

Harvesting forestry in the Banner County

Managing a mature forest requires careful planning, market knowledge, and judgement

Michael Somers,
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Clare has always been a hub of creativity and culture. Michael Cusack, founder of the GAA, was born there. Micko Russell and Willie Clancy lit up the music venues of Ireland with their dizzy fingers and musical genius. The Cliffs of Moher attract more than a million visitors a year. In the very middle of the county is the village of Inagh where the east of the county (where hurling dominates) meets the slightly more Gaelic-football-focused west. Here the Crowe family live and work the land.

Land here is heavy but Clare ground, like most of the west of Ireland, is renowned for producing quality cattle. Pat and Anne Crowe were suckler farmers. As is traditional in this part of the country, weanlings were sold at nine months in the fall of the year. In the early 1990s they were looking to optimise income from the overall enterprise.

At the time Teagasc was running courses on farm diversification opportunities; Pat and Anne attended. This was to change their farming enterprise, and lifestyle, forever. "Our plan was to plant half the farm and build a shed," says Pat. "I looked at this from a business viewpoint, the forestry grant was attractive at the time. "I figured if I took on the forest work, between that and the forest premia this would provide me and my farm with a better income. We made a lot of enquiries and attended many meetings and in the early 1990s our first planting was done.

"Soon after, a piece of land came up for sale beside me and at that stage we planted both farms. "I reckon this was vital for the enterprise. Mainly because it provided me with cashflow from forestry payments."

All of the Crowes' forest is Sitka spruce. Pat says it's an easy crop to manage. "We found that at planting



Pat Crowe and Michael Somers.



time you need to be on top of issues like vegetation but I see no difference in weeding a tree or fixing a fence." Pat took a different approach to many farmers.

"I took away 5% of the annual premium for work that needed to be carried out like road resurfacing, her-

bicide, inventory and so on. I think it's a good way of investing back into the forest."

Soon after, Laura was born and Pat reckons she is one of the first children from a farming background to grow up with forestry as the main enterprise.

Clearfell tips

Pat reckons that farmers need to get professional advice at this stage. "I would offer five bits of advice to farmers approaching clearfell:

1 Have a full and professional inventory carried out. Know what's in the forest and challenge the forest to squeeze the most out of the crop. Also, ask for both and weight and volume price.

2 Timing is critical. We are just at the end of spring here. It will be replanted for the next tax year. But as important is the market. If the price is not right, leave it on the stump. The trees are not going anywhere. Our decision to do a premature clearfell was based on timber price. Our trees had a dbh of 37cm. If they are too big, the mills will penalise you. Pat jokes: "It isn't much different than meat factories."

3 Be on site. It's a massive job with clearfells hitting €30,000+. Some won't hit this price but many of the older higher stocked sites will.

4 Have a good contract drawn up and get it checked by a solicitor.

5 The accountant head is vital. The clearfell revenue can fund farm development for many years to come.

“If a clearfell goes wrong you can lose thousands. If it goes right, many forest owners will never see a poor day again

ning this forest as a business and it's our income. We did our first clearfell in 2019 and it's been very successful. "I conducted all my own inventory. I investigated my market and we decided to convert the pulp to energy wood. The pallet and sawlog is heading to Murray's sawmill in Ballygar. But the smaller material have not had its branches delimbed. Instead it is stacked on site.

"They will be chipped for eco fuel. Yes it's good to burn wood for energy. But for me it's also halved my reforestation costs and I can fully stock the site. I've been to many open days about clearfelling. Personally I don't like winnowing. This is where the old branches of the trees are stacked into rows and piles and allowed to rot. The needles will fall off the trees where 80% of the nutrients are. Then we will stack and dry. It improves my cashflow as I will have two to three years of clearfelling revenue. We use and sell every twig.

"This is financial planning and this cannot be underestimated at clearfell. From an accounts point of view, I feel strongly that profit cannot be calculated until reforestation happens. That's when you know what your net profit is. The profit v the costs. Laura is training to be an accountant and I feel that there is a massive area emerging for farmers looking for this kind of advice and service.

"Clearfelling is a serious business. If a clearfell goes wrong you can lose thousands. If it goes right, many forest owners will never see a poor day again."

Forestry has a very favourable tax status and offers potential tax planning opportunities. It's very important that farmers know that, especially when passing on assets to the next generation. We have a great tradition of this in Ireland. Pat and Anne will pass it on in their own time. What Laura wants to do is up to her. Forestry is getting a bad press in so many quarters, but from the point of view of what we have here in Inagh I could not be happier. And we hope our family will live and work here in Clare for many years to come.

how to calculate volume and how to mark trees. I'm fully convinced when I'm not around that Laura will continue to generate a good living and lifestyle from this forest."

Pat now is coming to the end of annual forestry premiums. Many farmers are in that boat and many are looking at where the monies from the forest will come from. Thinning in west Clare is difficult. This is because of high wind speeds and its proximity to the coast.

"We never feared thinning," says Pat. "We simply got in early. I invested in a forwarder to take my timber out. I look on it as my tractor. Cattle farmers spread manure, mow and so on. Tillage farmers plough and sow. We bring out timber. We cut everything here to 3.1m lengths. There's no shortage of buyers for them.

"There is no question but that thinning brings forward clearfell. The oldest part of the forest here is 25 years old and it has been clearfelled. Many foresters would say that's too young. In general they are right. But I'm run-

"From an early age she went to courses with myself and Anne," he says. "She learned all the technical terms like diameter at breast height (dbh), basal area (BA), various thinning systems and the basics of managing a forest. At 12 she came with me to an inventory course and learned