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JOINT FAO/ECE/ILO COMMITTEE ON FOREST TECHNOLOGY, MANAGEMENT AND TRAINING

Seminar on
AFFORESTATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT

in conjunction with the 24th session of the Joint FAO/ECE/ILO Committee on
Forest Technology, Management and Training

Ennis, Co. Clare, Ireland, 15-19 September 2002

The Role of Co-operative in Sustainable Afforestation and Promoting Rural Development

Basic paper by Mr. Ray Gallagher

Summary

In farming terms, the west of Ireland has been designated as a 'Severely Handicapped Area' by the EU. It is an area of fragmented small farms, where poor drumlin/gley soils and interdrumlin peats predominate.

For over a century, the agricultural co-operatives in the area have a tradition of introducing new services and farming techniques for their members. When research in the 70s showed that unproductive gley soils could produce a valuable timber crop, these co-operatives were quick to see the opportunities this offered. The challenge was to introduce forestry onto western farms without undermining the cultural, environmental or social fabric of the regions. It must complement farming – not replace it.

To meet this challenge, with EU and Forest Service help, seven of the main agricultural co-operatives in the region set up the Western Forestry Society. The objectives of this Society were:

- to increase farm incomes through the introduction of a new crop to make marginal areas of farms productive;

- to create employment in remote rural areas, in order to accommodate under-employed farmers and to retain farm youth in the community; and
- to give a planned approach to farm forestry development aimed at optimising its economic, social and environmental impact on the farmer and his community.

Since its establishment in the mid '80s, the Co-operative's approach in achieving these objectives has constantly changed and evolved. The early years were spent breaking down anti-forestry feelings among farmers and rural communities. Next came the establishment of strategically located group demonstration plantations, used for widespread promotion. The next phase was setting up 20 farmer-owned forestry co-operatives around existing community leadership, to provide information, back-up services and encouragement for farmers contemplating afforestation while safeguarding community interests.

Today these co-operatives have 2,500 members who collectively have planted approximately 1,500 ha of farmland, of which 60% form part of group plantations. For members approaching the first thinning stage, it is currently finalising plans to involve them in group Sustainable Forest Management programmes which will ensure quality timber produced in a sustainable manner which complements other aspects of rural development.
