

Keeping faith with forestry

Pat Murray's belief in trees is reaping handsome rewards.

Noel Kennedy
Forestry Development Officer,
Roscommon.

“In my opinion, good land should always be farmed, but if ground is going to be costly to bring into farming condition, then you need to look at other options,” says Pat, who farms near the village of Ballinaheglish in mid-Roscommon.

Pat has a Suffolk cross and Mule sheep enterprise with a 70 strong herd of Friesian bullocks for finishing. In 1993, Pat chose to put some of his marginal land into forestry and since then has grown and managed his forest for commercial timber production.

The main holding is on the drier limestone land of Ballinaheglish, with an out-farm on heavier ground close to the Galway border. It's there that Pat has his forestry enterprise, along with 70ac of grazing land.

This is where Pat's late mother Teresa hailed from and after taking over her land in 1990, he began expanding the holding with the purchase of a couple of small neighbouring farms.

“The farms were of mixed quality land and over the next couple of years, I realised that the cost of reclaiming the wetter ground would be substantial,” says Pat.

Choosing forestry

Pat looked for options. There was a lot of talk about forestry as an attractive diversification option and the land seemed ideally suitable.

“Having looked into it, I saw a lot of positives,” says Pat. “A good planting grant, a tax free annual premium, a crop of trees that, if well looked after, could yield a valuable timber crop. I also valued the opportunity to do the work myself.”

In 1993, with advice from the local forestry inspector Matt Fallon, Pat planted his first forest – 6.5ac of Sitka spruce. True to his word and with the

help of a neighbour, Pat planted the new forest. To ensure the best start, he also took responsibility for weeding the ground around the trees and replacing those that failed. Despite long days farming, Pat was determined to look after his trees.

“I had a great interest in it and got satisfaction from doing the work,” says Pat. He is quick to mention that it was due to the support of his wife Anne, who was working full-time, that he was able to commit the time to the trees.

Encouraged by his first experience of planting and already appreciating the positive income boost, Pat went again two years later, planting 12.5ac of adjoining land.

This time however, following late spring frost damage in the first plantation, he heeded advice and planted both Sitka spruce and the more frost hardy Norway spruce.

In 1996, another 12ac was planted, with Pat “really squaring it up” by buying and planting a further 6ac in 2000 to bring his total forest area to 37ac.

An impressive feature is that all four forests are planted beside each other, bisected by a public road. This didn't happen by chance, with Pat appreciating the practical and economic benefits of consolidation and good access for early management, longer-term harvesting and eventual replanting.

In 2008, a forest road was built well in advance of future thinning to

Pat Murray's forestry timeline.

1993 first forest planted	2.68ha
1995 second forest planted	5.1ha
1996 third forest planted	4.86ha
2000 fourth forest planted	2.4ha
Total area	15.04ha (37ac)
2008 forest road built	
2012 first thinning	157t timber
2016 second and first thinning	493t timber
2021 third and second thinning	1178t timber
2022 Older Sitka spruce	

650 trees per hectare; height 20m; DBH 27cm; volume/tree 0.5m³



Noel Kennedy and Pat Murray.

provide this essential piece of infrastructure.

Moving into timber production

In recent years, the forests have gradually moved into the timber production phase.

In 2012, Pat organised the first thinning of the Sitka spruce in the 1993



and 1995 forests.

In 2016, all the forests were thinned with a first and second thinning of Sitka spruce and a first thinning of Norway spruce yielding commercial pallet wood, stakes and lower value pulpwood.

“Regular thinning is good for tree growth and timber value,” says Pat. “Especially as the forest is getting older, it has to be done carefully.” This was particularly important as he planned the third thinning of his older Sitka spruce forests.

For his 2016 thinning, Pat worked with Murray Timber from Galway. The company purchased the thinnings as a standing sale and organised the harvesting operation to cut and haul the timber to their sawmill in Ballygar.

Pat says he was very happy with this experience and in 2021, felt confident to go again with Murrays for the third

thinning of the older Sitka and second thinning of the remaining areas.

It was a successful operation, carried out during the summer in good ground conditions with little soil damage. In total, there were almost 1,200t of timber harvested, of which over 800t went to higher value uses like sawlog, palletwood and stakes.

All this timber stayed in the locality, with the sawlog and palletwood going directly to Murray’s sawmill and the stakewood going to Woodfarm fencing in Ahascragh.

The remaining timber was sold as pulpwood to the Bord na Mona power station in Edenderry. The timber sale returned €45,000 to Pat, who was happy and relieved at the outcome.

The future

Not a man to rest on his laurels, Pat is looking to the future and planning a strategy for the older trees. Conscious

of the risk of windblow and in the process of applying for his next felling licence, he is wary of pushing the trees too far with another thinning and may choose the more pragmatic option of clearfell in the next five years.

“If we do clearfell, we will aim to replant as quickly as possible and go again with a crop of Sitka spruce,” says Pat. “Looking back over the years, I feel our decision to plant what and when we did has been vindicated.”

Pat says he sees the rewards from continuity of management, but also knows the importance of getting ongoing forestry advice and having an annual walk of the forest with his local Teagasc forestry advisor.

“In the longer-term, I hope our children will eventually take over the forest and get the same joy out of it as I did,” concludes Pat.