

Farming Life

Private sector at heart of programme

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Premier Woodlands' managing director John Hetherington Copyright: User (UGC)

This is all very good in principle: the weakness in the case for more trees put forward by the Minister is that the vast bulk of the envisaged tree planting will take place on public lands.

With respect this approach is fundamentally flawed, should it not have already occurred! The case for the public sector to commit to more tree planting is to be encouraged.

However, farmers and other private landowners must be given the opportunity to play their part in equal measure. About 20 years ago, the private sector was planting 800-900 hectares per year. Everyone accepts that tree planting will be at the very heart of our overall response to global warming and the other environmental challenges facing the world at the present time.

Here in Northern Ireland, we have the perfect climate in which to grow trees. Another salutary point, which Minister Poots may have overlooked, is the fact that farmers own and manage by far the greatest proportion of land available for tree planting locally.

All of the Minister's predecessors committed to increase the level of tree planting undertaken in Northern Ireland. For lots of reasons these targets have yet to be met, with current levels of between 200-300 hectares per year.

Sceptics might say that it suited the purposes of Forest Service to focus on the management of its own estate while playing only lip service to the requests of farmers and other private landowners up to this point.

In my own case, I believe that the red tape associated with the EU forestry support schemes and administered by the Forest Service, became excessive.

As we are coming out of the EU, the scope for Northern Ireland to put in place a truly dynamic forestry development programme now exists. This is a real opportunity, which we all wish to support Minister Poots in achieving.

All trees lock up carbon. But above and beyond this fundamental fact, trees can play two vital roles across society here in Northern Ireland. Firstly, their conservation value is immense. Secondly, the commercial benefits of 'productive forest' must never be overlooked.

Let me give one very salient example of this that relates to developments taking place at the present time.

Many of our newer public sector buildings – including hospitals – are heated by wood pellet boilers. All of this fuel can be produced here in Northern Ireland.

There is absolutely no need for wood biomass imports. All it takes to make this happen is to have a tree planting programme put in place, involving both the private and public sectors, which delivers on our aspirations.

* And, finally, a few words about Covid-19.

All of Premier Woodlands' planting teams are continuing to work at the present time. Tree planting and forest management are activities which easily facilitates the social distancing measure brought in by the government over recent days.

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