

## **Response on Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland**

### **About the Institute**

The Institute of Chartered Foresters is the Royal Chartered body for tree professionals in the UK. Its membership covers the full range of tree professionals, and this range of expertise is one of its greatest strengths. It has 2,000 members who practise forestry, arboriculture and other related disciplines in the private and third sectors, central and local government, research institutions, universities and colleges throughout the UK. The Institute regulates standards of entry to the profession. It provides support to members, guidance to professionals in other sectors, information to the general public, and educational advice and training to students and tree professionals seeking to develop their careers.

Its members include officials of the Northern Ireland Forest Service, private consultants, contractors and entrepreneurs, academics and employees of charitable bodies. Through its members throughout the UK and Ireland the Institute possesses a wealth of practical experience, scientific knowledge and policy expertise.

### **Our Response**

We welcome this opportunity to comment on the proposals for future agricultural policy in Northern Ireland. Since leaving the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy, this is a time of great opportunity. Across the UK, new agri-environment schemes are being developed to address the climate and nature crises while supporting rural communities and the wider economy. Within this context, land use change is necessary and inevitable.

### **Competing land uses**

Agriculture and food processing are extremely important to the Northern Ireland economy and the agri-food interest dominates politically. However, the Assembly also recently voted to commit NI to a net zero target by 2050. This development must necessarily impact on the development of NI agricultural policy, with greater emphasis on the environmental impacts of land management – good and bad. The forestry voice is small compared to agri-food, and there is a significant risk that the environmental, economic and social opportunities in forestry will be missed if the arguments for expanding woodland cover are drowned out.

Competing land uses are the subject of much debate across the UK, and this is particularly important in Northern Ireland. Despite this there is no integrated land policy or associated funding. Achieving 12% tree cover would need up to 20% tree cover on marginal agricultural land, but current agricultural subsidies are competing with the funding available for trees and woodland and creating a disincentive for woodland creation. We support the ambitions to restore degraded peatland that may have been planted inappropriately in the past, and it therefore needs to be recognised that additional planting will be needed elsewhere if NI wishes to avoid net deforestation. As it stands, forestry policy, agricultural policy and environmental policy operate in competing silos, with different policies undermining each other.

It is the role of government to coordinate activity across these different land use policies to maximise opportunities and synergies, rather than to perpetuate conflict between policies, at no benefit to the stated environmental objectives. DAERA Minister Edwin Poots commented in the NI Assembly on the challenge of expanding forest cover, stating that it could only be achieved by coherent set of land use policies, including agriculture, forestry and the environment, which the current draft agricultural policy document fails to take fully into account.

### **Natural capital**

The public is keenly aware of the role forestry must play in helping to meet climate change targets, but we wish to emphasise that sustainable, multi-purpose woodlands can also deliver other benefits – including for biodiversity, water quality and wood production. We believe that the Department’s vision of ‘sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone’ is best informed by a natural capital approach, as is recognised in the other UK administrations. This would help to ensure that agricultural policy choices achieve Programme for Government aims whilst also supporting the vision.

Developing a new agricultural policy and long-term strategy requires difficult trade-offs between competing ecosystem services, and this is only achieved by understanding the full value of ecosystem services our rural land offers. Development of an agricultural policy which fails to take account of forestry and environmental services misses the full range of land use values and this is likely to result in poor policy choices being made for people in Northern Ireland.

### **Working together**

It is important that we forge better links between government, forestry, agriculture and conservation. We can see increasing polarisation in debate, and professional foresters want to work together with colleagues in other sectors to mitigate the risks that this presents. This will include demonstrating to farmers the opportunities of woodland creation for their businesses, helping them access incentives and upskilling them in woodland management. There is a need for relevant guidance and information resources to promote and support tree planting in Northern Ireland, and agricultural colleges should as a minimum cover basic forestry concepts in agricultural courses.

Land managers must also have access to the appropriate advice from professional foresters to ensure that the UK Forestry Standard, as the backbone of sustainable modern forestry, is adhered to.

### **Conclusion**

As it stands, the proposed agricultural policy threatens to jeopardise the Department’s Forestry Programme. With the focus on agricultural production, forestry as a land use option has been at best overlooked, and at worst undermined. We risk failing to meet climate targets and missing the opportunities trees offer to deliver not just for carbon sequestration but for biodiversity, timber production, flood mitigation, landscape benefits, recreation, the rural economy and for the people of Northern Ireland.