



Helen Lawless,  
Mountaineering Ireland.

05<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

Subject:- **Coillte response to BAU Five Year Forest Plan consultation received from Mountaineering Ireland**

Dear Helen,

Thank you for your submission in response to our public consultation for our Forest Plans. Please find below our response to you

In summary, Mountaineering Ireland's submission is welcomed and many of the points raised are clearly observed by the Estates and Recreation teams in Coillte. Many thanks for a detailed and thorough submission.

In relation to some points raised, the following observations are made (indexing is aligned to Mountaineering Ireland's submission and should be read in conjunction with it).

#### **1. RECREATION**

- b. Coillte recognises that there is considerably more recreational access and provision than just the recognised 260 sites and 3000 kms of trails that we show on our website. Every local forest provides local access through local knowledge and informal use. Our forests are managed with this in mind. Advance notices, posted at our entrances for all our operational sites, let local visitors know when we need to close sites for operations. When operations are completed, we seek to upgrade roads and trails where possible and if required to continue to provide good recreational access.
- e. As part of our planning process for operations, every site is screened through a formal Environmental Risk Assessment process. This allows any recorded or observed feature to be protected or further investigated before operations commence. While we have a full record of all *recorded* archaeological monuments on our lands, this process ensures that we capture any 'new' or unknown built or cultural heritage features on our lands and protect them fully before operations commence. In addition, there are regulatory provisions in place, implemented by the Forest Service to ensure the protection of archaeological monuments on forest lands. Coillte have a strong track record in this regard and have worked closely with local communities on conservation of some iconic buildings on our lands.
- h. We have examined the possible provision of parking at lands adjacent to/near the Pier Gates and remain open to progressing further should the use of local private parking not be suitable for longer term use. We will monitor the traffic and parking situation and through regular contact with Mountaineering Ireland discuss this further should it be required.



- j. The massive increase in use of forests during the Covid period and lifting of restrictions (35% increase in 2020 compared to 2019 total visitor numbers) has shown that we need to provide significant additional waymarking and information at previously lesser known and lesser-used forests. This is being actively examined in early 2021.
- k. Coillte will seek to designate further forests for general and leisure cycling where suitable and would welcome any further discussions with Mountaineering Ireland on this to identify suitable locations. The use of forests for MTB use will continue to be on a licensed basis with clubs or where purpose-built trails are constructed by Coillte at the national trail centres.
- m. Concerns are noted. The Ballyhoura trailhead project is still in discussion stages, so there are no concrete plans for the level of services to be delivered yet. As with any trailhead, where local enterprise is servicing the full needs of the visitor, we would not look to duplicate services.
- n. Coillte will always endeavour to provide access under licence, to those using its lands for commercial activities in the broad area of guiding or leading walking, cycling and equestrian groups or tours. Our fee schedule aims to be as reasonable as possible in matching a reasonable fee with the level of the business undertaken. It is always expected that anyone operating a business on or across Coillte lands carries insurance for their activities and this is a minimum requirement of licensing on Coillte lands. We are happy to discuss further with Mountaineering Ireland.

## **2. FOREST AND LAND MANAGEMENT**

- c. Across the entire Coillte estate, Coillte work with and respect nature. Where important features of biodiversity are identified, they are mapped and protected across our entire estate. Coillte manages all of its forests in a fully sustainable fashion, and continues to endeavour to remain the largest supplier of wood in Ireland, supporting over 12,000 rurally based jobs, along with the largest provider of outdoor recreation.
- d. Coillte manages all of its forests in a fully sustainable fashion and we would contend that it is not at all common practice find oil containers from forest operations lying around our forests. However, we have seen a significant increase in illegal dumping and littering on our lands especially since the onset of Covid 19. Coillte work proactively to prevent and deter littering on our lands. We are core members of Leave No Trace Ireland and ask all visitors to our lands to abide by their principles. We were instrumental in a national media campaign in 2020 to deter littering in the outdoors and we operate a partnership programme in the most prone area for littering on our estate to ensure the timely removal of illegal dumping.
- e. Regulations set by the DAFM state that signage is displayed at the entrance to each property where harvesting operations are being carried out.
- f. The visual impact of forest operations is carefully considered during the planning stage. This impact is minimised by limiting the area that will be clearfelled, providing visual screens of retained mature trees where possible and by carefully planning how the successor forest will look. Immediately after clearfelling is carried out, the area can look unsightly, as do many other crops after they are harvested. However, this is only very temporary as clearfelled sites are replanted immediately after harvesting. This means that the site has greened up again with young trees and grasses within 1 to 2 years.



- g. The felling licence notification that is displayed at each site prior to the commencement of operations is a template that is generated and provided for use by the DAFM.
- h. Silvicultural planning is a core component of our forest management practices. Currently, about 30% of our forests are composed of native species such as Scots Pine, Alder, Birch, Oak and Ash. These trees add a great deal of diversity to our forests. However, these species can be more demanding in terms of soil and fertility and are therefore not always the most suitable option for the marginal land that is available for forestry.

Furthermore, our forests are both a very effective carbon store and carbon sink. Ireland's forests store over 55 million tonnes of carbon in wood (National Forest Inventory 2017), which is equivalent to over 200 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, or 3 times the total annual emissions in Ireland.

In relation to invasive species control, Coillte have an annual programme of work for the control of invasive species which includes removal of natural regeneration of non-native species including Rhododendron and this approach is targeted to prioritise sites of high conservation value. We also liaise closely with DAFM in relation to this issue, which is a national problem, specifically in relation to rhododendron.

- i. Coillte has formed an innovative new entity known as Coillte Nature. Coillte Nature is the not-for-profit branch of Coillte that is dedicated to the restoration, regeneration and rehabilitation of nature across Ireland. Its mission is to deliver real impact on the climate and biodiversity crises through large-scale projects based on the best ecological evidence. Its aim is threefold: to undertake impactful projects that create, restore, regenerate and rehabilitate biodiverse habitats across Ireland by partnering with public, private, non-governmental and community stakeholders; to manage those habitats for ecological and recreational value in perpetuity; and in doing so, to maximise the ecosystem services they provide to people for the benefit of everyone, now and into the future. This entity will lead the way to engage with our stakeholders and create awareness of our biodiversity work and has a dedicated section on our website which provides regular updates and information about all projects.

In addition, Coillte is now active across four social media channels posting information about our business, our forest operations and most importantly our forests, showcasing the environmental and social benefits they deliver. We regularly post about our biodiversity offering and our woodlands for health programme but can increase posts on our management and protection of our archaeological heritage.

- j. Coillte is always available to consult with local communities prior to and during project development. All local stakeholders are consulted with well in advance of development, from pre-planning stage through to project completion. We also liaise closely with key stakeholders in relation to any issues and specific requirements that may arise after project completion and lines of communication are always well maintained by Land Solutions staff. We have also developed strong recreational offerings at our wind farms, for example Sliabh Bawn, which have been well received locally and are enjoyed by locals and visitors alike.



### 3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- a. As acknowledged, our Social and Environmental Panels were disbanded due to low / non-attendance in all BAUs. Also, the BAU Consultation meetings gives every notified stakeholder the opportunity to consult with us, not only S&E panel members which is important and welcomed. Notifications of upcoming meetings were issued to each stakeholder via letter / email and published on our website. We aim to issue all invitations to consult with us in a timely fashion at all times and will continue to do so. We are also very active on social media and release regular information and updates across our channels.

Unfortunately, due to the current health crisis our annual Consultation Meetings could not go ahead in 2020. We look forward to hosting our meetings in 2021 in full compliance with all HSE Guidelines and Protocols. In the meantime, we always continue to be available to consult with stakeholders. If you need to contact us, please e-mail [info@coillte.ie](mailto:info@coillte.ie).

- b. In relation to personnel changes, Coillte prides itself on giving staff the opportunity to gain knowledge and experience in all areas of our business which results in personnel changes. Therefore, we always recommend that stakeholders contact us via our website initially. We ensure relevant staff are notified who will liaise directly with each stakeholder. Key stakeholders who deal with Coillte staff on a regular basis are normally informed of any changes in personnel at local level.
- c. It is intended that a revised recreation-centric website will be developed in 2021. The issues raised are also well noted internally.
- d. Coillte offers a very cost-effective annual rate for access to its paid car-parks at forest parks. This will be made more easily available to the public through a new online system in 2021.

We plan to publish our draft plans in the coming weeks and will at that stage invite you to review these plans and submit further queries / comments for our attention. You will be notified when our plans are available to view on our website.

Kind Regards,

Sharon Byrne,  
Stakeholder Engagement Officer.