Continuing Developments
For Continuous Cover Forestry

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The past year has seen a number of significant developments for Continuous Cover Forestry (CCF) in Ireland. As many readers will be aware, CCF is the management of irregular structure woodlands, with multiple canopy layers and an emphasis on natural regeneration to achieve stand renewal and sustainability. Traditionally, production forests have been managed on a rotational system, often with clear-felling and re-planting in Sitka spruce stands taking place on a 35-40 year cycle. For owners of small woodlands, in particular, CCF is becoming increasingly attractive due to savings in management costs, such as replanting and weeding, while generating a continuous income from regular stand interventions. Relatively few woodlands are currently being managed on CCF principles, but this is destined to change with new policy measures, investment and research coming on stream, as described further in this article.

Forest Policy

A new grant scheme dedicated to CCF was announced by Andrew Doyle TD, Minister of State for Forestry, on 22 January 2019. This initiative is part of a wider strategy to promote the sustainability, resilience and biodiversity of Ireland’s forest estate. A maximum of 30 applications will be approved in the first year. There will then follow a review of progress before the measure is extended forward from 2020. Funding is for 12 years to assist with planning and management costs associated with stand transformation to CCF. Three cost-based payments will be made, up to €750/ha in year 1, another payment of €750/ha between years 4-8 and a final payment of €750/ha at year 12. The management plan must follow a standard template and payments are based on work in the plan being completed. Foresters making applications on behalf of clients must provide evidence of prior knowledge or training in CCF.

The new CCF management grant has been called a “landmark” in Irish forestry. There have been a significant number of applications within just the first few months of the ministerial announcement. With approximately 22,000 small and farm woodland owners across the country, there is potential for CCF to be widely adopted.

New Investment

Another notable development for CCF took place in May 2018 with the launch of the SLM Silva Fund. This fund will be managed by SLM Partners, an asset management company that acquires and manages rural land on behalf of institutional investors. The company’s mission is to scale up regenerative, ecological farming and forestry systems that deliver financial returns and environmental benefits. The SLM Silva Fund is backed by the European Investment Bank (EIB), Irish investors and other European institutional investors. The EIB investment package includes €12.5 million in EU guaranteed loans, plus additional funding for training and development activities.

The EIB investment package for CCF is part of the bank’s Natural Capital Financing Facility, launched in 2015. This is a €400m initiative
intended to protect Europe’s natural capital. The facility will enable institutional investors to support alternative sustainable forestry models and support Ireland’s ambition to protect biodiversity, soils and landscapes, and combat threats associated with climate change.

The investment strategy for the fund is to acquire existing plantations in Ireland and, where possible, transform them to CCF. SLM Partners is collaborating with Purser Tarleton Russell Limited (PTR), a leading forestry management, consultancy and research firm with deep experience in Continuous Cover Forestry. PTR will be responsible for managing the forest properties after acquisition. The increment in growth is removed as ‘income’ preserving the ‘capital’ of the standing forest. Environmental impact monitoring, training and development activities will continue over the lifetime of the fund.

Research and Development

The most important research project currently taking place is the TranSSFor Project. This is dedicated to the transformation of Sitka spruce stands to continuous cover forestry. Given that Sitka spruce accounts for over 50% of the productive forest area in Ireland, it is essential that more detailed research is conducted with this species to understand how it can be managed on CCF principles.

The primary objective of the TranSSFor Project is to compare crown and graduated density thinning with conventional (low) thinning regimes in two productive woodlands, one on gley soil and the other on brown earth (Figure 1). Crown and graduated density thinning are thought to promote stand structural diversity and facilitate natural regeneration.

The trial was established at the time of first thinning in 2010. The stands are currently at the third thinning stage and are being assessed in terms of stand stability, productivity, timber quality, environmental impacts, operational factors and economic performance. The project is being led

*Figure 2. Students from Waterford Institute of Technology developing tree marking skills at the marteloscope in Gughaval Forest.*
Continuous Cover Forestry

by Teagasc Forestry Development Department and UCD, with support from Coillte and a farm woodland owner.

Other applied research taking place at the present time includes monitoring of Research Stands established by the Irregular Silviculture Network (ISN). Seven different forest type stands have been identified in the network, with detailed inventory being repeated on a 5-year cycle. This is generating information on the transformation in stand structures, natural regeneration, economic performance and ecological attributes. A separate network of training plots, known as marteloscopes, have been set up to help develop skills in tree marking and preparation of stand prescriptions (Figure 2).

In a new development for Coillte, a project called BioClass has mapped biodiversity areas across their estate. This has flagged sites where CCF is the recommended management option for enhancing biodiversity value of the forest stand, while also managing for quality timber.

Linked to the programme of CCF research is a growing need for knowledge transfer. Forestry Knowledge Transfer Groups (KTGs), supported by DAFM, are enabling woodland owners to develop skills and understanding of woodland management, especially in CCF. Regular meetings and forest visits are a feature of KTGs, with additional support provided by the advisory team at Teagasc.

Pro Silva Ireland

ProSilva Ireland (PSI) is the leading non-profit organisation and registered charity dedicated to CCF in Ireland. Over many years, Pro Silva Ireland has forged strong links with similar forestry groups across Europe. Pro Silva Ireland organises two Open Forest Days each year in woodlands being transformed to CCF. Among other activities, PSI organises an annual international study tour (Figure 3) and provides input to relevant DAFM forest policy consultations. From Spring 2019, PSI has launched a series of 2-day short courses in tree marking and stand transformation. There are plans to extend this series and add new topics in response to growing interest and demand.

Concluding Points

Across the forestry sector at the present time, high timber prices continue to spur on the sector and draw more woodland into active management. The imperatives to enhance the resilience, sustainability and biodiversity of woodlands are stimulating new interest in CCF. With the introduction of a new grant, investment initiatives and training programmes there has never been a better time for woodland owners to give CCF their serious consideration.

More Information

- Pro Silva Ireland – www.prosilvatireland.com
- Forest Service - www.agriculture.gov.ie/forestservice
- Teagasc Forestry Development Department - www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry
- SLM Partners - www.slmpartners.com/activities/slmsilva
- UCD Forestry - www.ucd.ie/agfood

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