



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Forestry Bill

1 December 2009

Mr Patrick Casement (Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside):

Thank you for the invitation to the Committee and for the opportunity to say a few words. The CNCC was set up in 1989, following the publication of the Balfour report, which looked into the delivery of nature conservation in Northern Ireland, in light of what was happening across the water where separate agencies were set up in different countries. Scottish Natural Heritage, English Nature and Countryside Council for Wales were independent bodies, and Jean Balfour looked at whether a similar body should be set up here.

She concluded that such a body should not be set up here and that nature conservation and countryside matters should remain within the Department of the Environment in what was then the Environment Service. As a form of scrutiny, however, she recommended that the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside be set up to provide independent scrutiny and advice to the Department on matters around nature, conservation and the countryside. That was an amalgamation of two existing committees — the Committee for Nature Conservation and the Ulster Countryside Committee. The CNCC is one of three statutory advisory councils to the Department of the Environment. The others are the Historic Monuments Council and the Historic Buildings Council.

The CNCC has a chairman and a deputy chairman who are paid, and up to 18 other members from a wide background who share a strong interest in our natural heritage. Current membership includes university professors, geologists, three people who work for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), retired civil servants, schoolteachers, environmental consultants, farmers, and engineers. There is a wide range of people who come from different viewpoints but who have a strong love of the national heritage. We do not always have a focused or narrow view of anything that we are looking at; we tend to take a fairly broad view, because we come from a broad range of backgrounds. In a sense, our response reflects that.

I was fairly new to the post when the response was produced, and Peter Archdale, the deputy chairman, was not in post. Since the response, the council has had a fairly major turnover. It was reconstituted in February. Therefore, several other points have come to light; we will touch on those during the session.

The Chairperson:

Has the turnover in council membership affected the balance that you outlined?

Mr Casement:

Perhaps slightly. For example, it has probably increased the interest in public access to the countryside. There is less specific interest in woodland, per se. Having said that, most people still have a strong interest in forestry and woodland. However, their knowledge is less specialised. I do not think that it has affected the views; it may have affected the light in which people look at certain things. Further scrutiny of the Bill has uncovered one or two additional points.

The main points remain absolutely clear: we feel that commercial production, environmental benefit and community benefit should have equal importance in the Bill. It is too heavily weighted towards commercial production. We are absolutely clear about the importance of the Forest Service's land for recreational and educational purposes in the absence of a public footpath network and for public health benefits. We are absolutely clear about the need for sustainable forests such as continuous cover forestry, which provides biodiversity and water quality benefits and improves flood protection and carbon retention. We are clear about the need for forest protection and forest expansion.

Mr Peter Archdale (Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside):

I will summarise the views that have emerged since we submitted the consultation letter. The Bill is not ambitious enough. It lacks vision and the broad recognition that forestry provides far more than commercial production. To a certain extent, that is evidenced by the value of the timber, in monetary terms, that comes from our forests. Frankly, the Forest Service runs at a loss. Therefore, as far as we are concerned, arguments in favour of more of the same do not really wash.

Over the past couple of years, there has been a greater awareness of ecosystem services. As Patrick mentioned, that is the broad recognition of all the advantages and services that are provided by an ecosystem. That does not apply to forests only; it is in the water framework directive and applies to whole catchment areas and all the things that are happening therein. The role of forests to service the environment is huge. For example, forests clean water and contribute to water quality. There are examples in England where water from forests needs virtually no treatment and, therefore, saves money. The need to recognise all the other benefits is missing from the Bill. That is not particular to the forestry element, but it is a good starting point.

Frankly, the Bill, as it is couched at the moment, gives too much power to the Forest Service. Some aspects of it say that the Forest Service is the appropriate body to judge outcomes. Where the outcome is commercial forestry, I would argue that it is not taking all the factors into account.

Another example of that is the issue of felling licensing. It is difficult to understand why that applies to only the public authority sector, given that the Department and, indeed, other Departments are exempt. We have noted that issue in the council, and there seems to be quite a level of detail about how RPA will impact on some of the really basic services that councils provide once it is implemented. As the Bill stands, any council has the power to fell trees without the requirement for a licence. However, the question is: where are they going to get the expertise to make that judgement? They could go back to Forest Service, but that would make the system very cumbersome, which takes us back to the point about whether commercial forestry is driving the decision-making process.

The Chairperson:

If commercial forestry were successful, would you be more sympathetic to the Bill? You make a strong point about the fact that commercial forestry runs at a loss and yet it is our drive and motivation.

Mr Archdale:

That question has two distinct parts, one of which is about *[Inaudible.]* It is fair to consider the issue as purely financial; and, in straightened times, it probably should be considered as such. However, one is not comparing like with like, which is the broader issue. One of the reasons why commercial forestry is not operating at a profit is because the quality of the timber we produce does not fit all the requirements of this country. I accept that we use some of our own timber and that we use some for biomass, but we also import vast amounts, which takes me to my next point.

In part, the Forestry Bill is an expression of the way in which we want to manage forestry, but it does not cover all elements. In September, during a field trip to Wales, we met an organisation there called Coed Cymru, which looks at the gamut of forest services, from organisations that plant trees to those that want to produce and market charcoal, wicker fences, biomass products and hardwoods for furniture. Northern Ireland does not have that. It has only a market for softwood, which is used for either biomass or posts and building materials. There is a need for a

facilitating organisation such as the one in Wales to incentivise other areas to produce different forms of wood products. You will be aware that Forest Service's present target is 550 hectares per annum. Last year, it managed 289 hectares, all of which were planted by private landowners. The Forest Service did not plant any new trees last year; it only replanted.

The Chairperson:

Has the council identified any ways of incentivising the marketplace?

Mr Archdale:

In fairness to Forest Service, it noted that issue in last year's report. Consequently, it put together an advisory group comprising conservationists, producers and some government representatives. Forest Service's recent announcement that it will increase the woodland grant scheme rates has been seen as addressing one of the problems. However, there are intrinsic difficulties in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

That new grant will now pay £2,400 a hectare for broad leaved woodland and £1,600 a hectare for conifer woodland. Do you think that that is a strong enough incentive?

Mr Archdale:

I cannot answer yes or no, because I have not tested the water with anybody. In my case, which is probably a good example, I have about 40 hectares of land, of which about one third is woodland, and I would like to increase that. However, the associated problem, which is what every farmer is dealing with, is that it is difficult to look 40 years ahead to the time when I will get the cash for the crop.

In forestry, it has always taken a long time between planting and getting cash, and a lot changes during that time. Few farmers will want to commit for that long. In the initial phase, much of the grant is taken up by planting costs. The grant covers the establishment costs, effectively, and there is then a period of no income and few outgoings, and then the final payment comes. That period will reduce, so, in that sense, it should encourage new planting.

Against that is making a commitment for long periods. The only way around that is to have a different form of woodland management. That might not be short rotation coppice, in which the

land is treated like a crop of grass, but short rotation forestry, where firewood is cut every eight or 10 years. Under that system, there can be more cycles, and income is brought in during phases when the grant is not paid. The wording of the previous grant eligibility criteria did not allow that. I have not yet had the chance to check the current wording, because it is was issued recently.

The Chairperson:

It was issued on 26 November 2009.

Mr Casement:

There is also a perception that farmers will lose single farm payments for areas on which they plant trees. One of the best kept secrets in agriculture is that farmers in Northern Ireland are subject to an exemption by which they receive the same amount of single farm payment on a smaller area if some of their land is planted with trees. Therefore, that is not a real issue.

The Chairperson:

In November 2009, the Department's statement reminded those who claimed the single farm payment in 2008 that they can now plant and receive the single farm payment as well as the annual farm woodland premium scheme payment.

Mr Casement:

That has been the case since the single farm payment was introduced, but we are only hearing about it now.

The Chairperson:

It should have been marketed better.

Mr Casement:

It should be a strong selling point for the forestry grant system.

The Chairperson:

In the Department's statement of around 300 words, that information is contained in the last paragraph before the notes to editors.

Mr Casement:

It is a curious way of dealing with that, and it is a serious omission.

Mr Archdale:

The Bill's proposals for the overarching role of Forest Service contain little or no mention of the benefits that Patrick touched on, including carbon capture, water improvements and the sustainable development elements. There needs to be a duty on the Department to allow for those benefits, although it is not clear how that would be defined. The Department of the Environment is working on that through the biodiversity duty for councils, which will be part of the review of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, which the Committee will consider shortly. The issue is not discussed in the Forestry Bill.

Mr Casement:

On the issue of carbon capture, 90% of the carbon that is stored is in the soils, and only around 10%, if that, is in above-ground vegetation. Planting large numbers of trees will make some difference, but it will be small. The question of where trees are planted is even more important; rushing out and draining all our peatlands must be avoided, because that is where the bulk of carbon is stored.

The moment that a deep plough is put through a piece of deep blanket bog, large areas are exposed to oxidisation. Carbon dioxide and methane are produced as a result of that, and that leads to a significant loss of carbon, rather than a gain from the trees that are planted. Therefore, it is imperative that we do not drain and plant our blanket bogs and peatlands. If blanket bogs and peatlands are healthy, they will continue to grow and store more carbon at a rate that is at least as good, if not better, than forestry. There is a balance to be gained, and we have to be very careful that we do not do more damage than good by planting trees all over the place.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for that presentation. You raised a lot of points that other groups raised, such as the Bill not being ambitious enough and the fact that there could be too much power vested in the Forest Service. Those points have been made to the Committee quite forcefully by a number of groups.

I want to go back to the issue of incentivisation. It would be helpful if you would seek a

broader view from your members on that point and inform the Committee. We would like to get a handle on what constitutes good incentivisation. In light of the statement made by the Department on 27 November 2009, it would be good to know if that is going the right way. Perhaps you would make a judgement on that, as it is something that we will need to comment on after our deliberations.

You do recognise that social and recreational activities could also be commercial ventures. I assume that you will be encouraging those activities as a potential, although not necessarily exclusively, commercial projects.

Mr Casement:

Our concern is that creating a commercial opportunity from that would deprive the wider public use of the forests. This is public land, and there are huge benefits from public access to that land and from exercise in the countryside. That is something that we are only beginning to get to grips with. We have commissioned research that looks at the public health benefits of the natural environment and we are already getting some very interesting results just from looking at research that has already been done. A lot of research has been done in urban situations, such as urban parks, but there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that access to green spaces makes a huge difference to people's physical and mental health.

We had a discussion about that recently, and I sense that in the council there is a concern that opening forests to commercial operations, whereby people pay to go into a forest to do a certain activity, excludes others from using the forest in a low-key manner. There may be a place for that commercial activity. However, I do not think that it should be the main thrust of forestry policy. We see forests as a public benefit rather than a goldmine for Forest Service.

The Chairperson:

To get to a forest, most people have to drive or take a bus, and, potentially, have to pay for parking. They can then enjoy a walk in the countryside and perhaps some refreshments that may be available from a vendor.

Mr Casement:

I do not think that one would have any objection to that. However, there has been talk of aerial walkways and exciting adventure playgrounds and so on.

The Chairperson:

If people want to bring their pushbikes into forests, will they have to pay for that?

Mr Casement:

It is important that there is a huge range of things going on in forestry. However, the point I am making is that one would not want to see a directive that points solely towards commercial operations and which excludes a large proportion of the population.

The Chairperson:

Nowadays, there are very few ventures in the countryside that are free.

Mr Archdale:

There are 75,500 hectares of land managed by Forest Service, which is not quite the same thing as 75,500 hectares of forest. Last year, its report showed that the access charges were £700,000. Turning the thing on its head, there is an argument to be made that, because that land is publicly owned, there should be a right of access.

I am fortunate to live near Gortin Forest Park, and, on the occasions that I go there, I have seen that it is all down to the honesty of individuals as to whether they pay. That £700,000 does not equate to the number of visitors to the forest.

The Chairperson:

It is not feasible to just use the forests and throw things at one's feet. We have to pay for maintenance.

Mr Archdale:

Exactly, so why not acknowledge that fact and say that we are providing these facilities for the public good? That will stop people from thinking that by paying a fee they have the right to damage the facilities. We should turn it around and say that the public has a duty to look after them. There is a positive message there about access and the environment, and we should consider that.

The Chairperson:

You talked about interpretation of the Bill with regard to commercial timber production that includes development of land. The Department has come back and said:

“The provision in the Bill gives full recognition to the social and environmental aspects of sustainable forestry management.”

I assume that you continue to disagree with that point.

Mr Archdale:

The Bill points to the woodland assurance scheme, which is, effectively, the certification under which the Forest Service operates. It is a UK-wide scheme, and there has been recent consultation about it. The proposals in the scheme are broadly in line with our thinking. The Forest Service operates under the same scheme at the moment, so I do not see why it should change. There is nothing in the Bill that would change the current arrangements, under which the Forest Service acts as judge and jury; it makes the decisions. When the Forest Service makes a decision for commercial reasons to fell a coop of timber, it can go ahead and do it, as long as it says that it is meeting the woodland assurance scheme standards.

There have been efforts to consult with stakeholders, but those have been incredibly sporadic. The northern region held one consultation last year, which was impressive and thorough. It covered issues such as access, shooting rights, recreation and water quality, but as far as I am aware, that is the only occasion on which any such consultation took place. It did not happen in the western region, as far as I know.

I am aware that the Department intends to consult more frequently and on a more holistic basis, but we have their word for it —

The Chairperson:

To be fair, you are saying that they are not really listening to you.

Mr Archdale:

We do not see any evidence of it as regards that degree of consultation. There are an awful lot of stakeholders in forestry, and it is difficult to get them all together to tell them what is being planned while saying that it will not impact on any of them.

Mr Elliott:

Thank you for your presentation, gentlemen. I declare an interest as a farmer.

There are a couple of issues. Broadly speaking, does your organisation include representatives from the commercial timber industry?

Mr Casement:

We do not have any representatives as such. We are all appointed by the Minister as individuals, so there is no representation of bodies on the CNCC in that sense.

Mr Elliott:

Is there anyone from that industry who would be easily identifiable?

Mr Casement:

No. We do not have any connection to commercial timber growing at all, in that sense. We are limited by the people who apply to come on to the council, and further limited by the results of interviews —

Mr Elliott:

I am trying to get a handle on the make-up of the council. You have concentrated on the recreational use of forests, and I have no difficulty with that. I am trying to determine what sort of contact or co-operation that you have with commercial timber producers in order to get a real picture of how they look at things. I am approaching this from the point of view of a farmer who wants to plant 20 acres or 40 acres of woodland. What role do you have with them?

Mr Archdale:

For a start, I am one of those people.

Mr Casement:

Me too.

Mr Elliott:

If I wanted to access the woodland scheme and plant 40 acres of forest, how would you

encourage me to do so? To be blunt, what I have heard would almost discourage me from doing so. I am very concerned that Forest Service has overall control. Groups such as you sometimes look at the environmental and nature aspects without looking at the timber production issues.

Mr Archdale:

From my point of view, the incentive to plant is the fact that, in all likelihood, I will be leaving a legacy to my children when I die, because I very much doubt that I will see the crop come to fruition, particularly because I want to plant broad leaf. I have to balance the particulars of the income that I already derive from the farm annually against what the grant scheme will pay and the amount of effort and hassle that would be involved. Without going too far down that line, there is currently a disconnect between the advice that I receive from countryside management branch, which purely advises on countryside management and farming, and the forestry element. Therefore, when I tell the branch that I wish to plant, it will give me the phone number of the Forest Service representative — I think that there are two of them in total to cover the whole of Northern Ireland — and we will agree a time and discuss the planting requirements. It is then a straightforward commercial decision.

If one says that there is a spectrum in farming, with the intensive dairy farmer at one end and the fairly non-intensive part-time farmer at the other, there will be difference in relation to how much weight they put on the environmental versus commercial factors. I freely admit that I am well down on the environmental side. However, that applies to every single farmer in every shape or form. The age range of the farming community is particularly relevant. It makes a lot of the take-up very difficult because most of them say that they will never live to see the fruition.

Mr Casement:

Peter and I are probably roughly on or just below the average age for farmers, which is a fairly serious thought in itself. However, we are probably exceptions because we are both considering planting more trees. For a lot of people of our age, it is not something that even crosses their minds. This is as much a cultural issue as it is about financial incentive. We would probably be happy with the incentive because we are inclined to plant trees anyway, but I am not sure that it will —

The Chairperson:

Are you a full-time farmer?

Mr Casement:

I am no longer a full-time farmer. I have been for 30 years, but I am easing out of farming. In a sense, it is a matter of people's predispositions. If people could be encouraged to think about planting trees from a more cultural perspective, they may find the incentives more attractive. However, unless they are predisposed to it, there is always the sense that, no matter how big the incentive, people could get more if they did not plant trees, because the land would be available for other things.

Mr Archdale:

It is a very difficult equation to solve because it is not just an issue here in Northern Ireland. Forest Service puts a lot of effort into trying to get people to plant more trees, but it has failed consistently. The issue is wider: it is down to the long timescale involved. There are some big estates here, although there are more over the water. Such people think in 100- to 200-year timescales. They really believe in planting because they see that that will not benefit them, perhaps not even their children, but the generation beyond that. Forestry requires that long-term view, which, unfortunately, is not terribly common in Northern Ireland.

Mr Casement:

Since Forest Service was set up in the 1920s, we have traditionally regarded timber as something that is cropped once and then replanted. People here wait until the crop is mature and crop it again rather than treating it as a continuous crop. Forests are managed very differently on the continent, where a continuous harvest is extracted from the forest as opposed to our clear-felling approach. People on the continent view the forest as a continuous source of income rather than waiting 40 years and hoping for a big bonanza. Taking a longer-term view engenders a very different attitude to forestry. However, we are where we are, and it is difficult to move from one system to another.

The Chairperson:

We could move to another system if there were a proper incentive.

Mr Casement:

If we could find a way of incentivising a shift away from clear-felling and towards more continuous-cover forestry, we would see a gradual shift in attitudes, but that will take time.

Mr Elliott:

I have still not heard what your organisation and Forest Service will do to encourage the farming community to plant more forests. I do not think that Forest Service does a particularly good job in that regard either. The farming community is the only source through which additional forests will be planted, unless Forest Service attempts to buy more land, an approach that seems to have slowed greatly. I am sorry for being blunt, but I have not heard anything from you or anyone else about what can be done to create real incentives to encourage planting. I am interested in forestry, and I have some of my own.

Mr Archdale:

Is what is missing a master plan, or grand vision, of how Northern Ireland should be forested? Our fragmented land ownership makes it difficult for the Government to target money at big concepts, such as ecosystem services, and achieve ancillary goals such as linking with other forests, protecting ancient woodland and targets on water quality and the carbon catch. This is big thinking —

Mr Elliott:

If you do not mind me saying, that is not in the interests of farmers. Those are not the issues that are on farmers' minds. What is on the minds of farmers who milk 40 or 50 cows, or who have 40 or 50 suckler cows, is that their work will no longer be sustainable. There is an opportunity where there are less intensive farming methods, and the single farm payment pushes that agenda. More farmers are going out of business, and this should be the perfect opportunity to plant more trees and have more forest cover. However, it is not happening because farmers do not see that they will get a viable return.

Mr Archdale:

The financial element is central, but the timescale makes it difficult.

Returning to my point about the bigger picture, Jim McAdam of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute has been doing some interesting work on agri-forestry, which benefits both stock and forestry. We also saw good examples of that in Wales. However, there is no incentive for the Government to consider that approach, because they look at things in isolation. More joined-up government is needed. Let me be blunt: Forest Service does not even know how much

forest it owns or where it is. It has a pretty good idea, but a public inventory is missing. How can the Government, who are represented by Forest Service, give a strong lead? It is a mystery?

Mr Casement:

The situation is complicated. Peter Archdale is talking about joined-up government, but we are an advisory body to the Department of the Environment and talking to farmers is not part of our remit. We are only here because the Committee invited us.

The Chairperson:

I appreciate that. Is your council appointed by the DOE?

Mr Casement:

Yes, it is.

The Chairperson:

How many people sit on the council?

Mr Casement:

There are about 18 of us.

The Chairperson:

Are their salaries paid from the public purse?

Mr Casement:

All the members are volunteers, except for myself and Peter Archdale.

Mr Archdale:

We are also volunteers.

Mr Casement:

Basically, we are volunteers, but we receive a small sum.

The Chairperson:

Does the council have a budget to carry out its work?

Mr Casement:

We have an approximate budget.

The Chairperson:

What size is that approximately?

Mr Casement:

I cannot tell you, because we do not have access to that information. We make a case to the Department for what we want to do, and it either says yes or no.

The Chairperson:

Essentially, you are answerable to the Minister of the Environment.

Mr Casement:

Yes, we are.

Mr Shannon:

I will follow on from what Tom Elliott asked you. All farmers and landowners want to see how they can best utilise their land due to diminishing returns in their businesses. They have to look for alternative sources of income. Forestry is more than a walk in the park; for many, it represents an income over a number of years.

The Chairperson mentioned the incentive that there is in the woodland grant scheme. There is a bigger emphasis on planting broadleaf trees than there is on planting conifer trees. From what you have said, I presume that you welcome the incentive to plant broadleaf trees. Patrick Archdale mentioned a vision. Does that vision match the vision of landowners and farmers? I am not sure that it does.

Mr Casement:

I suspect that it does not. Our vision is for a much more interconnected network of woodlands across Northern Ireland. In small woodland, our emphasis is on broadleaf trees rather than commercial conifers, although there can be blocks of commercial forestry here and there. How do you persuade individuals to plant certain trees when they are not very interested in doing so

and cannot see a return? That is the problem that we have raised.

Mr Shannon:

By their very nature, landowners and farmers will want to start off by planting trees in sections of fields. Most farmers are involved already that process. Farms in Northern Ireland are much smaller, so it is harder for farmers to find places to plant trees.

I do not disagree with you about the ploughing-up of bogs. When the furrow hits a bog, some of the ecosystem of that bog may be destroyed. However, a landowner or farmer will want to forest land that is perfectly productive from an arable farming point of view. Are you saying that they should not do that?

Mr Casement:

No; I was talking purely about peatland soils, not mineral soils. In general, it is not a problem to grow trees on land that is suitable for arable farming and for growing crops and grass. I am talking about upland peat primarily as well as lowland peat bogs, which are inappropriate places to grow commercial trees.

Mr Shannon:

You said that it is important where trees are planted. Are you saying that trees should be planted closer to towns? What did you mean?

Mr Casement:

Again, I meant that trees should not be planted on our peatlands. Peatlands are our prime carbon stores, so planting on them risks doing more damage and increases in carbon dioxide.

Mr Archdale:

The countryside management scheme rewards farmers for planting riparian zones with trees. That is an attempt to improve water quality, and is an ancillary benefit of forestry. That timber is not expected to be harvested in any productive form. It may well end up as firewood or coppice, but such planting is encouraged to improve water quality.

Mr Shannon:

You said that the Forest Service cannot quantify how much the land it owns. I was told in reply

to a question to the Minister how much land the Forest Service owns. Therefore, they may have some idea about what they control.

Many and diffuse groups want to use Forestry Service property and land. It is not impossible to have a portion of forestry made available for mountain bike riding, for example, or picnicking, walks in the park, shooting, or, if there are ponds, for angling. There are lots of opportunities if the land is managed correctly. There is a place in the Forestry Bill for everyone. Do you agree?

Mr Casement:

There certainly should be, although I am not convinced that there is.

Mr Archdale:

That comes back to my point about the woodland assurance scheme. It is impossible to tell any one group to decide the relative priorities and the best way to proceed for woodland. It is a stakeholder process, and I strongly favour using a stakeholder mechanism that can be used to arrive at a consensus for that management. At the moment, it is handed down on tablets of stone from the Forest Service, which decides on limits of access or what land will be available, for example, for mountain biking. The absence of that mechanism is what concerns us. Put simply, good democracy will determine the balance of advantages and disadvantages for each group.

The Chairperson:

I think that you will find conifers better for snipe-shooting. Jim, is that right?

Mr Shannon:

I have some hardwoods on my land, but they will be there until the day that I die, and probably my son and grandchild. However, they are there for one purpose: to shoot pigeons. *[Laughter.]* That is it, and I am quite honest about that. I can do that. My point is that everyone can do that.

Mr Savage:

You spoke about your visit to forests in Wales. How does our Forest Service compare with government forestry services across the rest of the UK?

Mr Archdale:

I am not in any way qualified, or have the knowledge, to answer that. I was specifically referring

to an organisation called Coed Cymru, which was set up to facilitate the establishment of small producers and suppliers. Farmers, too, can avail of its services. The organisation recognises that woodlands provide far more than just commercial softwoods or hardwoods, and that a great range of businesses are involved at all levels with forestry. Coed Cymru's role is to facilitate the joining up of producers and suppliers, and make the market work better. That was my impression after two visits to that organisation.

Mr Savage:

Is the Forest Service lacking something or lagging behind? Could it do more? By the way, Chairman, I declare an interest. Could more be done to encourage woodland planting in Northern Ireland? I am thinking of all the government land, so if they are encouraging the private sector to plant trees, why are they not doing it themselves?

Mr Archdale:

The forestry market in Northern Ireland —

Mr Savage:

I am being guided by what you people are saying, because, although I am not involved in the industry, I am very keen to listen to what you have to say.

Mr Archdale:

I hesitate to speak authoritatively on the subject, but my observation is that the market here is monolithic. The commercial reality is that we have a limited number of mills, which get five-year contracts. I would like to fell two and a half acres of mature Sitka spruce that my father planted in 1960. It is lovely timber, but it is not worth felling. After costs, I would get about £1,000 for it, which is daft. However, that is the reality of small-scale woodland production at the moment.

In the 1960s, farmers were encouraged, much like now, to plant trees in corners of their land, although, nowadays, they plant hardwoods rather than softwoods. Should we not be facilitating, for example, biomass production from softwood woodchip? That is the sort of joined-up approach that is missing. I do not know the market well enough to suggest how to get round such problems, but things seem to work better in Wales than here. That is as much as I can say on the subject, and I would not like to get any further into it.

Mr Casement:

We saw an extraordinary Coed Cymru project to change the market in Wales by developing a house that can be built from Sitka spruce timber. Traditionally, we thought that home-grown timber was inappropriate for house building because it is not strong enough. However, Coed Cymru created a modular house that could be used in any circumstance and put together to create various types of housing. As a result, home-grown Sitka spruce now has potentially much higher value. Those houses can be put up overnight, at a cost of £40,000 each.

That sort of vision that is lacking here; looking at the thing from start to finish, not just growing trees, but considering what to do with the timber, carrying the whole process through from one end to the other.

Mr Savage:

It is interesting that you mention your vision for the future, because wooden chalets are being advertised in some of the farming magazines, so you would be entering a niche market. Do we provide the type of timber here that would address those issues?

Mr Casement:

The project that we saw in Wales was producing proper and permanent housing with incredibly low heating costs, etc. To run one of them would cost something like £100 a year in electricity. They are quite extraordinary houses. It is cutting-edge stuff, which was very interesting and exciting to see. In our forest industry, one does not get that sense of vision or energy.

One point that we did not mention about Coed Cymru, which I think that the Chairman might be interested in, is that I believe that there is only one salaried individual directly employed. I believe that there are eight individuals who are all on secondment from other organisations that recognise the value that they get from it.

Mr Savage:

Chairman, I want to follow up what Mr Archdale said about the lack of vision. You gentlemen are employed by DOE. Will DOE give planning permission to build the type of chalets that we have discussed?

The Chairman:

George, just for the record — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Casement:

I have to admit that that is beyond our expertise.

The Chairperson:

I do not think that DOE could afford Patrick. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Savage:

You talk about vision and expertise. Has enough knowledge been obtained and background work been done to take projects forward into that niche market?

Mr Casement:

Certainly, that has been happening in Wales. I cannot answer whether planning permission will be granted. If someone has planning permission for a house, that person has a right to put a house there. That is the individual's choice. That is beyond my expertise.

The Chairperson:

We will move on.

Mr Burns:

I apologise for my late arrival. I missed the start of your presentation. Everybody wants more trees and woodland to be planted, and for that to be part of land management. However, it comes down to whether farmers would consider that to be profitable, as Tom mentioned. A farmer who is involved in forestry and planting trees would be considered an upmarket farmer. Ordinary farmers would not be involved in that.

Mr Elliott:

Just for the record, I do not class myself as upmarket. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Burns:

You are, Tom; there is no question about it. I want to ask about woodland insurance. We see pictures of forest fires in the news. You could have woodland that has matured for a number of

years; beautiful trees that have grown for 15 or 20 years, and someone could light a fire in the forest, the fire gets out of control, the wind takes a grip of it and the entire woodland burns. Years and years of work and waiting, which has been passed from one generation to another — a legacy — is destroyed.

The Chairperson:

It goes up in smoke.

Mr Burns:

Yes. Is that not a great fear for people who have planted those trees?

Mr Archdale

I suspect that you are right. There is that fear. In response to that, I would point out that, according to its own figures in last year's report, the Forest Service has 61,000 hectares of forest and lost 38 hectares to fire, which, in proportional terms, does not indicate high risk.

As members know well, particularly if they happen to be farming down Fermanagh way at the moment, it is a fairly risky business. You are a victim of external circumstances. Although I have never felt it necessary, I believe that it is possible to take out insurance. Like all insurance, it is based entirely on risk.

Mr Burns:

Last week, people told us about planting trees. They said that trees would not only be at risk from fire but, if there were exceptional storms, the wind could blow them down. You have got to know where to plant trees. Not everywhere is suitable. A tremendous storm could come in and blow a crop down.

Mr Casement:

I go back to the type of forestry that is planted: you must plant the right trees on the right ground. Continuous-cover forestry is much more resistant to wind throw than the conventional forestry that we practise. Therefore, a block of forest that has trees of mixed ages in it, rather than trees that are all exactly the same age, will be much more resistant.

If you fell out trees continuously, on an almost annual basis, the forest is much more resistant

to wind throw. Baronscourt Estate in Tyrone has already practised that and has found that, even during the most severe storms, they lose far fewer trees.

They are also much more resistant to fire, because there is no uniform stand of very close trees that are all touching each other. Those are two additional benefits to continuous-cover forestry, apart from the other benefits that I have mentioned. It is resistant to storms and resistant to fire.

Mr W Clarke:

I am sorry that I missed your presentation, but I am getting the general gist of it. I apologise if I ask a question that you have already answered. What are your views on using forest cover to help to eradicate flooding? You have probably mentioned that in association with blanket bogs, and the two working together. The point about forests close to towns and cities is a good point to make for two reasons: they provide social and recreational well-being and also act as a carbon sink around those areas, thus combating the emissions from the traffic that goes into town and city centres.

Finally, I totally agree that biomass presents a good opportunity for us at this stage to replicate what was done in Scotland, where wood-power stations were set up, and also to create the confidence for people to buy into the technologies and start growing the timber for it. It also uses not just the willow but the remnants of harvesting. There is a need to start managing our forests in a better manner. I think that that point should be referred to in the Bill. Who should lead the way? Should it be the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), or should it be the Forest Service that decides how much biomass the public sector should have, and that the biomass heating systems should be procured?

Mr Archdale:

Those are really great questions, because what you are really asking is where the edges of the system are. I mean that in a process sense. To be honest, big government, whether here or across the water, finds those questions really difficult, even down to asking whether to plant wind farms on top of hills, and matters like that. I will try to give an answer.

I had a look at the recent sustainable development consultation from OFMDFM, and my initial impression was that it was lacking hard targets, but it is a very good structure. It is a framework that matters like that should be fitted into, because we need to find the answers to those sorts of

questions. Those answers will be translated into Programme for Government targets that civil servants can then actually work towards achieving, and can adapt policies to make those things happen.

A lot of those questions are under the sustainable development umbrella, and they have not been well addressed up to now. Expertise is developing; for example, DARD is starting to focus on post 2012 common agricultural policy (CAP), as you are well aware. That is going to be interesting. One of the elements of that is carbon capture and carbon accounting; another is water-quality issues, and the question of how we reward farmers and landowners for those services. Those are the ecosystem services that I spoke about before. Your comments fit very well within that. At the position that we are in at the moment, it is difficult to find the centre of that, but it probably sits within OFMDFM. The other point is that there should be recognition of those obligations, in some shape or form, within the Bill. In a simplistic sense, it is a duty of sustainable development.

Dr W McCrea:

I noted that the opening comments of your submission state that your organisation:

“welcomes the intention to bring forward new legislation”.

That is one thing. There is a lot in those few words. That tells me that you welcome the intention, but I am not so sure whether you welcome what comes after the intent. Therefore, I will ask a straightforward question: does the legislation that has been presented show you that the Department is serious about forestry development and achieving sustainability?

Your silence says it all. If your answer were yes, it would have been a quick answer. Your silence speaks volumes.

Mr Casement:

I think that it does.

Dr W McCrea:

Forget about courtesy.

Mr Casement:

It is not to do with courtesy; it is to do with having a very qualified yes, and how one would

qualify that yes. There is a definite attempt and intention in the Bill to address those issues.

Dr W McCrea:

Yes, but intent in the Bill is not enough.

Mr Casement:

Exactly; that is the point that I am coming to.

Dr W McCrea:

The point is the substance of the Bill. When putting a Bill through the House, it must have substance, not intention.

Mr Casement:

That is the point that I am coming to; we do not think that the Bill goes far enough or spells out clearly enough how the issues of sustainable development will be addressed.

Dr W McCrea:

To cut to the chase, do you believe that the Bill lacks substance, and that more substance is needed to make it a good Bill?

Mr Casement:

It is complicated, because we want to see more forests, and a lot of those issues are expressed in the Bill.

The Chairperson:

We are trying to see the wood through the trees.

Mr Casement:

It is a bit like trying to see the wood through the trees, but the problem is how those issues are managed and addressed, and the detail of doing so. It may not be appropriate to put that into the Bill.

Dr W McCrea:

With the greatest respect, that has to come into it somewhere. If there is to be substance to the

Bill, questions have to be answered. If those questions are not answered, the Bill will go through with only an expression of intent.

Mr Archdale:

Part of our reticence is also the fact that it has taken 54 years to get a revision of the previous Bill.

Dr W McCrea:

Is it not important, having waited for that period of time, to have a Bill with substance and to get it right?

Mr Casement:

I agree entirely. I am worried that some of the changes that we want to see in forestry in Northern Ireland are matters of detail and management. Those issues would have to be catered for in the Bill, but they need not or should not be spelt out because circumstances will change, and one can tie one's hands too much by having too prescriptive a Bill. It is difficult to comment in that sense. The intention may be enough as long as it is the right intention and it enables the right things to be done. To make it absolutely prescriptive would be a mistake. That is one of the reasons that I am having a little bit of difficulty in addressing your question.

Mr Archdale:

It would be a complete tragedy if we went down the road of the Forestry Act 1919 in the UK. That changed the emphasis on forestry to production because we nearly lost the war due to a pit-prop shortage. As a result of that, irreplaceable ancient woodlands were being destroyed right up until the 1960s. They were being blown up with dynamite or bulldozed. That is the problem that causes us to hesitate.

We are operating within what we know at the moment, and the circumstances that we know at the moment. If your constituents are not being fed properly, and we need to cut down some timber or move to agri-forestry whereby we are moving stock under trees, there must be flexibility in the Bill to deal with that. The challenge is to couch a piece of legislation that describes the intent but keeps some flexibility to allow for changing circumstances, particularly about our understanding of carbon accounting, contribution to global warming, and such matters.

Dr W McCrea:

Gentlemen, you are an advisory council and, therefore, you give advice. We want you to advise us how to make the Forestry Bill the proper Bill that it should be. If you cannot advise the Committee as to what should be in the Bill and what should be the parameters or guidance, what is the meeting all about? You have been set up by government to give advice.

Mr Archdale:

I submit that we have given you some advice.

Mr Casement:

We have submitted some advice and some comments on the Bill. We have come today and given our views on how we think it should go forward. If you want more, we need to know exactly what you want more of. I am not clear as to what you want us to do. We are not parliamentary legislators or draftsmen.

Dr W McCrea:

I am not looking for you to do that. We have enough of them.

Mr Casement:

I have no doubt about that. However, we can give only a certain amount of advice. We rely on people to give their time voluntarily to do this. We are not a think tank that is paid vast sums of money to come up with the perfect solution, and we are not experts. We cover a huge range of issues, so we can do only our very best here. We can do more, but it would take some time, and I do not think that time is on everyone's side.

Mr W McCrea:

Do you think that enough protection is given to ancient woodlands?

Mr Casement:

No.

Dr W McCrea:

So, should that be strengthened?

Mr Casement:

Yes, and I think that we mentioned that there should be absolute protection. We would definitely say that.

The Chairperson:

I appreciate the time that you have given to the Committee, and I appreciate your answers.