Grower in Ireland" highlighted the ongoing demand for certified wood products in Ireland's export markets and the necessity for the maturing private estate to engage in the certification process. The conference was run by 'Sustainable Forest Management Ireland' (SFMI), formerly 'FSC Ireland' which is a voluntary, not-for-profit, chamber-based organisation whose aim is to promote sustainable management of Ireland's forests through information, advocacy and education on independent forest management certification schemes.

The conference, held on June 30th in the Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, was launched by Minister of State for Forestry, Andrew Doyle TD and had a capacity audience comprised of private timber growers, forest owner groups, forestry companies, state agencies and timber processors.

Pictured above (from l to r) at the SFMI Conference on June 30th in the Botanic Gardens are: Andy Grundy, Soil Association; Kevin Donnellan, Coillte; John McLoughlin, Society of Irish Foresters; Dr Owen Davies, FSC UK; Marie Doyle, UCD (Chair, SFMI); Andrew Doyle TD, Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine; Ronan Haslette, Merenda; Phil Webb, UK Forest Certification Ltd; Ewan McIntosh, Tilhill Forestry; Andrew Doyle TD; Steven Meyen, Teagasc; Mary Mulvey, Ecotourism Ireland; Karl Coggins, Forest Service (DAFM); William Merivale, PEFC Ireland.

A separate conference on June 1st, run by the Wood Marketing Federation and the Society of Irish Foresters, focused on the topic of 'Wood Mobilisation'. It directly addressed the issues of access, grant structures, and safeguarding the supply chain, but forest and chain of custody certification were referred to several times as issues that need to be tackled to ensure market access for privately grown timber.

WHY BOTHER?

The rationale for timber certification for private owners is clear; until recent times, Coillte has been the dominant supplier of timber to the primary processing sector - the Coillte estate is certified to both FSC and PEFC forest management standards and all of the major Irish sawmills have FSC chain of custody certification as do the board mills. Compliance with either certification scheme requires that no more than 30% 'controlled wood' or non-certified material can be mixed with the certified material to produce a certifiable product. As the significant areas of privately owned forests planted in the 1980s now reach maturity, production forecasts indicate that the contribution to gross national roundwood output will reach 27% (or 37% of net realisable volume) in 2016 and by 2025 will equal Coillte output (Figure 1).

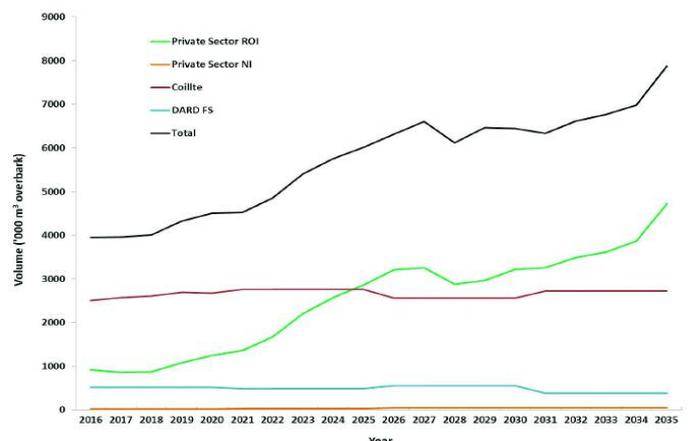


Figure 1: Forecast of total net realisable volume

(Source: All Ireland Roundwood Production Forecast 2016-2035, COFORD 2016)



Photo courtesy of Conor McSwiney

Figures indicate that 80% of Irish timber is exported and speakers at the SFMI Conference were unequivocal that certification is not an optional extra for them; it is not a ‘nice to have’ but a ‘must have’ in terms of accessing the key UK market.

Several Irish sawmills have reported that they are approaching 20% intake of non-certified sawlog material and are concerned about the non-certified status of the private estate. The figures are even higher when dealing with pulpwood material and GP Wood for example, has reported difficulties in selling pulpwood sourced from private forests due to its uncertified nature.

GETTING CERTIFIED

The process of becoming certified is relatively simple; decide which certification scheme you wish to use, contact a ‘certifying body’, have a pre-audit to identify any obvious ‘corrective actions’, undergo the full audit and await the outcome – if there are corrective actions identified, these must be addressed and audited before a certificate will be issued (any certificate issued is valid for a period of five years but also requires annual surveillance audits).

However, while the process is not overly complicated, it has long been acknowledged that the costs associated with the certification



Photo courtesy of Steven Meyen

of small forest units is prohibitive. Although both global schemes have made efforts to address this through the development of 'group certification' mechanisms, costs still remain a key deterrent to engagement. Tilhill Forestry in the UK manages two types of group certification - 'resource' managed (as in those forests that are fully managed by Tilhill) and 'group' managed (where only those issues pertaining to certification compliance are managed). The most cost effective method for the certification of private forests in Ireland is undoubtedly through the formation of large groups; the pros of this include having a dedicated manager, knowledge sharing, strength in numbers, economies of scale and a reduced audit burden and the cons associated with it are that the group is audited as a single entity and that it is 'only as strong as its weakest member'.

FOREST SERVICE SUPPORT

In an effort to support wood mobilisation, the Forest Service is at an advanced stage in the development of a Pilot Scheme to use Knowledge Transfer Groups to support group certification. It was initially envisaged that this pilot project would achieve group certification for both of the participating producer groups and in the process create a template that can be adopted by other groups;

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given information gleaned from the conference, it now seems as though a more efficient approach would be to allow expansion of a certified group through the admission of new members as opposed to the establishment of several other groups. This project will focus on achieving FSC certification as it is currently the most well established scheme in Ireland, however, it is expected that the template created will be easily adapted to PEFC when it develops further in Ireland.

TWO SEPARATE STANDARDS

It is important to note that the two global schemes do not recognise each other - you cannot mix PEFC-certified paper handles and FSC-certified paper to create a certified paper bag. Thus, to deliver a certified product to the marketplace, every link in the chain from forest to sawmill to every stage of processing needs to be aligned with the same certification scheme.

In Ireland, all the links in the chain are well established for FSC. For PEFC, the forest management standard exists, the Coillte forest estate has achieved PEFC certification and recently, SmartPly has achieved chain of custody; however, in order for PEFC to become a viable option for private growers, the primary processing sector, i.e.

sawmills, need to achieve chain of custody certification. Hopefully this is something that will happen in the short term as it offers alternatives in terms of market access and may become particularly attractive if the Brexit outcome makes the UK market less important in coming years (while the UK market has historically displayed a preference for FSC, other European countries favour PEFC - though the gaps between the two appear to be closing in many countries).

Thus, we have two separate national standards for forest management in Ireland, both having to be revised at five-year intervals. The UK has had a unique solution to this issue of 'double-jobbing' for a number of years through the 'UK Woodland Assurance Scheme' - it is a national certification standard that is endorsed by both FSC and PEFC. The fourth and latest version of the UKWAS standard has been submitted to both FSC and PEFC for approval.

However, as the FSC now require that standards incorporate a set of 'International Generic Indicators' (IGIs), there has been some disquiet from PEFC industry partners about the perceived extra requirements this will bring. If UKWAS4 is endorsed by both bodies, a similar approach in Ireland should be considered given the relatively small scale of our national forest estate.



Photo courtesy of Mairé Doyle

THE FUTURE

One pressing issue is the revision of the Irish FSC Standard; if a Standard Development Group is not registered with FSC to kick start this process in Ireland, a Certifying Body will be appointed by FSC International to produce an interim standard that takes into account the IGIs. SFMI, whose membership includes organisations such as the IFA, Coillte, Teagasc, UCD, Ecotourism Ireland, Society of

Irish Foresters as well as several individual members, is willing to spearhead the process, if sufficient support and input can be amalgamated (further information is available from SFMIreland@gmail.com).

While certification is lauded as being transparent, voluntary and market-based, it is fast becoming a costly necessity for owners to access markets; but it is also very much an independent 'stamp of approval' for high quality forest management and the process may help identify further efficiencies and improvements in how Irish forests are managed.

DEFINITION:

Forest Management certification confirms that a forest is being managed in accordance with the requirements of a pre-defined standard (for example, either FSC or PEFC).

Chain of custody certification confirms that any changes that the timber products undergo are in accordance with requirements of a pre-defined standard (for example, either FSC or PEFC); chain of custody certification is required for each link in the chain in order to deliver a fully certified product to consumers.