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Draft Agricultural Appeals (Amendment) Bill 2020

SUBMISSION TO PUBLIC CONSULTATION

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1. Managed Forestry in Ireland

Managed forestry is a fast growing, green industry which provides rural jobs, contributes to climate action, facilitates tourism and recreation and produces technologically advanced timber and biofuel products. The industry, which is managed to the highest European standards, returns a €2.3 billion contribution to the Irish economy and supports 12,000 jobs many rural based. Amber Forestry is proud to be delivering and growing quality jobs with its ongoing involvement in the state and Private forest sector. It is also vital to point out that our role in Forest establishment in these rural areas also ensures future timber supply and their associated job creation in their communities. By 2035, it is expected that the sector will double in size. We currently provide 5 jobs in County Laois thus making a significant contribution to both direct and indirect employment and the local economy.

Forestry has the potential to significantly contribute to Ireland's obligations to mitigate climate change and provides valuable habitats for biodiversity and nature, along with important ecosystem services such as water quality and flood protection. Forestry can also meaningfully improve farm income and farm value.

The formation of a new government, together with an important and ambitious Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, paves the way for policy formation, legislation and change. We will always seek to engage positively with Government into the future and we note in particular that forestry can play an important role across so many of the objectives laid out in the Programme for Government.

This is a shovel ready sector, with real potential to grow sustainable local and green jobs. Currently in County Laois where we are based there is according to recent statistics some 420 people employed in the Forestry and Timber sector

2. Current crisis

At present, the forestry industry is at crisis point. Never have I seen it like this and it appears to be getting worse and this is of real concern to myself and my employees.

Since the introduction of new forestry licensing procedures in 2019, the processing and issuing of forestry licences have been seriously impacted. The current system is not fit for purpose and the ability to operate and plan is being impeded by administrative inadequacies and procedural barriers, which exist nowhere else in Europe.

There has been widespread disruption across the forestry sector. Currently, felling license approvals are only at 20% of the required rate; consequently, the industry is being starved of the necessary timber supplies. The potential impact is severe, both financially and with respect to jobs as sawmills will run out of timber within months unless the current impasse is resolved. The severity of the situation is underscored even further when the impact of Covid-19 is considered as unemployment soars nationally and the numbers on the Live Register remain high here in Laois.

Another central part of the licensing process, the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) has caused significant difficulties. At present, there are approximately over 400 outstanding projects appealed but not yet processed – these appeals impact planting, felling and road building. Since the start of the year, the FAC has only processed an average of circa 25 projects per month. At the present rate at which appeals are being processed, it will take 16 months to clear the backlog. However, the rate of new appeals continues to grow and is actually far greater than the rate at which they are being processed - leading to an ever increasing backlog. In one day in early August, objectors stalled production of 100,000 cubic metres of timber - enough timber to build 5,000 homes. It is also worth noting that the vast majority of appeals are lodged by a small handful of individuals and target forest policy generally rather than any specific project.

We believe that these issues can be addressed, and solutions identified but action must be taken now before more jobs are lost rather than created and the true potential of the industry is undermined.

3. Comments regarding the draft legislation

Amber Forestry welcomes the draft legislation and encourages its implementation with additional elements. Outlined below is the views of my company, Amber Forestry with respect to specific parts of the draft legislation alongside some additional recommendations.

- **Head 3:**

- **Annual Report:** The proposal regarding the introduction of a yearly report is welcome. A key focus of the report should be on how the FAC performs with respect to the timely delivery of decisions on appeals. Sufficient resources should be put in place to ensure that FAC decisions are delivered within 60 days of appeals being lodged.

- **Head 4:**

- **Chairperson:** The introduction of a Deputy Chairperson is welcome; this would negate current difficulties where the Chairperson must be a participant in every appeal.
- **FAC Divisions:** I welcome the proposal to allow the FAC to meet in divisions and recommend that a division of the FAC should be able to operate without one of the Chairpersons and be comprised of FAC board members only.
- **Quorum:** A quorum for a committee should be 2 rather than 3, as this is appropriate to the level of complexity of forestry projects and it will allow the statutory timeframe of 2 months to be met.
- **Criteria for FAC Membership:** The FAC will be able to fully utilise the resources at its disposal by the removal of the requirement for a member of the FAC to be of a specified grade – this is a welcome proposal.
- **Resources:** The FAC must be adequately resourced and have the appropriate manpower to clear the backlog and reach a point where all appeals are decided upon within 60 days of an appeal being lodged.
- **Timeframe for Appeals:** As noted above, a decision on all appeals should be issued within 60 days of an appeal being lodged – a statutory timeframe should be put in place for dealing with appeals; an approach already adopted for some housing developments. This additional amendment is of fundamental importance to improving the effectiveness of the forestry appeals legislation.

- **Head 5**

- **Payment of fees:** The proposal regarding an introduction of a fee for appeals is welcome and a key step to ensure the FAC is adequately resourced and brings the process in line with other planning requirements.
- **Oral Hearings:** Amber Forestry supports the proposal regarding the power of the Chairperson(s) to determine whether an oral hearing is required to determine an appeal. The holding of oral hearings has created long and unnecessary delays.
- **Ministerial Powers:** The proposal for the relevant Minister to retain the stated powers to issue Directives and formulate regulations for the FAC is welcome.

- **Additional Measures to those contained in the draft legislation:**

- **National forestry policy:** Terms of reference for the FAC should make note of the obligation of the licensing system and the process for appeals to support national forestry policy. The importance of the forestry sector, the employment it supports throughout Ireland and its €2.3 billion contribution to the national economy have been recognised by successive governments.
- **Appeals without sufficient ground:** The Chairperson of the FAC should be given powers to reject appeals which are without sufficient ground or merit.
- **Site specific appeals:** Valid grounds for appeal should be further developed to ensure all appeals are related to a specific site and are not used as a mechanism to object to national forest policy.
- **Appeals determination and precedence:** The Chairperson of the FAC should establish a firm precedent from existing decisions; this would avoid a situation of hearing repeated appeals that are generic and raise no new issues. If an appeal is upheld or rejected, the FAC should be able to examine its backlog of existing appeals (and new appeals) and summarily issue the same decision on appeals of exactly the same type and same pertinent factors.
- **Lodging of appeals:** The Minister should establish more rigorous requirements with regard to an application to appeal; that is to say that an appeal should have grounds that relate to an individual licence rather than a group of licences. Evidence for specific appeals should be provided when lodging the appeal and the appellant should be required to state their specific interest in the licence that they are appealing.

4. Conclusion

Our company is based in County Laois but we also undertake work in the adjacent counties. I employ 5 staff. My business which is focused fully on Forest establishment supports many other sectors of the local area

- Fuel shops for my vans and my Brush cutters / Chainsaws
- Repair garages for my Van fleet
- Repair shops for my machine fleet.
- Repair shops for my Quads.

The Forest sector is currently not only supporting my staff but also all our families . Our Children are in the local schools and are settled here as part of the Irish fabric.

The current crisis is deeply worrying to me and as the Licencing delays get worse I fear it will soon begin to really affect me in the downstream establishment sector. While I would like to expand and invest in new machinery I cannot have confidence just now .

As such I would ask that everything is done to uphold these changes and to get the forest sector back on a strong footing once more.

Signed : *Dzintars Lukasevics*

Owner – Amber Forestry