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Statement – forestry and tree cover in Ireland February 2018

The Irish Wildlife Trust (IWT) is a national, membership-based, conservation charity which was established in 1979. The goal of our organisation is to raise awareness of Ireland's natural heritage and its importance to people.

It is well known that Ireland's once expansive native forests have dwindled to a small number of highly fragmented patches which represent about 1% of Ireland's total land area¹. Although total tree cover is over ten times this figure this still leaves the country with the second lowest such level – exceeding only Iceland. However, the majority of this tree cover consists of uniform stands of non-native species, typically conifers such as sitka spruce and lodgepole pine. These plantations have largely supplanted biodiverse habitats such as peat bogs and low intensity farmland, creating new environments which harbour little by way of flora and fauna. The land drainage which precedes planting, fertiliser and pesticide use and the harvesting methods which involve 'clear felling' all place considerable pressure on receiving river systems, resulting in pollution from acidification and loss of sediment². The EPA has identified commercial plantations as one of the principle pressures on water quality, and in particular the collapse of river sites which once enjoyed 'pristine' water quality status³.

Native forests provide an amenity resource, filter and clean water, help prevent flooding by slowing the flow of water off land, sequester and store carbon, provide opportunities for direct income (timber, wild food foraging, tourism) and are of immense biodiversity value. Plantations, on the other hand, pollute water courses, provide no amenity or habitat value, and contribute to flooding during harvesting. The employment opportunities and carbon storage from the production of low quality timber do not come close to matching the potential value of native forests when social and environmental considerations are taken into account. Furthermore, the generous system of public subsidies in place under the current forest programme (and amounting to hundreds of millions of taxpayers' euros) effectively devalue competing land uses, contributing to depopulation and degradation of habitats even where plantations have not been planted.

The IWT would like to see a much greater level of forest cover in Ireland. This should be based on the principle of 'public money for public goods'. The greatest public good surely comes from the establishment of native forests which can benefit future generations for many centuries to come. It should include a mix of forest establishment with minimal extractive pressure (i.e. where nature conservation is the principle

¹ Cross J. 2012. *Ireland's Woodland Heritage*. National Parks and Wildlife Service.

² Kelly-Quinn et al. 2016. *Hydrofor: Assessment of the Impacts of Forest Operations on the Ecological Quality of Water*. Environmental Protection Agency.

³ EPA. 2017. *Water Quality in Ireland 2010-2015*.

aim) and woodlands managed for commercial purposes, on the basis of 'continual cover forestry'. This will require new skills, new infrastructure and new ways of thinking – in short, a total reimagination of the forestry sector in Ireland. Existing plantations should be phased out – at harvesting, replanting should be done with community participation and integrate the variety of public services as described. New areas of native woodlands should be identified in uplands, on degraded peatlands and along river corridors. Agro-forestry could allow this alongside animal husbandry and biodiversity aims, as exists in countries such as Norway.

Ireland currently faces significant environmental challenges, and in particular with meeting targets established under the Water Framework Directive, the Habitats and Birds Directives and legally binding reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time there are widespread concerns regarding economic and population decline in rural Ireland. Developing a radically different approach to forestry, by moving away from monoculture plantations, and towards biodiverse native forests, can help to achieve all of these aims.