

NORTHERN IRELAND FORESTRY BILL

WOODLANDS PROVIDE SOCIAL, HEALTH, ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

*NORTHERN IRELAND HAS AMONGST THE LOWEST WOODLAND COVER (6%) IN EUROPE
AND OF THAT COVERAGE LESS THAN 0.1% IS ANCIENT WOODLAND*

*NORTHERN IRELAND IS ONE OF THE FEW COUNTRIES IN EUROPE WITHOUT A
COMPREHENSIVE WOODLAND INVENTORY*

*FOREST SERVICE HAS A TARGET TO DOUBLE THE PERCENTAGE OF WOODLAND IN
NORTHERN IRELAND, FROM 6% TO 12%, BY 2050*

*NEW WOODLAND CREATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND HAS FALLEN BY 50%
IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS*

THE EXISTING FORESTRY ACT WAS INTRODUCED IN 1953 AND IS NOW OUTDATED

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

-  The Department's focus should move from promoting forestry (which can typically be interpreted as timber production) to encouraging and resourcing **sustainable woodland** (native trees which provide multiple services) **restoration, creation and management**.
-  Sustainable woodland creation and management commitments should apply to **all woodland** (public and private) in Northern Ireland.
-  A statutory duty to produce and maintain an up-to-date **woodland inventory** should be introduced.
-  The requirement for **felling licences** should be applied to all government departments and agencies.
-  The Act should introduce a **statutory presumption against the felling of ancient and long-established woodland**.
-  Creating **opportunities for sustainable woodland-based recreation** should be a clearly stated goal for the Department.
-  Most recreational opportunities should be **free of charge** to encourage the use and enjoyment of well managed woods.

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NATIVE WOODLAND IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Only 6% of land in Northern Ireland is wooded compared to 10% in the Republic of Ireland, 12% in Britain and an average of 37% in European Union as a whole.
2. The *Ancient Woodland Inventory* produced by the Woodland Trust identified 10,000 hectares, 0.08% of the land area, of ancient and long established woodland in the region. Since felling licences were abolished 50 years ago, 273 ancient woods have been felled.
3. Woodland provides social, health, environmental and economic benefits. It is essential for regulating climate, controlling flow and quality of freshwater, mitigating air pollution, conserving soil and storing carbon. Woodlands are important for biodiversity and excellent areas for many recreational activities.

LEGISLATIVE LANDSCAPE

4. The existing Forestry Act was introduced in 1953 and is now outdated.
5. The Forest Service's 2006 'A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth' established a target to double to 12% the area of 'forest' (NIEL believes this should primarily be met by planting native species in mixed woodlands) in Northern Ireland in 50 years. The Programme for Government includes a target to create 1,650 hectares of new woodland by 2011. Northern Ireland is currently not on course to meet this target.
6. The Department of the Environment is proposing to introduce a duty on all public bodies to further the conservation of biodiversity within the revised Wildlife Order.
7. In July 2009 the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development launched a strategy to promote and facilitate the recreational and social use of forests.
8. Timber production should remain an important element of the new Forestry Act, but the new legislation should enhance the full range of services that woodlands can deliver.

A SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY ACT?

9. The 2009 Forestry Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 29 June and is currently undergoing the scrutiny of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.
10. *Functions of the Department:* the Bill proposes a general duty be placed on the Department (DARD) to "promote forestry"; limits the definition of forestry land to "land held by the Department"; and does not make specific mention of a woodland inventory.

NIEL believes the duty must promote sustainable woodland creation, restoration and management; the Act should apply to all woodland areas/owners; protection should be afforded to all ancient and long-established woodland; and a statutory requirement should be placed on the Department to produce and maintain an up-to-date woodland inventory.

11. *Felling of Trees:* the Bill proposes to reintroduce the requirement for felling licences for trees growing on land of 0.2 hectares or more in area; however, this requirement does not apply to "the felling of trees by a Northern Ireland department..." and does not specifically introduce a presumption against the removal of ancient and long-established woodland.

The incredible biodiversity and public value of ancient and long-established woodlands should be recognised by a statutory presumption against their removal. This presumption and the felling licence regime should apply to all government departments and agencies; including Forest Service (publicly owned forests make up 70% of our woodland resource). Felling licences should be granted subject to conditions, such as the requirement to minimise water pollution during and after felling.

12. *Recreational Opportunities:* the Bill states for the purpose of improving the amenity of forestry land that the Department may provide facilities it considers desirable and may, with the approval of DFP, impose charges for the use of these facilities.

Creating opportunities for sustainable woodland-based recreation should be a clearly stated goal for the Department. Most recreational opportunities should be free of charge to encourage their usage and ultimately to promote the benefits of well managed woods.