

Investment in knowledge pays the best interest

Often attributed to Benjamin Franklin, this saying certainly holds true today for Tim McCarthy, a sheep and beef farmer, and forestry enthusiast, from Carriganima, Macroom, Co Cork

John Casey
Teagasc forestry development officer, Mallow



“I was always interested in trees, partly because there was more money in forestry than from sheep on our high ground,” says Tim McCarthy. Starting in 1988, Tim went on to plant more ground in 1992, 2000 and 2003. Over the years, Tim has consciously increased his own knowledge of forest management while also building the capacity of the forestry owner group of which he is chairperson. More recently, Tim has been sharing his experiences with the next generation of potential forestry owners.

Fadó fadó (2006), John Casey, Teagasc forestry development officer based in Mallow, initiated a series of meetings and field days with the purpose of setting up forest owner producer groups in west Cork. This, originally LEADER-funded, project was supported from the onset by a cohort of enthusiastic farm forest owners, including Tim.

Their consensus was that the formation of producer groups was crucial to overcoming some of the obstacles that forest owners encounter including lack of market awareness, low forest management skills, small individual forestry plantations, etc.

To address some of these issues, the West Cork Forestry Group was formed in 2009 from two pre-existing

groups in Ballyvourney and Dunmanway. The initial focus was on building capacity among the forest owners through a series of courses on timber measurement, marketing, operating chainsaws, etc, and, equally importantly, through the sharing of forest owners' experience of private forestry.

In 2014, the group decided to register as a co-operative and to engage a forester. The Forest Owners Co-operative Society (FOCS) with members across Munster was born. FOCS offers its members services from planting to harvesting including management plans, road grants, felling licences and supervision of harvesting operations.

From the beginning, Tim has been central to the forest owner group's development and he is currently the chairperson of FOCS. In conversation with Tim, a farm forest owner described FOCS as a “godsend to owners as they ask themselves where they are going with their crop”.

In May 2018, 12 members of Forest Owners Co-operative Society, including Tim, were presented with Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification for their woodlands by Minister of State for Forestry, Andrew Doyle TD. This followed a Forest Service-funded pilot project in which FOCS and North Eastern Forestry Group based in Dundalk were chosen to participate.

Each member had to complete a pre-audit assessment to identify any non-conformities or issues to be resolved pre-audit. All members agreed that the experience helped to increase their knowledge of their forests, both from each other and from the project specialists.

In September 2018, Minister Doyle launched the forestry Knowledge Transfer Group (KTG) programme, the main aim of which is to broaden the knowledge level of forestry topics amongst farm forest owners.

Teagasc contributes to these KTGs, emphasising how farmers can integrate forestry into their overall farming landscape and to improve whole-



Tim McCarthy at a pruning course.



farm sustainability and to reap the rewards from timely and good-quality forest management. Again, FOCS stepped up to the plate, successfully running four KTGs in west Cork.

In March 2019, Tim generously agreed to share his experience of growing and recently thinning his FSC-certified conifer crop with students as they completed the new Farm Forestry module in the Teagasc Certificate in Agriculture. Much of the conversation was about aspects of individual tree growth through to forest growth and forest timber production.

In terms of practical forest skills, simple methods of tree measurements, forest stocking, calculating yield class, performing log volume calculations and volume estimations for forest plots were also covered.

These crucial skills aid good-quality forest management and can benefit the farm forest by increasing volume with the intention of generating a greater income for the farm forest owner. Tim is very much looking forward to clearfelling his 1988 forest crop within the next three years.

The impact of various forestry operations were also discussed in terms of the best-practice principles to benefit the environment, biodiversity and landscape while also providing a stable farm income from the forest.

Tim's insights provided a perspective of the factors taken into consideration when making the decision to plant a forest, experiences learned along the way and the other potential benefits that can be by-products of having a forestry enterprise on-farm.

Tim feels that the biggest issues for owners and the co-op were how to get info out to our members, especially considering their older age profile; startup costs for groups and, of course, forest certification. Tim maintains that the co-operative approach has vast potential for first-generation forest owners, many starting from a low knowledge base, as their crops grow both in volume and value.

"If farmers are going to invest their land in forestry, they should invest in knowledge for themselves at the same time," is Tim's conclusion.