

Macroom District Environment Group

Dear Minister Hackett,

On behalf of Macroom District Environment Group, this is not the forestry review many of us had anticipated when you took office.

Forestry in Ireland is subject to rules under the European Habitats Directives which are necessary to maintain water quality, as well as to protect important habitats and landscapes from insensitive or inappropriate changes in land use.

As the Irish forestry industry has been routinely ignoring these requirements for years, recent legal challenges to licencing have crippled the industry. But instead of hiring ecologists and getting on with the job of assessing each application on a case by case basis, as we are obliged to do under EU law, the Irish state has reacted by attempting to muzzle objectors. This is a blunt and unwieldy way of dealing with the problem.

The [Draft Agriculture Appeals \(Amendment\) Bill 2020](#) is a flawed attempt to sidestep issues within Irish forestry. Instead of addressing actual impacts of plantations on landscape and environment, the proposed changes would prevent people from intervening on behalf of the environment by introducing monetary charges, restricting those who can object to licences to eligible persons or groups, and most worrying of all, giving the arbitration boards more power to overrule objections without due process.

In addition, the public submissions period for this Bill was far too short, having been announced on the Friday of the August Bank Holiday and continuing through the traditional month in which many people take their holidays.

Some active environmentalists we contacted about this Bill had not heard of it, not to mention the general public.

All of this leaves any resultant legislation open to legal challenge from numerous directions, not least, Ireland's exposed inadequacies in terms of climate mitigation, epitomised by the words of

the Supreme Court, when ruling in [Friends of the Irish Environment v. Government of Ireland \[2020\]](#) ;

“6.38 ...it seems to me that the level of specificity required of a compliant plan is that it is sufficient to allow a reasonable and interested member of the public to know how the government of the day intends to meet the NTO so as, in turn, to allow such members of the public as may be interested to act in whatever way, political or otherwise, that they consider appropriate in the light of that policy.”

The proposals restricting who may object to forestry licences will necessarily omit many people whose interests and perhaps expertise on forestry, ecology and landscape might otherwise be of value to all concerned.

Where it is seen to obstruct access to environmental justice, this Bill is open to legal challenges under the Habitats Directive, Environmental Impact Assessment Directive, the Strategic Environmental Directive and the Aarhus Convention.

If this Bill is pushed through, these challenges are certain to cost the state a lot of money, while in the long term this flawed legislation will do nothing to relieve the pangs of one of Ireland's important rural industries.

It is an environmental imperative that we carry on afforestation and forest management with the most informed and beneficial overview and range of oversights possible, so that we can rely on the structures we put in place now, to do a good job for many years into the future.

We hereby call upon Minister Pippa Hackett to abandon this farcical and dangerous fob to industry. Instead, release funding for ecologists and administrative personnel so the actual problems in Irish forestry can be addressed now, without further unnecessary expense or drama.

Sincerely, on behalf of members of Macroom District Environment Group,

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