

SUBMISSION ON THE IRISH FOREST CERTIFICATION INITIATIVE DRAFT NATIONAL FOREST STANDARD NO. 3

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INTRODUCTION

We have prepared this submission in a personal capacity, but this submission draws on our experience as researchers on the BIOFOREST project (bioforest.ucc.ie), and, in particular, as lead and co-authors of the BIOFOREST report: *Biodiversity assessment in preparation for afforestation: a review of existing practice in Ireland and best practice overseas* (Gittings, et al., 2004). Our submission is concerned with the impacts of afforestation on biodiversity. The fact that we have not commented on other aspects of the *Irish Forest Certification Initiative Draft National Forest Standard No. 3* (referred to as the draft standard hereafter) does not necessarily imply that we endorse the content.

IMPACTS OF AFFORESTATION ON BIODIVERSITY

The draft standard does not provide adequate safeguards to protect open habitats and species of nature conservation importance from the impact of afforestation.

One of the major issues in developing a sustainable forestry policy in Ireland is the impact of afforestation on biodiversity: i.e., ensuring that the planting of previously open habitats does not damage the conservation status of habitats and species of nature conservation importance. As part of the BIOFOREST project, we were lead and co-authors of the report: *Biodiversity assessment in preparation for afforestation: a review of existing practice in Ireland and best practice overseas* (Gittings, et al., 2004). The findings of that report as summarised in the BIOFOREST synthesis report (Iremonger et al., 2007) are included in Appendix 1 of this submission. An unpublished manuscript (*Biodiversity Assessment in Preparation for Afforestation - Existing Irish Practice and Recommendations for Improvements*) prepared from the Gittings et al. (2004) report is attached to this submission.

We concluded that: "lack of adequate strategic assessment, failure of regulations to require biodiversity assessment for the vast majority of afforestation proposals, and serious deficiencies in those biodiversity assessments that are carried out mean that sites of high biodiversity importance are currently at risk of being damaged by afforestation" (Iremonger et al., 2007).

The deficiencies that we identified in our review were concerned with the afforestation consent procedure where sites without nature conservation designations are involved. In our review, we concluded that "current procedures appear to be successful in preventing any possible afforestation damage to designated sites". However, we have since become aware of an afforestation consent that was granted for afforestation of lands within Ballyvergan Marsh proposed Natural Heritage Area. The resulting afforestation has caused significant damage to the nature conservation status of Ballyvergan Marsh (see Appendix 2 for a description of this case) and show that current procedures are not successful in preventing afforestation damage to designated sites.

The draft standard does not have any specific criteria relating to impacts of afforestation on biodiversity. While afforestation impacts on biodiversity are included within the scope of criteria 6.A and 6.B, these are general criteria and do not emphasise the issue of afforestation. Criteria 10.A.1 and 10.A.3 refer to afforestation but do not cover biodiversity issues in sufficient detail and rely on existing guidelines and

procedures (which we have shown to be inadequate; see above) . It is important to emphasise that reliance of existing standards and guidelines (e.g., *Forest Biodiversity Guidelines Code of Best Forest Practice*, and *National Forest Standard*) will not provide adequate safeguards to protect open habitats and species of nature conservation importance from the impact of afforestation. Therefore, **afforestation that is certified under the Irish Forest Certification Initiative National Forest Standard will need to go beyond the requirements of existing guidelines and standards if it is to satisfy sustainable forestry requirements.**

Given the key importance of managing afforestation impacts, as discussed above, we consider that a specific criterion relating to afforestation impacts on biodiversity should be included in the standard and we have drafted a criterion for consideration. This criterion is based on the conclusions of the BIOFOREST project’s review (Gittings et al., 2004; see Appendix 1), which is the only detailed review of the adequacy of existing Irish procedures and practice. As will be apparent from my proposed criterion, **there are requirements for the development of guidelines and training courses to allow the development of sustainable afforestation.**

While we strongly recommend that a specific criterion relating to afforestation impacts on biodiversity should be included in the standard, we have also reviewed the relevant criteria in the draft standard and makes recommendations for their improvement.

PROPOSED CRITERION (TO BE INSERTED UNDER FSC CRITERION 6.2)

IFCI Interpretation	Means of Verification and Guidance Notes
6.C.: Afforestation Impacts on Biodiversity	
<p>A full habitat survey, using the customised version of Fossitt (2000), will be included in applications for afforestation consent. This will be carried out by either an accredited ecologist, or by a forester who has completed an accredited habitat assessment training course.</p> <p>Full details of all afforestation consent applications will be made available for public consultation.</p> <p>All specified habitats will be included in the Area for Biodiversity Enhancement. Any application that contains more than 15% of specified habitats, or for which consultations raise potential biodiversity issues, will be referred to the Forest Service ecologist for assessment as to whether an EIA is required.</p> <p>The biodiversity assessment contained in EISs submitted for afforestation projects will conform to specified standards.</p> <p>Biodiversity assessments contained in EISs will be reviewed by a Forest Service ecologist, or an accredited external ecologist.</p>	<p>Habitat map with description of important habitats.</p> <p>Customised version of Fossitt (2000) (to be developed).</p> <p>Ecologists accredited by membership of professional institute (IEEM) or by specialist training course.</p> <p>Accredited habitat assessment training course for foresters (to be developed)</p> <p>Interactive map-based website with details of afforestation consent applications.</p> <p>List of specified habitats (to be developed)</p> <p>Sample of grant applications from each self-assessment company will be inspected by the Forest Service ecologist</p> <p>Guidelines on standards (to be developed; IEEM guidance to be used in interim)</p>

REVIEW OF EXISTING CRITERIA

6. B. 1. Protection of Rare Species and Habitats

The draft standard includes a list of habitats and species to be protected that is actually quite comprehensive. Most habitats and species whose conservation status could be negatively impacted by afforestation are covered by one or more of the categories mentioned here. Inclusivity is not, therefore, a problem. The issue here is that these categories are too vague to be of practical use in identifying areas that should not be afforested. It is all very well to state that "soil fauna" is of biodiversity significance, but how is soil fauna biodiversity to be identified by an appropriate person and marked on a map? How does this person decide which areas of a site support sufficient soil fauna biodiversity that they require to be protected? How are the habitat categories mentioned (e.g., peatlands, wetlands, semi-natural grasslands, etc.) to be identified? Without referring to literature that provides definitions of these habitats that allow them to be identified (e.g., *A guide to habitats in Ireland*, Fossitt, 2000), these categories cannot be used to distinguish between areas that are and aren't suitable for afforestation. As we discuss in our BIOFOREST review (Gittings et al., 2004), and refer to above in our proposed criterion, a customised version of Fossitt (2000) should be developed to provide a classification that will usefully discriminate between higher and lower quality examples of habitat types commonly encountered on afforestation sites (e.g., differentiating species-poor/semi-improved from species rich/unimproved grasslands).

A second point is the definition of a suitably qualified person, in the context of identifying areas and features of biodiversity importance in an afforestation site. The Guidance notes in the draft standard state that such a person should be either a woodland ecologist, or a qualified forester. Most of the habitats that require protection from afforestation are not woodland habitats, so it follows that the expertise required to identify rare and threatened species and habitats in the context of a pre-afforestation biodiversity assessment is that of an ecologist of non-woodland habitats. Many qualified foresters have not received sufficient training in habitat identification to be able to identify open habitats and species of biodiversity importance. Therefore, the definition of a suitably qualified person in your document should be amended to: "An ecologist or forester accredited by membership of a professional ecological body (e.g. IEEM) or by a specialist training course, to be developed".

In this section, the draft standard identifies hedgerows as being among the habitats that are of particular significance for biodiversity, and should be safeguarded (presumably through exclusion from conventional forestry operations). Similarly, in Section 10. A. 3, the draft standard recommends that areas of scrub be retained in afforested sites; and other documents referred to in this draft standard (e.g. the Code of Best Forest Practice and the Forestry Biodiversity Guidelines) also recommend that areas of hedgerow be retained. These recommendations will tend to be interpreted simply as leaving hedgerows unplanted, with a few metres of space separating them from the forest crop. If hedges are to be effectively retained in forest plantations, so that they are not shaded out as the forest crop matures, a minimum of 10 m unplanted land should be left between the hedge and the forest on either side. This should be stated explicitly in this standard.

10. A. Diversity and Design

1.

The draft standard refers to Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) being required by law on areas > 50 ha, and consultation with local authorities being required in relation to afforestation on areas in excess of 25 ha. Smaller areas are covered by the statement "appropriate environmental appraisals are prepared for smaller schemes in sensitive locations in accordance with FS Code of Best Forest Practice (draft) and FS Guidelines". These texts make reference to biodiversity constraints on afforestation only in the context of areas with formal nature conservation designations. The retention of important habitats is mentioned only in the context of enhancing the biodiversity of afforestation sites by retaining small areas of habitat within these sites - not preventing sites from being afforested in the first place. In fact, in the FS Code of Best Forest Practice, several site types conforming to or overlapping with the broad definitions of habitats given in section 6. B. 1. (e.g., fertile peats, podsols, peaty gleys) are included in a table of plantable sites.

The vast majority of afforestation proposals are for areas of less than 50 ha, and many more are smaller than 25 ha. The draft standard does not, therefore, make adequate provision for protection of sites of nature conservation importance from afforestation outside of designated areas.

3.

The draft standard states that "To avoid negative impacts on valuable habitats consultation with NPWS is required. Valuable habitats as listed in 6. B. 1."

Comment or advice from NPWS should not be restricted to applications for afforestation in or near designated areas, but should be sought wherever an adverse impact on biodiversity is a possible outcome of afforestation. Strategic forestry plans (e.g. Indicative Forestry Strategies) could greatly assist forest inspectors in this regard, by identifying zones within a regional management unit in which biodiversity issues were likely to apply to afforestation proposals.

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APPENDIX 1: EXTRACT FROM BIOFOREST SYNTHESIS REPORT (IREMONGER ET AL., 2007)

3.2 Review of Methods of Biodiversity Assessment

3.2.1 Introduction

The objective of this study was to review different preplanting habitat biodiversity assessment methods used overseas and to highlight those that would be most suitable for integrating into the methodologies used in Ireland. The review focused on the assessment of terrestrial and wetland biodiversity (i.e. largely excluding aquatic biodiversity). There is no standardised protocol for the assessment of biodiversity in afforestation sites, but methods include assessment of species biodiversity using traditional inventory and biota analysis and landscape scale assessment of biodiversity using remote sensing and GIS.

3.2.2 Methods

Information on existing practice in Ireland was collated from a variety of published policy documents, guidelines and reports, and by consultation with personnel in the relevant agencies. In addition, the biodiversity assessments contained in the nine afforestation environmental impact statements (EISs) that had been carried out in Ireland were reviewed. Existing practice was regarded as deficient where it was considered likely to fail to identify sites of high biodiversity importance, resulting in the risk of damage to such sites.

Information on existing practice overseas was obtained by literature searches, a questionnaire survey and web searches. The United Kingdom was the only country where we found evidence of a significant body of relevant information, so we focused a more detailed information search on the United Kingdom. This included a review of a sample of Scottish afforestation environmental statements. Examples of best practice were identified as those that were most likely to identify sites of high biodiversity importance, thereby having greatest potential for prevention of damage to the site biodiversity.

3.2.3 Irish practice

The recent introduction of statutory consent procedures for all afforestation, and new procedures for environmental impact assessment (EIA) of afforestation have addressed the major deficiencies that previously existed in the legislative control of afforestation in Ireland. However, with the exception of criteria relating to designated sites, the legislative procedures for screening for sub-threshold EIAs are not very specific. Local authorities, which should be equipped with strategic overviews of their constituencies, are not required to carry out strategic assessments for forestry. In the few cases where strategic assessments have been prepared, minimal attention is given to potential biodiversity constraints outside designated areas.

The personnel involved in biodiversity assessment for afforestation do not currently receive adequate training or other guidance (e.g. in the Forest Service publication the Forest Biodiversity Guidelines) for the identification of habitats and fauna and flora of biodiversity importance. The employment of an ecologist by the Forest Service was a welcome development, although more than one ecologist is needed. The official guidance on conducting EIAs, published by the EPA, does not deal with issues such as scope, survey methods and evaluation in sufficient detail. None of the EISs reviewed contained adequate assessments of overall biodiversity. The main deficiencies were insufficient scoping, non-standardised habitat/vegetation classifications, reliance on incomplete lists of species with little or no information on abundance or distribution within the site, and little or no evaluation of the conservation importance of the site. The fact that six of the nine afforestation projects for which an EIS was submitted were approved indicates that assessment by the local authorities was deficient. Despite lacking inhouse expertise in biodiversity assessment, the Forest Service and local authorities are responsible for assessing the biodiversity impacts of all afforestation proposals. The state nature conservation agency (National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS)) is only consulted about proposed afforestation located in or near designated areas.

In conclusion, lack of adequate strategic assessment, failure of regulations to require biodiversity assessment for the vast majority of afforestation proposals, and serious deficiencies in those biodiversity assessments that are carried out mean that sites of high biodiversity importance are currently at risk of being damaged by afforestation.

3.2.4 United Kingdom practice

The low area thresholds for an EIA of afforestation projects and the provisions for a sub-threshold EIA appear to provide an effective framework for identifying afforestation projects for which an EIA should be carried out. Local biodiversity action plans provide a coherent method of identifying priority habitats and species. Strategic assessments often include information on biodiversity constraints outside designated sites, with countywide Phase 1 habitat surveys providing a valuable resource. The low area thresholds and provisions for the subthreshold requirement of an EIA make this the principal method used for biodiversity assessment. Other specific procedures for biodiversity assessment have also been developed for special grant schemes and private forestry companies. Preliminary surveys and consultations during the scoping process for an EIA enable identification of those aspects of the site's ecology that require more detailed investigation. Standardised survey methodologies are used, and the survey effort and methods are clearly stated in the environmental statement. Data are also taken from previous surveys and consultations. Where there is a significant nature conservation interest, the findings of the environmental statement are reviewed by the statutory nature conservation agency.

In conclusion, the ecological information that is available through strategic assessments, conservation designations and consultation with both statutory and non-statutory conservation organisations means that, for most forestry proposals, the Forestry Commission is able to make well-informed decisions about whether an environmental assessment is necessary and what its scope should be. Where best practice is achieved, environmental assessments are successful in identifying much of the biodiversity held by a site, either through field surveys or through reviews of existing knowledge. Generally, assessment procedures are such that the risk of new afforestation resulting in significant damage to conservation interests in the UK is low.

APPENDIX 2: HABITAT LOSS CAUSED BY AFFORESTATION AT BALLYVERGAN MARSH

Ballyvergan Marsh is one of the most important wetland sites in County Cork. It is a proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA). While it has not been selected as a Special Area of Conservation by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), it is included in the shadow list (of sites that qualify for SAC status) drawn up by An Taisce, Birdwatch Ireland, Coastwatch Ireland, Irish Peatland Conservation Council, and the Irish Wildlife Trust (Dwyer, 2000).

We have recently become aware of the fact that the Forest Service granted consent for afforestation of an area within the pNHA, and this area was afforested in 2004. The area afforested held species-rich wet grassland/marsh habitat and supported the Marsh Fritillary butterfly (recorded here in 1999 and 2000; RPS Ireland, 2002). The Marsh Fritillary is listed on Annex 2 of the Habitats Directive and is threatened throughout Europe.

The application for which the Forest Service granted consent was the third application for afforestation on these particular lands. The previous two applications were refused following objections by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. In the case of the third application, an internal report within NPWS recommended objection, but this objection was never communicated to the Forest Service.

This is the second time in recent years that afforestation has damaged Ballyvergan Marsh - a large area at the western end was afforested in the mid-1990s without any consultation with NPWS.

It is extremely worrying that a well-known site like Ballyvergan Marsh can be damaged in this way and this case dramatically illustrates the failure of afforestation consent procedures to protect an important site. While the lack of a response from NPWS to the Forest Service consultation was obviously a contributory factor, there are other aspects of an adequate afforestation consent procedure that would identify important nature conservation sites. For example, the entire area afforested should have been identified as "habitats...of particular interest", as required under the *Forest Biodiversity Guidelines*. The presence of Marsh Fritillaries (a "species of particular interest" in the context of the *Forest Biodiversity Guidelines*) would have been identified if adequate consultation had been carried out. In combination, these factors should have flagged the potential nature conservation importance of the area and should have prevented reliance on the lack of a submission from NPWS as the only consideration of the nature conservation implications of the afforestation proposal.