

A new way to grow

Paddy Rhatigan has found that forestry gives him as much job-satisfaction, and a better work-life balance, than sucklers. His income is higher too

Noel Kennedy
Teagasc Forestry Advisor, Roscommon

Many drystock farmers are reassessing their situations and seeking sustainable options to improve returns while also improving their work-life balance. Paddy Rhatigan went through this thought process. As a result, he took radical action.

Interest in forestry

Reared in Knockhall, not far from the Shannonside village of Rooskey in Co Roscommon, Paddy was farming sucklers full-time with his father, as soon as he left school.

"I always looked on forestry as a potential option for our marginal land," says Paddy. "Our combination of heavy soil and wet summers can make cattle farming extremely difficult." A neighbour, Paddy Hanley, owner of the local bacon factory, planted his farm in the 1990s.

Paddy Rhatigan watched over the fence with admiration as the fast-growing trees thrived on land similar to his. Following the death of his parents Paddy continued to farm. In his forties and farming on his own, he began to think seriously about his quality of life now, and in the future. He concluded that putting land in forestry could help to reduce his difficult and sometimes stressful workload.

"In 2012, I took the life-changing decision to plant most of the farm," says Paddy. Following consultation with local forester Joe Tansey, an

afforestation grant application was made to plant 45 of the farm's 53ha. The remaining 8ha around the house were kept for farming.

The large area for planting, influ-



Paddy Rhatigan shaping a young oak.

enced by its eligibility to retain Basic Payment, made possible the establishment of a highly commercial, sustainable, stand of Sitka spruce. "I made sure we included a significant, 20%, share of broadleaf woodland of oak and birch and extensive biodiversity protection," says Paddy. "I want my forest to be an asset to the countryside and wildlife."

Paddy also factored into his decision-making that forestry on this scale, with excellent road access, would achieve economies of scale contributing to valuable timber sales in the longer term. In the short to medium term, he will maximise income from annual premiums and the Basic Payment Scheme.

Effect of planting

Planting works were completed by December 2013 – the afforestation grant covered all of the establishment costs. Within weeks, Paddy received his first annual forestry premium of almost €28,000.

As an eligible farmer, he will contin-

ue to receive premiums for 20 years.

Taking all direct payments into account for 2017 – forestry premiums, Basic Payment Scheme and GLAS – the gross income is working out at €712/ha, €284/acre. "There is no way," Paddy says, "that I was ever going to make that out of suckling. In fact, the difference is even greater as my own cost of labour and general inputs are hugely reduced."

Following planting, there was a massive reduction in Paddy's workload and although he had sold all his cattle he was determined that he would continue to farm his remaining land. In 2015, he put this into GLAS as traditional hay meadow and each year, weather permitting, he cuts and sells up to 140 bales of hay or silage locally. Unsurprisingly, he has also planted 450 native broadleaf trees under the Native Tree planting option.

Getting involved – gaining experience

While his forest was still under contract Paddy had his first experience of looking after young trees, under

Revised Forestry Programme 2014-20

The Forestry Programme 2014-2020 was recently revised with new enhanced forest establishment and support grants. This will make the planting of broadleaf trees more attractive to farmers.

- Some of the highlights are:
- Increases in establishment grants and annual premiums with a premium top-up for planting areas 10ha+.
 - Premium up to €660/ha to plant oak and beech.
 - Premium up to €680/ha for Native Woodland Establishment.

- Premiums payable for 15 years.
 - Agroforestry premium increased from €260/ha up to €660/ha. Premium paid for five years.
 - New forest fencing and tree shelter scheme.
 - Second thinning grant for broadleaf forests @ €500/ha.
 - Forest road grant – road density increased from 20m/ha to 25m/ha.
- For more information, see <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/news/2018/mid-term-review-summary.php>

Farm and income profile 2017

Total farm size	52.69ha
Enterprises	Forestry 45.49ha – Sitka spruce 36.4 ha; oak and birch 9.6ha – P2012
	Meadow (in GLAS) – 7.2ha
Direct payments 2017	€
Afforestation premium	26,880*
Basic Payment Scheme	7,908
GLAS	2,755
Total	37,543 = €712 per hectare

*Annual premium paid for 20 years. Income tax exempt. USC and 4% PRSI** deductible
** PRSI liability for applicants under 66 years old

the supervision and encouragement of local forestry contractor Padraic Kelly.

This working relationship developed and, since 2014, Paddy has been working part-time with Padraic planting, fencing and pruning young plantations across Roscommon and Leitrim. As well as gaining experience and knowledge from his contractor colleagues, which he is now putting to good use in his own forest, Paddy hugely enjoys the work. "It's healthy and I'm earning a few bob."

Since 2016, Paddy has taken on full responsibility for looking after the forest. The trees are in rude good health with impressive growth across all species but in such a large forest there are always jobs to be done. As Paddy observes: "Nature doesn't stop working when you do."

Jobs, for example, include the maintaining internal access paths and forming/shaping the extensive plots of oak and birch. Paddy realises that these jobs, done early and done right, will have huge benefits for the quality

of the trees and those looking after them in the years to come.

Gain knowledge – build confidence

Paddy's knowledge of forestry has grown enormously since planting. "This is my forest – my future and I'm determined to gain the knowledge and develop the skills to ensure it gets the best management," he says. To this end, Paddy keeps himself informed and updated by attending local Teagasc field days and seminars and consulting the Teagasc forestry website. He recently attended a Teagasc/DAFM information meeting on the revised forestry programme. Anticipating first thinning in as little as six to seven years, he has attended a conifer thinning and timber measurement course run by Teagasc in 2017.

The future

"I'm genuinely excited about forestry and farming," says Paddy. "My decision to plant has been fully vindicated and my income and quality of life have improved enormously."