



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and  
Rural Affairs

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Forest Service Business Plan

8 September 2016

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

### Forest Service Business Plan

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Ms Linda Dillon (Chairperson)  
Ms Caoimhe Archibald (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Sydney Anderson  
Mr David Ford  
Mr Patsy McGlone  
Mr Harold McKee  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Edwin Poots  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Malcolm Beatty	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Marcus McAuley	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

**The Chairperson (Ms Dillon):** I welcome Malcolm Beatty, the chief executive of the Forest Service, and Marcus McAuley. I ask that you keep your presentation to ten minutes or less, and then we will have questions from Committee members. Thank you.

**Mr Malcolm Beatty (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** Thank you, Chair. I will start with a bit of an introduction because this is the first time that I have appeared before the Committee. I look after the Forest Service, which looks after the state forests but also has a supervisory role over private forests. In Northern Ireland, we have just over 100,000 hectares of forest in total. I was reading the 1908 committee of inquiry, and, at that time, we had about 10,000 hectares in this part of the world, so we have increased that by 90,000 hectares in the last 100 years. The state owns 60,000 hectares of that, and I look after that.

Those forests were planted over many years. Some are younger than others, and some are now quite mature. They are at the stage where they host something like five million visits every year: in 2014, it was 4.7 million. People spend about £76 million in accessing the forests and while they are there, so it is a big number, and it reflects how people view the forests — people walk there, and dog walking is part of that.

Forests are an important environmental resource. They are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as being under sustainable forest management, so that gives us a lot of advantages. It means that the timber that we sell can be marketed by our customers as FSC-certified or PEFC (Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification) certified, which is important for getting it into

the markets. It also means that the timber that we produce — 400,000 cubic metres every year — is sustained. It will be there next year and the year after. We have good evidence that we can continue at that level until about 2030, after which it will reduce. It is also a mark that we manage our forests with good environmental practice and good community engagement and we comply with all of the agreed standards.

Our aim as an agency is to increase the capital in forests, simply meaning more trees and forests should contain bigger trees, which are inherently more valuable to the industry. There should be better diversity in the forests. As you would expect, they are mostly conifer but not exclusively. We would like to get the broadleaves freed through our thinning policy. If you go to somewhere like Gosford, you will see a lot of oak forest there now. It started off as Norway spruce with some oak in it. We would like to see the forest being rather more relevant to the people who use it and live beside it, so we are doing quite a lot of work with our partners in local government to see how they can make better use of the assets that I look after. We have had quite a lot of success with that.

I have given you our business plan. It sets out our aims and objectives for this year, particularly appendix 5, which is towards the back. It sets out in scorecard format the things that we want to tackle this year, including what is important financially. We have a target to bring in quite a lot of money: timber will bring in almost £10 million, with almost another £1 million from recreation. Part of that is managing the forest at a reduced cost. On current expenditure, I would expect to manage the forests so that we do not require more than about £3 million from the Exchequer to do that.

Our business now is really in three parts: the first is looking after the forest itself; the second part is looking after plant health for the whole economy, so it is forestry and agriculture; and the third part of our business is seeing whether we can use our assets more profitably, particularly for energy use. Our timber already feeds into the thermal heat end of things, but we have a lot of forest in upland areas and we are looking into whether we can do something with wind farms. We are carrying through our business cases on that, which look positive in a zero-subsidy environment. We need to take that through and make sure that our business case stacks up.

Perhaps that is enough for an introduction. I will now take questions.

**The Chairperson (Ms Dillon):** Thank you very much, I appreciate it. You mentioned wind farms: I just wonder why the commitments on wind farms on Forest Service land have not been met.

**Mr Beatty:** Why have we not done that yet? The policy changed last year in the UK. The industry was very much a subsidy-dominated industry, so people putting in wind farms made a lot of money. That subsidy, from our point of view, has now been removed. By the time we make our wind farms operational, there will be no subsidy, so we are really looking at whether the figures still stack up. Would somebody invest in them? We are talking about fairly serious money, maybe up to £300 million if all of our projects go ahead — that is quite a lot. We are about to market test again to see if the investors are still out there and whether they are prepared to do it. On the back of that, we have done quite a lot of work on what we need to do in engaging communities and how they react to them. There has been a lot of preparatory work done there. We have met colleagues in the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), we have talked to the political parties and the industry, and we think that we have a viable business. We now need to test that and bring the business case back and put it to the Executive. That is where we are.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you for your presentation, Malcolm. Where do you see the future for forestry after Brexit? I know there is no magic wand, but, as you know, we have done very well from Europe as far as forestry and tourism are concerned.

**Mr Beatty:** Where are we? Pre-Common Market — unfortunately I am old enough to remember those days — there was a clear policy that forestry could take place on land that was not needed for farming. In the Common Market, that changed, and forestry could take place wherever landowners wanted it to. At the moment, a lot of our forests, state forests in particular, are on the tops of hills and on peat bogs, which is a whole environmental issue in itself. What is the requirement post-Brexit? Do we need to intensify our agriculture and make it profitable? In that case, there would not be much scope for further forestry, or has this changed in some way? That is speculation; we do not know where it goes.

It is clear that we need to use the forests that we have more, let us say, intensively. They are heavily used for recreation. Can we make that good for tourism, so that our district council partners can put in

assets so that, when tourists come to their area, they will stay in the forest a little longer and spend a little more money in the bed and breakfasts and restaurants? That is something that we need to work at. We are talking to councils and to Waterways Ireland and asking, "With all our land — 5% of the country — can we make connections between what you have and what we have?". People can walk, cycle or whatever and enjoy the countryside. Can we make the forests more attractive? Can we work on species composition? Can we keep the trees longer? Can we keep the big trees? There is a very nice forest in Rostrevor that has huge trees, and we are not in a hurry to fell them. Thirty years ago, they would have been gone; now we keep them as they are important for public access and for people coming to enjoy them. We will still work on the trees and thin them so that they will be there for longer. It is that kind of scenario I see us working on post Brexit — using the forests more intensively.

I would still like to see something going on in afforestation, but it needs to be a little better and not so much about planting for timber. As a nation, we will always import most of our wood requirements. The UK imports in excess of 75% of what it requires. I cannot see us making a huge impact on that, but where we have forests we should use them to satisfy our own needs. You will have heard a lot of talk in the press last year about the impact of forests on flooding, and people have been looking at that and how it works. Is it through interception? Can forests on both sides of a stream act as a dam and hold the water back before it goes downstream? There are pros and cons to that. If you are upstream of a forest and the water cannot get away, that is not good. If you are downstream of the forest and the water does not get to you so quickly, that would be good. We are talking to Rivers Agency and research organisations and mapping the countryside to see where there are opportunities and where we do and do not want to do this. Post Brexit, we are at the planning stage and are identifying the opportunities that we can take.

**Mr McMullan:** If we come out of Europe we will be relying on our own funding. Who should lead on that: Forest Service or local authorities?

**Mr Beatty:** I am charged with forestry, so it is my job to give advice and guidance on where I think we can play a role and support local authorities where they want to do more in their area. Local authorities will own their tourism strategies, not us, but, if a strategy says that forests have a role, my job is to support them in that, either through advice or management of the wood. Sometimes, if the asset is on our property, it is about finding some of the capital, providing someone else looks after it, and we have done that. Under the last Executive, we were able to get our hands on £4 million of capital, and we spent that in 10 forests. We knocked down a toilet block and built a visitor reception in Florence Court. That is now managed by the National Trust and has been very successful. You have seen the caravan site at Glenariff in your constituency. We would like to bring that to fruition, so that it is run not by us but by another party. We have lots of other projects, including Slieve Gullion and play parks. We have a good play park in Gosford. Those are the things that we see ourselves doing.

**Mr McMullan:** The memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with councils are vital.

**Mr Beatty:** Absolutely.

**Mr McMullan:** Will you do more work with councils?

**Mr Beatty:** Yes. My organisation has just over 200 people in it. A significant number of those are in plant health, so I run the forests in the whole country with fewer than 200 people. I cannot do all the recreation. I need to find partners, but I want partners who want to do it. The councils are vital to that. We have MOUs — I cannot remember the exact number — with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. We are talking to Ards and North Down Borough Council about Ballysallagh to see whether there is something that it wants to do there. We have trails in different places. A lot of the councils manage mountain bike trails, such as those at Davagh, Castlewellsan and Rostrevor. There are good models to build on. We just need to help people make it better.

**The Chairperson (Ms Dillon):** In my area, there have been some successful projects between Mid Ulster District Council and Forest Service. In years gone by, there seemed to be a lot of obstruction by Forest Service. I have to be straight about that. We had a lot of difficulties with projects that we were trying to deliver in mid-Ulster. That seems to have changed, and I very much hope that that continues. From what you are saying, that seems to be the attitude going forward, which is extremely important.

While I was on the council, a lot of the projects that we were talking about were looking to European funding. I am now concerned that local government will pull back from a lot of the work that it would

have liked to do with Forest Service on tourism and different projects because it does not have the finance to do it. That is the bottom line. Local government would have been very much relying on funding from Europe to do those kinds of projects. Tourism strategies for all 11 councils are a big concern for me into the future, not just in relation to the Forest Service but to a lot of different areas. They were very much looking to European funding to develop that work. I appreciate that the attitude going forward is that you will work with councils, but my concern is whether the finance will be there to do anything. I appreciate your presentation.

**Mr Ford:** Thanks for the presentation, Malcolm. I should start by declaring an interest: a small number of your 4.7 million visitors walk through our land. They go around one particular path into Tardree forest.

**Mr Beatty:** My apologies.

**Mr Ford:** I remember, about 15 years ago, a presentation to the then ARD Committee that talked about the planting of broadleaves rather than conifers. How much progress have you made over the past 15 years on making the environment more attractive for visitors?

Tied in with that, the report highlights a fairly significant reduction in the number of your staff. It certainly appears to me that, around areas such as Tardree and Randalstown, there is a deterioration in the environment for visitors. I fully accept that part of that is caused by people on scrambler motorbikes, but part of it seems to be simply the lack of ability to do the maintenance that you would have done, such as paths being trimmed back and having a decent surface. There are places where you could have walked in your Sunday shoes but where you now have to put on a pair of wellington boots.

**Mr Beatty:** First, on the broadleaf bit, through the various planting grant schemes, we support landowners who want to plant. I will not get the number right, but in excess of 80% of those plantings tend to be broadleaves.

**Mr Ford:** I was thinking specifically about your own.

**Mr Beatty:** Where we have cleared away conifer areas — I will not get the figure right — we have a requirement to have, I think, at least 10% or, more likely, 15% of things other than conifer. Those will be broadleaves, but it can be open ground, which will be colonised with broadleaves. The other thing that we see as we restock the woods is that, where we plant conifers, there is an awful lot of native seeding going into that, so there is ash and willow growing up there. We will not clear that. It will suppress itself naturally, but there are other areas that will be cleared and restocked. We see the composition of the woodlands changing without us doing very much.

Our main focus at the moment is on thinning the woodlands so that we release the oaks that were planted in the 1960s and before then. Some of those woodlands — I referred to Gosford in my presentation — are now looking very nice. I started working in the Forest Service and looking after that forest in the late 1980s. We thinned it, and I thought, "This is going to fall down. It will never work". I am glad that I was wrong. It is a nice forest, and I think that we can do more of that. There is a balance to be had. We are trying to get forests established quickly; that is the first thing. We then want the composition to be right. On the technical side, if we put in some conifers and some broadleaves and make sure that the broadleaves are retained, we will get a good win. However, I am not so naive as to think that just planting conifers will create a wonderful forest environment; we need the other bit as well. We are doing quite a lot.

The other thing we are doing there is tackling things such as rhododendron and laurel throughout the woodland and getting rid of those invasives. That is improving the condition under the trees so that there is a bit more light getting to the ground. The environment is definitely better then and you start to see the herbaceous layer coming in again. The other thing we do through our policy of management is to control the light reaching the forest floor, which improves diversity. I hope that that answers your question on that bit.

**Mr Ford:** Yes.

**Mr Beatty:** I now come to staffing numbers. Yes, I wish that I had a lot more people; there is no question about that. However, we are where we are. It has forced us to think about the path network

and drawing it back to the essential trails, the ones that we put in during the urban and rural improvement campaign. We cannot afford to maintain all of them, so we are coming back to a core network. When we engage with councils and they want to do more, that is great, but they will do it. In your part of the world, we do not have an MOU with the council. We have talked, but there has not been agreement for various reasons. It would be nice if that could happen.

I do not see us having the resources to do much more than this, but we are committed to making sure that people are safe when they go into the woods. We have done quite intensive surveys of the trees where the trails are, and we look at their condition to see whether a branch is going to fall on somebody and that sort of thing. That is where our priorities lie. It would be nice to see more trails being looked after; indeed, that is important in places such as Tardree. I spoke about the forests being relevant to people: well, people in the forests are taking exercise, which must be a saving to the health budget somewhere along the line. That is one of the principal reasons that we want to engage with local government, particularly around the towns and villages. We want to ask them, "Have you got the right number of trees there? You want open space: can we manage those spaces and make them more accessible?", and we push that.

**Mr Ford:** I just want to make a further quick point. There are references in the business plan to 200 hectares of planting this year: I presume that that is directed entirely to the private sector and that a lot of it will depend on people's decisions about agriculture. It is beyond your ability to be certain to deliver that.

**Mr Beatty:** We have talked to the industry. When we set that target, we had a knowledge of what their appetite was. Some of it is on a year-to-year basis, but we have also changed our approach. We now do it as a challenge scheme, so we invite people to give us their best offer and we take the best of them. That has had an impact; people are saying to themselves, "The grants might not be there tomorrow, so we had better apply now". That marketing strategy is there.

We have also said that we want big woodlands rather than small ones, so we have set a minimum size of five hectares. If you look at a map of Northern Ireland and all its forests, you will see our forests as big discrete blocks, and then it is like a pepper pot over the rest of the country. Some of it is OK, and some is not so good. There is a lot of edge effect. My colleagues in the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) are concerned about the effect of predators on breeding waders, the shelter that the forests would give and why that might discourage some species of bird. We are saying, "For the moment, let us see whether we can get some consolidation of the woodlands so that they are big".

We cannot stop people planting trees on their own account, but we do not see that we need to support them at this stage. That said, the small planting will go ahead through the agri-environment scheme when it launches.

**Mr Poots:** What is your attitude to mountain bikes?

**Mr Beatty:** We have encouraged our partners to put trails in, and we support them when they build them. We are clear that it is not our function to maintain those trails, but we make sure that they are designed so that they support the interest in it. Those that I have seen are very successful and very popular.

**Mr Poots:** There is a lot of tourism potential. It is an activity that seems to be growing. There are some good opportunities, and feedback in the past has been that the Forest Service has been a tad obstructive to the development of such facilities. I wonder what your current attitude is.

**Mr Beatty:** We are very businesslike. We always say, "We like these things, but who will look after them?". We do not see that it is necessarily the public's job to pick up all of the tab.

**Mr Swann:** Thanks, Malcolm. One of your remits is to control disease and the threat of outbreaks. Can you talk me through how that works with your 200 staff?

**Mr Beatty:** That is where the extra 40 staff are. There are 220 altogether, but 40 are plant health people. That is really a second division in the Forest Service. One division is forestry; the other is plant health. They carry out surveys of the whole country. For example, on tree diseases, we have been carrying out surveys on ash and larch. Then, as new outbreaks in different species happen, we

focus on that. It is a lot of inspection and following up the trade leads. If we are notified of something in another country, we trace that back to here and follow it up. If it has come from us, we feed it back to the people whom we do business with in the UK or through the European Union. There is a lot of work on that.

**Mr Swann:** Where are we in regard to ash dieback?

**Mr Beatty:** We are still finding the disease; it is still spreading. There have been about 80 further outbreaks this year. We will need to evaluate that and see where the disease is going. My opinion is that it will continue to spread: the question is at what rate and whether there is enough diversity in the species to allow reseedling with more disease-tolerant trees from the native population. Work is going on in England, particularly in Queen Mary University of London, on the genetics of this. Some lines of ash have some tolerance. Fortunately, a large collection of good ash trees has been planted in the east of England. They are exposed to disease, and we will see which survive. If we find tolerant races, we can bring them back here and start to seed. The best that we can hope for is that it will be a slow burn and that the disease will progress slowly. If it does, that will give us time to feed better disease-resistant trees back into the countryside. We are not at that stage yet.

**Mr Swann:** With 80 outbreaks, how many sites are we looking at?

**Mr Beatty:** I cannot remember; I will give you a note on it.

**Mr Swann:** When you referred to forests, you mentioned invasive species — rhododendron in particular. What is your management on your own grounds for not weeding giant hogweed?

**Mr Beatty:** Where there is a threat to the public, like giant hogweed, we definitely deal with it. Where we are aware of it, we will try to deal with it; we do not want it to spread any further. Are we successful all the time? I do not know. Do I know all the places where it is? No. There are some issues around that. We tend to get knotweed when we have brought in road material. It comes in on the quarry material, and we discover it some years later and try to deal with it. I do not think that we are a huge threat to our neighbours, but, if we were, that would concern me.

**Mr Swann:** You said that you were trying to consolidate all your sites: is Forest Service aware of all the sites that it owns throughout Northern Ireland?

**Mr Beatty:** We know where our property is. We have reasonable knowledge of where other people's forests are, and we take that from the orthophotographs and other people's databases. We have an obligation under the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 to create a register by 2020. We have already published a draft register telling people where they are by townland. We need to consolidate that, and, at that point, once the register has been confirmed, how the felling licences apply will kick in. It already is the law that, to fell plantation, you need our approval through a felling licence, and the real control that we look for is not to stop you felling, provided that you regenerate the forest. That will give us and landowners certainty that they are on the register and need to do something about it.

**The Chairperson (Ms Dillon):** Forest Service's headquarters recently moved to Enniskillen. I wonder how that has impacted on staff and whether the transfer has worked well. I see anything that involves decentralisation to rural areas as a benefit. It is good thing, but I want to be sure that the staff are looked after.

**Mr Beatty:** I will start with organisational terms and then talk about personal experiences that have been told to me. We were not able to transfer many of our administrative staff. For very laudable reasons, they needed to stay in this area and so did not move. That meant that we recruited quite a lot of people in the Enniskillen area. There was a little loss of knowledge, and it has taken us a little while to build that back up. They tended to be reasonably junior administrative staff, so the senior managers were there to provide the cover and the knowledge transfer, but it takes time to build the organisation up.

The professional staff did not all transfer. Quite a lot were already in the Fermanagh area, and some have moved, but due to the nature of our work and organisation — because it is countrywide — we were able to say, "Well, OK, you cannot go to Fermanagh but you can work somewhere else". We bring people to Enniskillen when we need them to meet there. It works.

Plant health obviously was not part of that move, so that is the next bit I need to think about — where to locate that. That is becoming an issue in relation to how we manage that as part of the organisation. They are part of Forest Service, and they need to be there. Having them separate would create a tension, and yet their work is definitely in the east dealing with crops and horticulture, which there is not too much of in Fermanagh.

I have had personal experiences of talking to my staff. Those who have joined us are delighted. They do not have a commute to Belfast, as they did in the past. Effectively, they have had an increase in disposable income. They like their working environment. It is a nice open-plan office that they seem to like and enjoy. Some staff, particularly the more senior ones, have a long commute. To be honest we just have to work our way through that and see how to best manage it. The bottom line is whether I can deliver a service, and I think we are doing that, particularly as we work more and more with councils. They are delivering things like recreation, which means that we do not need to be on the ground so much. That is an important part of our strategy for making all of this work. Does that answer the question?

**The Chairperson (Ms Dillon):** Thank you very much.

**Mr McGlone:** You referred to Florence Court. I had occasion to spend a wee bit of time there over the summer, and it is a lovely spot. It really works well, and the trees and everything in it are perfect. We do not have a lot of trees where I come from, but as I went around Fermanagh I noticed a lot of afforestation. One thing that struck me was that you are doing a fair bit of thinning out of conifers. I presume it is your property: maybe it is not.

**Mr Beatty:** In Florence Court?

**Mr McGlone:** No, not Florence Court — wider than that.

**Mr Beatty:** We are thinning in many places.

**Mr McGlone:** The one thing that struck me was how densely the trees appeared to have been initially planted together. As an observation, I find that probably a restrictive practice — maybe not — in the development of the forest. Has there been any new thinking around that to allow a wee bit more spread? I looked at the ground itself, and it cannot be good for the ground or what is beneath it. Maybe I am wrong; maybe that is just a simpleton talking about an observation that I had.

The second thing is not unrelated to it: grey squirrel populations, their control and, in particular, how they affect the native red squirrel populations. What measures have you had to take and what problems have you with them on the properties that you have?

**Mr Beatty:** First, tree spacing. We plant the trees close because it gives us better wood quality in the long run. The issue with any plank you buy is whether there are very many knots in it and how big they are. If the trees are widely spaced, the branches are bigger, the knots are bigger and the timber quality is lower.

**Mr McGlone:** Ah, right.

**Mr Beatty:** That would apply to conifers and to broadleaves. There was a time when we reduced the stocking requirements on broadleaves so people would plant, instead of 2,500 stems per hectare, 1,000. We have a lot of, in my view, very poor native broadleaf plantations. The trees are growing well, but they have big branches, which will lead to very poor timber. If you have only planted the tree for the environment, that is fine. You have got all you want, but that is all you have got. If you plant a tree and you are going to hand on to your successors in title, they might want sometime to have a nice oak plank cut out of that: that will not happen. So we do it that way — hence we thin. We plant 2,500. There are some arguments that we should plant more tightly than that to get better wood. Our timber is always fast-grown, with quite wide rings. The closer the trees are, the narrower the rings will be. The timber that you buy in the lumber yard from Scandinavia is much closer grown and slower grown. That is simply because the trees are closer together.

**Mr McGlone:** Thank you for that. That is very interesting.

**Mr Beatty:** Grey squirrels are an introduced species — they are definitely non-native — from North America. In North America, they do not cause a lot of damage, but they do here. They damage native broadleaves. They will sit on them and chew their bark. They need that for the salts. The trees will be badly damaged and utterly worthless for timber, so it is a big issue. They carry a disease that affects our native red squirrels. That is the background. Foresters are concerned about it; they do quite a lot to intervene.

Two things happen. We have discovered that the red squirrel survives in conifer forests because it has access to the conifer cones. The grey squirrel does not like that kind of food material. I am not saying that red squirrels like it, but the grey squirrels cannot get at it, so the red squirrels survive there. By that separation, the greys do not come in contact with the reds and cannot spread their disease, and you get populations of reds surviving. Some more recent work has shown that a native predator — the pine marten — seems to disturb grey squirrels. I am not saying that it preys on them — it does when it catches them — but the simple disturbance of having a predator in the area means that the grey squirrels are less successful at breeding and move on. That, in itself, will ease the pressure on the red squirrel, and they will come back. The red squirrel is much smaller, so it is harder for the pine marten to get at. Therefore, it tends to survive a bit better.

In policy terms, private growers in particular came together and said, "Look, this grey squirrel is such a nuisance. It's destroying all of our woodlands, so can we do something about it?". There is a UK Squirrel Accord that deals with the conservation of red squirrels, the control of grey squirrels and the mechanisms that we have to put in place, such as research, cooperation or whatever, to deal with that. We are a signatory to that. Before that, a lot of native red squirrel groups were working in the country. They work on our ground. We sign agreements with them so that we know what they are up to. We encourage them. They might do things like feeding red squirrels. There are mixed views about that, but you can see the community interest in it. There is a view that bringing red squirrels into a feeding point is a really good way of spreading disease, so there are things there that we watch. Where it works, that is OK. It is really good to involve people in that. They monitor, and they can tell us what is going on because we are not there. That is the approach that we take.

**Mr McGlone:** Thanks very much for that. It was very helpful.

**Mr Swann:** To expand on the squirrels, who is responsible for the management and control of deer on your property?

**Mr Beatty:** I am.

**Mr Swann:** Disease, cull, the whole lot?

**Mr Beatty:** They are wild animals, so, in a sense, nobody owns them, but, as a landowner, you are entitled, as is any landowner, to control wild animals on your property. Deer are a threat to young trees in particular. We manage the deer population, keeping the numbers to an acceptable level. We do not eliminate, but we certainly cull. We make sure that the population is at a sustainable level.

**Mr Swann:** What about poaching and the removal of those deer if they are wild animals?

**Mr Beatty:** That is a police matter.

**Mr Swann:** Is there a problem with that? Do you know?

**Mr Beatty:** It takes place, but it is not hugely important to us. We make sure that we have good liaison with the PSNI.

**Mr Swann:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Beatty:** No, I do not like poachers. First, there is a welfare issue for the animals. If they are wounded or whatever, it would fall to us to deal with that. They are probably shot with the wrong weapon, so it will linger. I simply do not like the idea of people wandering through our forests with weapons that I do not know about.

**Mr McKee:** I am looking at the opposite side, not the lovely lush green tree but the aftermath of a fire. Do you own all trees on public land?

**Mr Beatty:** No.

**Mr McKee:** Right — that rules that out.

Around Spelga Dam, do you own trees there?

**Mr Beatty:** We have some trees around Spelga.

**Mr McKee:** On the Trassey Road?

**Mr Beatty:** Some, yes.

**Mr McKee:** To me, there are areas there that look like a graveyard.

**Mr Beatty:** Aye, because they have been burnt.

**Mr McKee:** They have been burnt.

**Mr Beatty:** Yes. Those are our plantations.

**Mr McKee:** Why are those burnt trees left for a number of years? They are very unsightly. It is certainly not good for attracting visitors. So many visitors use the Trassey Road and the Spelga Dam area. Why are those trees allowed to remain?

**Mr Beatty:** The first thing we do is to try to salvage some of that. We will try to get it to market where we can, but it is not that attractive. It is covered in carbonised material, and it is hard to get it into the mills. There is a cost bit to that. We will interplant that and plant through it. The trees will grow up and give a little bit of shelter, and they will come up through it. The other thing is that we are keen to remind people, "If you go lighting fires round here, this will be the consequence". We have an unusually big fire problem — much worse than our climate would indicate. That means that it is people-related. The Mournes and bits of east Fermanagh come out as two hot spots where we have to watch that. There are a lot of people in the Mournes, and I am happy to remind them not to light fires. It is bad for the environment and bad for them. Wildfire travels faster than they can run.

**Mr McKee:** That is why you keep the trees there.

I have another question. I have observed that over a two-year period in Castlewellan forest, trees that were felled and debranched were left lying in massive piles to dry out.

**Mr Beatty:** They will not burn, but I would like those to be taken to the mills. I have been asking my staff as I go round why that timber has not been taken away.

**Mr McKee:** It would burn.

**Mr Beatty:** Well, no, not easily.

**Mr McKee:** The stuff that I saw was very dried-out.

**Mr Beatty:** When people built houses with timber, they liked the massive timbers that were in it. What would happen in that case, as you saw at Trassey, is that the outside of the tree chars but the inside is sound. The outside would simply carbonise and become an insulator. It is very hard to burn a whole tree. It is easy to burn a branch or a twig, but that is a different thing from a massive log.

**Ms Archibald:** Thanks for the information so far; it has been very interesting. To pick up on something that Robin touched on, it is my understanding that one of the issues with chalara was imports. Are imported seedlings screened and tested?

**Mr Beatty:** We do not permit the import of ash at the moment.

**Ms Archibald:** I know, but what about other things?

**Mr Beatty:** I cannot remember what the legislation is at the moment. I know that we have been pushing at different times to increase that, and it happens in the UK. We certainly watch what is going on through trade. I cannot just remember whether we have brought in legislation that says there is an obligation to tell us. That said, it is not a huge trade at the moment. Most people will plant trees because we give them grant aid. If we are not giving grant aid or controlling it through the grant-aid system, then we have a good handle on what is coming into the country. The horticulture sector is certainly a risk, not just on the tree side but because of other plants that are brought in. We do inspect the nurseries. It is not so much at the docks, but, when it lands at a horticulture centre, we inspect that and see what is going on. They are obliged to keep records.

**The Chairperson (Ms Dillon):** There are no further questions from members. Thank you very much for your presentation; we appreciate you coming along.

**Mr Beatty:** I invite the Committee to visit a forest. You would be welcome to do so.

**The Chairperson (Ms Dillon):** Thank you very much.