

THE NATIVE WOODLAND SCHEME FROM THE FORESTRY CONTRACTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

For the past number of years the priority of the forest contractor has been to provide the woodland owner with a service that is heavily focused on conifer establishment, timber extraction and vegetation control, at a very competitive cost. Escalating labour costs and insurance cover has compelled the contractor to invest more heavily in up-to-date machinery and equipment.

The introduction of the native woodland scheme has provided new challenges for forest contractors. Work practices on sites must now be adopted where the emphases are much more focused on habitat retention, flora and fauna protection and long-term conservation work as laid down in the relative management plan. The management plan expects work to be carried out to a very high standard, while still giving good value to the owner. Work often has to be completed over a very short time span, when conditions are poor, creating serious difficulties for the contractor.

The contractor can address the problems to a certain extent by becoming more informed on native woodland management and by understanding and perfecting the different skills required. They must also look at new ways of adopting machinery and work practices, so as to comply with the protection of sensitive habitats, as prescribed in the management plan.

It is also incumbent on the managers and ecologists to be familiar with the practical difficulties encountered by contractors. They need to be aware of possible expenditure that will be incurred when setting out prescriptions in the detailed schedule of proposed operations. Communication with the contractor prior to completing the management plan could be beneficial to all. Communications between management and contractors should be ongoing when work is in progress on the site.

Introduction

Larry Byrne and Sons is a family forestry business engaged in sawmilling, timber harvesting, log transport, fuelwood production and woodland management. We also purchase standing timber, both hardwood and conifer. The business acquired a semi mature 17 ha oak woodland in County Wicklow, with the view to providing a long-term supply of raw material for fencing and fuel wood. When the management plan was drawn up for the woodland, its ecological importance was highlighted. After much debate and consultation it was decided that the long-term objective would be to manage the woodland for limited timber production while maintaining its ecological values. This experience gave me an invaluable insight and interest into native woodland management.

Communication

Good communication is essential between the contractor, participating forester and the ecologist:

When drawing up the management plan

- Establish an agreed work programme and time for completion
- Agree work methods and costs
- Identify special areas for protection and site constraints

When operations are in progress

- Regular site meetings to discuss progress and work standards
- Discuss unforeseen problems that may have arisen

Timing

From the contractor's point of view it is essential that there is continuity of work through the year. Overhead expenses are spread over a 12-month period. It is best to carry out operations such as extraction and ground preparation from late spring to early autumn when ground conditions are favourable. However, there are often constraints during this period. For example forest operations cannot be carried out during the nesting season. Very often, operations may be held up due to lack of funding or projects awaiting approval. The end result is that work is concentrated to late in the year, which is very difficult for a contractor to programme.

Costs

The onus falls on the contractor to carry out all operations laid out in the management plan to a very high standard. The Native Woodland Scheme is cost based so there is a limit to the amount of expenditure that can be incurred. Again the onus falls on the contractor to be cost effective, while also ensuring that operations do not impact negatively on the ecological values of the woodland.

This is an important issue where there are a number of costly operations such as deer fencing, rhododendron removal etc and all costs may not be covered by the grant. The high cost of labour and difficulty in obtaining insurance cover must be taken into consideration. The more mechanised the operation, the more cost effective it will be.

Experience to date of contract work under the Native Woodland Scheme

Larry Byrne and Sons carry out all NWS operations, but specialise in woodland management, and continuous cover practices, respacing and coupe felling. A large percentage of our work to date has been the removal of non-native species both broadleaf and conifer.

Before undertaking a project we always like do a detailed site assessment noting:

- Ground conditions/flora and fauna/terrain
- Volume and log size of any timber to be removed.
- Extraction paths
- Haulage routes /distance
- Water / fisheries
- National monuments

- Power lines
- Public access/safety

Methods of extraction used

- (1) Horse Extraction (labour intensive)
- (2) Cable extraction (on very sensitive sites but very costly)
- (3) Skidder (long timber lengths and large diameter logs)
- (4) Forwarder and chainsaw (hardwoods)
- (5) Forwarder and Mechanical Harvester (conifers)
- (6) Combination of any of the above

Site conditions vary from flat wet alder-willow type sites to steep acid oak-birch-holly type woodlands, often with rock outcrop and each of these site types will require very different work practices.

On the more difficult sites extraction methods such as cable or horse are used.

On the majority of sites worked on to date, it has been possible to use a combination of mechanical harvesting and forwarder and chainsaw, which we find to be a very effective method from an economical, environmental and safety point of view.