Close To Nature Forest Management

A report on the morning session of the joint Pro Silva Ireland / IFA conference held on November 10th 2006 and supported by COFORD under the Workshops and Seminars, Networking and Knowledge Transfer Supporting Initiative.

Summary of Presentations:
The full presentations are available on www.prosilvaireland.org

Jan Alexander (Pro Silva Ireland and Forest Owner)
“Close to Nature Forest Management in Ireland”
Jan presented a broad view of what Close To Nature Forest Management. She showed Irish examples of unmanaged cases of restructuring from even aged crops to multi-aged forests. She discussed how, if this process were managed as it is in Europe, an economic transformation from plantation forests to permanent forests could be possible in Ireland. She showed examples of such situations in Europe and referred back to her own forest and neighbouring forests in Leitrim for comparison.

Phil Morgan (SelectFor – Continuous Cover Forest Management Consultants, UK)
“Why is Close to Nature Forest Management an Attractive Management Choice for Farmers”
Phil discussed why farmers might think about adopting a Close to Nature Forest Management System with reference to the threats and opportunities facing Irish forestry. He outlined the benefits of Close to Nature Forest Management, how the system works, the transformation process and the end results. He presented a practical example of transformation based on a typical plantation of Sitka spruce with many illustrative slides. He emphasized the importance of timely thinning, professional marking, good access, continuity of management and well informed and engaged contractors. Phil revealed that the Welsh forestry strategy aimed to transform 50% of Welsh forests to a Close to Nature Forest Management System.

Per Hilbert (Danish Forest Owners Association)
“Near to Nature Forestry in Denmark – Possibilities, Dangers, Practices”
Per gave some background as to how forestry is organized in Denmark before going on to discuss the new Danish Forestry Policy and the Agreed Guidelines for Private Forest Management which effectively aims to transform all Danish forests to a Close to Nature Forest Management system. He outlined the reasons for this new policy which are predominantly based on the increasing incidence of serious wind damage in Danish plantation forests, coupled with greater public demand for Close to Nature Forest Management. He outlined the proposed approach to be taken in different forest types. He also expressed concern that in some forests the transformation process may suffer from issues relating to timber quality, inability to generate an economic return and staff trained in different systems. He presented a couple of case studies, including one privately owned forest which was generating an annual income of €400 using Close to Nature Management.

Discussion
The following bullet points summarise the main challenges for Irish forestry arising from this event:

1. Other countries have taken serious steps to transform plantation forests to permanent forests. They have done this for different reasons such as better economic return, increased capital value, more stable, more healthy, more popular. These arguments can be made in the Irish context and a serious debate about the appropriate and sustainable silvicultural systems in Ireland would be useful.
2. The transformation of plantation forests to permanent forests has in many cases been an economic decision based on real timber values and sales and not notional non timber values which are incidentally enhanced.

3. Case studies in transformation were outlined by different speakers and such case studies would be usefully established and monitored in an Irish context. Pro Silva Ireland members are currently doing this but a structured research approach to such efforts would facilitate more objective reporting of same.

4. The key inputs into transforming plantation forests to permanent forests are management, access and skilled labour. Two of these inputs have training and education implications. There are currently no domestic opportunities for Irish foresters or contractors to train in Close to Nature Forestry and this is something that should be considered.

5. Has there ever been a proper piece of research enquiring into what the public wants from Irish forests? Such a study was carried out in Denmark in which a range of photographs of different forests managed in different ways were shown and respondents were asked to rank the forests in terms of what they liked / wanted most. It would be useful to know what Irish people want of forests and this should inform national forest policy.

6. Irish forestry employed overseas assistance when establishing itself in the early 20th century. Such assistance has been used repeatedly with every new development in Irish forestry (redevelopment of sawmills / wood energy / introduction of timber harvesting machinery etc.). There is a strong case for the state to sponsor a foreign expert in Close to Nature Forest Management to advise on how it can be incorporated into National forest policy.

These are just a few discussion points designed to provoke thought and debate on the subject.

Paddy Purser
Pro Silva Ireland
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