

Irish Times
May 8, 2013

Public access to forests raised as part of growing opposition to sale of Coillte rights

Sale would cost the State more in the long run, committee told



A stroll in the woods. Proposal to sell harvesting rights has not been rationally assessed in relation to its impact on the public good, say critics. Photograph: Bryan O'Brien/The Irish Times

Alison Healy

The sale of the harvesting rights of State forestry company Coillte could actually cost the State more money in the long term, the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture heard yesterday. Donal Magner of the Society of Irish Foresters said the buyers of the harvesting rights would be unable to pay the full value of the non-wood benefits, especially recreation.

However, the State would have to continue to provide these benefits and this could mean the Exchequer might not be a beneficiary in the long term. "This could cost the State a lot more." He said fears about public access to forests after such a sale were "well founded", as the sale of harvesting rights would "virtually eliminate the public forest estate and by extension Coillte both as meaningful entities, leaving Ireland unlike any other state in Europe or the developed world".

The society represents professional foresters and people with an interest in the forest and timber industry.

'Not rationally assessed'

Mr Magner said the proposal to sell the rights "has not been rationally assessed in relation to its impact on the industry and on the non-wood or public good aspects of forestry".

There were suggestions last week that the Government was moving closer to dropping its plan to sell off the harvesting rights, as part of a privatisation plan agreed with the EU-IMF troika. Minister for Communications Pat Rabbitte told the Dáil the "mooted privatisation of Coillte looks more unlikely every day".

Earlier at yesterday's Oireachtas committee meeting, Minister for Agriculture Simon Coveney and Fianna Fáil's agriculture spokesman Éamon Ó Cuív clashed during a discussion on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Mr Ó Cuív accused the Minister of "preserving the rich and making them richer" with his stance on the farm policy while Mr Coveney said Mr Ó Cuív was "grandstanding" and "trying to play to the gallery".