

3 February, 2010.

Mr. Tony Lowes
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RE: REP7169/JG/09

Dear Mr. Lowes,

I have been asked by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Mr. John Gormley T.D. to refer to your recent correspondence regarding the afforestation of peat soil.

As you are aware forestry policy falls within the remit of the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. However, in order to be of assistance to you, and considering that the issues you raise are quite technical, I asked Coford, the National Council for Forest Research and Development in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to examine the issues you raise. A copy of their response is enclosed.

Yours sincerely,

Eddie Kiernan,
Private Secretary

Response to issues raised

Ireland has not taken losses of carbon from soils into account. The Irish carbon reporting system for forest (CARBWARE) has always included the soil carbon pools in net GHG balance estimates (NIR, EPA 2007). The inclusion of the soil carbon pool is mandatory under the UNFCCC and IPCC 2006 guidelines.

The most recent Irish submission to the UNFCCC under the Kyoto Protocol shows that peatland afforestation since 1990 represents 40% of the net uptake of CO₂ in 2008 (eq. to 1.2 million tonnes of CO₂). This net value includes the emissions from peat soils due to afforestation (0.062 million tonnes of CO₂).

Annual submissions of greenhouse gas emissions/removals in forests to the UNFCCC are subject to review by international experts. According to numerous reviews of the CARBWARE system, by the UNFCCC expert review teams, peatland forests are reported in a compliant, transparent and consistent manner in accordance with the IPCC 2006 guidelines.

While soil carbon changes are difficult to detect (COFORD Connects, Environment 9, 2008), estimation of emissions from peat soils is based on peer reviewed international publications (e.g. Hargreaves et al. 2003), and are better understood than carbon changes in other soil types, such as mineral soils. These emission estimates are included in the CARBWARE reporting system.

The contention that 'peat/mineral soils are not categorised' or reported is not correct. All soils are included in the national estimates in accordance with IPCC guidelines.

Peatland afforestation trends

The referred to CORINE based estimate of peat land afforestation does not reflect the real situation for Ireland (Black et al. 2009 and NFI 2007). The overall percentage of forestry on peat soils is 41 %. There is a productivity threshold in place for grant aided afforestation. This has reduced the level of peatland afforestation from 61% of the area afforested in 1990, to 39% in 2006.

EU Life projects

The statement that EU Life projects' 'management on these sites maximises carbon projection and storage' is not supported by reference to scientific literature.

In their undisturbed state, northern peatlands absorb a small amount of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (Sottocornola and Kiely 2005), but emit a powerful greenhouse gas, methane, under the prevailing, waterlogged conditions (Hargreaves et al. 2003). Considering the difference in the global warming potential of methane compared with carbon dioxide, the net contribution to global warming may be positive, neutral or negative, depending on site conditions and peat type. However, it is not known if conversion from forests to peatland results in a sink of carbon dioxide. In contrast, deforestation of peatland forests results in a large emission of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.

This has significant negative impact on greenhouse gas balances.

To date, EU Life projects have deforested ca. 2000 ha prior to conversion to peatlands. This, under Kyoto protocol rules, represents deforestation and an emission of ca. 1.23 million tonnes of carbon dioxide since the inception of the project, or 0.07 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.

References:

- Black, K., O'Brien, P., Redmond, J., Barrett, F. and Twomey, M. 2009. The extent of peatland afforestation in Ireland. Irish Forestry 65(1&2): 61-71.
- Hargreaves K.L., Milne, R. and Cannell, M.G.R. 2003 Carbon balance of afforested peatland in Scotland. Forestry 76(3): 299-317.

NFI. 2007a. National Forest Inventory - Republic of Ireland - Results. Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Johnstown Castle Estate, Co. Wexford.

NFI. 2007b. National Forest Inventory - Republic of Ireland - Methodology. Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Johnstown Castle Estate, Co. Wexford.

Sottocornola, M. and Kiely, G. 2005. An Atlantic blanket bog is a modest CO2 sink. Geophysical Research Letters 32 L23804.

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