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New strategy for forestry needed in climate plan

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'Forests and wood-based products offer sustainable, long-term solutions to the climate-change problem,' says Prof Pekka Kauppi of the University of Helsinki.

Given the urgent need to address "the climate emergency" and the role forestry could play in reducing carbon emissions, a new approach is needed, according to environmental researcher Dr Cara Augustenborg.

A multistakeholder forum should chart a way forward and respect concerns of host communities where extensive afforestation was located, she told a Forest Industries Ireland (FII) conference at the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin on Monday. This was required if the sector was to develop to the extent necessary, she added.

Hard lessons from wind energy development should be learned, and evidence of forestry's ability to reduce emissions made clearer to the public. Having a just and equitable approach was the only way a backlash against afforestation could be countered, said Dr Augustenborg, a fellow in environmental policy at UCD.

"Climate-smart forestry" could mitigate the EU's carbon dioxide emissions by up to 20 per cent by 2050, said Prof Pekka Kauppi of the University of Helsinki. "Managed forests are the most scalable way to deal with harmful emissions. Forests and wood-based products offer sustainable, long-term solutions to the climate-change problem.

"Europe was the first continent where forests ceased to shrink and started to expand. Although forests and wood biomass in forests are expanding in the EU, deforestation still predominates at the global level," he added.

FII chairman Brian Murphy said forests were highly effective carbon sinks, enabling the production of building materials with the lowest carbon footprint and generating carbon-neutral fuel, which was replacing oil and gas.

“Last year, our wood products locked away as much carbon dioxide as was produced by all the licensed cars in Dublin or all the households in Cork, Waterford and Kerry combined. Our managed forests grow extremely fast, producing valuable straight trees that literally gobble up harmful carbon dioxide,” he added.

‘Sitka wars’

Some citizens referred to “sitka wars” but the species was in Ireland long before the Friesian cow, he noted. Irish forests were teeming with life, he added, in contrast to what naysayers were saying on social media.

Minister for Climate Action Richard Bruton highlighted Ireland’s record on investment in forestry.

“We have invested nearly €3 billion in forestry since the 1980s which, through ongoing sustainable forest management, can contribute to delivering abatement of up to 20 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over the period 2021 to 2030. This is a major component of Ireland’s climate change action,” he said. “However, we need to increase participation rates in the forestry programme to maximise benefits for climate action, the environment and rural communities.”

Speaking after the conference, Irish Wildlife Trust campaigns officer Pádraic Fogarty said: “It’s now blindingly obvious we need a programme to bring trees back to our landscapes on a vast scale. However we need to be strategic about how this is done. Planting monoculture plantations of conifers willy-nilly is not the solution and will only add to problems.”

‘Foster ownership’

A combination of approaches was needed, based on native trees and ecological processes, to grow more trees in towns, cities and on farms. “We can create large, permanent forests on public land, on uplands and along river corridors. We can have a commercial timber sector based on close-to-nature techniques and ‘continuous cover’. We should give more community say in the development of these woodlands to foster ownership and stewardship.”

While there was a place for planting trees, in most instances a process of natural generation of scrub should be encouraged. “This is more effective and slashes costs while minimising the need for plastic tubes, herbicides etc... Control of herbivores is all that’s needed to allow woodland to emerge. In this way trees are the cheapest, most popular and most effective tools in addressing our biodiversity and climate emergencies.”

Source: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/new-strategy-for-forestry-needed-in-climate-plan-1.3950648>