

## Introduction

Native woodlands are an integral part of Ireland's natural heritage, history and culture, and are unique in terms of their biodiversity. They are home to a host of specialised woodland animals and plants, including red squirrel, pine marten, great spotted woodpecker, narrow-leaved helleborine and wood millet, to name but a few. They provide numerous ecosystem services, including the protection and enhancement of water quality, wider habitat linkage, landscape enhancement, opportunities for outdoor recreation and interpretation, and carbon capture.

The Woodland Environmental Fund (WEF) provides an access point for individual businesses to help expand Ireland's native woodland resource, by providing additional incentives to encourage landowners to plant new native woodlands that they may not have otherwise planted, had that additional support not been provided. This relationship benefits the State by contributing to national targets regarding native woodland afforestation. It enhances the reputation of the participating business, as that business is associated with the creation of a tangible environmental asset that will become a permanent feature of the landscape. These forests will benefit society on an ongoing basis through the 'delivery' of the important ecosystem services set out above.

WEF is an ideal 'Corporate Social Responsibility' (CSR) project, as the restoration of Ireland's once-vast forests of oak, birch and alder invokes a shared emotion amongst many of its citizens. Therefore, involvement in the WEF can contribute to a more cohesive society, as people who associate themselves with the participating business – either through their own business dealings or through employment, or by buying their products – can feel part of a collective effort to restore this important piece of Ireland's natural heritage. As a CSR project, WEF goes beyond the immediate boundaries of the business itself. It demonstrates a willingness to tackle, in a tangible way, wider societal issues relating to biodiversity, water quality, climate mitigation, and health and well-being.

## Promoting native woodland establishment contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as follows:

<b>GOOD HEALTH &amp; WELL-BEING</b>	Native woodlands provide an ideal 'venue' for outdoor recreation, with a beneficial impact regarding physical health and mental well-being.
<b>CLEAN WATER &amp; SANITATION</b>	The strategic planting of native woodlands improves water quality and helps reduce the risk and severity of flooding. As set out in the DAFM document <i>Woodland for Water</i> , research and practice show that new native woodlands trap sediment and nutrients, stabilise banks, provide food, shading and cooling for aquatic life, aid riparian restoration, and help regulate floodwater.
<b>AFFORDABLE &amp; CLEAN ENERGY</b>	Wood realised through the appropriate 'close-to-nature' management of emerging native woodlands can be used for domestic fuel or can be sold into the local market.
<b>DECENT WORK &amp; ECONOMIC GROWTH</b>	Native woodlands provide multiple opportunities for value-added products and services, supporting local employment and economic development. These include high-value timber products from rustic craftwork to bespoke furniture, and non-timber products such as mushrooms and foliage. Native woodlands also provide a venue for visitor centres, holiday accommodation and adventure sports, and contribute to the attractive landscape visitors to Ireland seek out.
<b>CLIMATE ACTION</b>	Native trees and the wider woodland ecosystem, including soil, sequester carbon from the atmosphere, thereby contributing to enhanced carbon storage within the countryside.
<b>LIFE ON LAND</b>	New native woodlands provide a semi-natural environment that provides a home for a wide range of plants and animals, including woodland specialists, woodland generalists and 'ruderals' (or opportunists). They can be used strategically to augment existing ancient woodland and to create linkage throughout the landscape between other semi-natural habitats, including rivers, species-rich grasslands and upland heaths. These biodiversity functions, further explored in the publication <i>Management Guidelines for Ireland's Native Woodlands</i> (2017), contribute in a tangible way to the overall richness of wildlife in our countryside.

## Government promotion of native woodland establishment

The Native Woodland Establishment Scheme is a key measure in the delivery of Government policy to increase Ireland's native woodlands, pursued specifically to unlock the wealth of ecosystem services described earlier. The scheme offers farmers and other landowners the cost of establishing such woodland, together with an attractive 15 year premium, and is based on solid ecological principles regarding species selection, seed source, minimal site input and long-term 'close-to-nature' management. It is also operated in close partnership with the eNGO Woodlands of Ireland and with various public bodies dedicated to working with landowners to expand this vital resource.

The scheme is the most significant measure ever taken to reverse centuries of decline in Ireland's native woodland resource, with the current target under the Forestry Programme set at 450 ha – or 1.3 million trees! – per year up to 2020. The Woodland Environmental Fund creates a mechanism for businesses of all sizes – from local firms to multi-nationals operating in Ireland – to positively engage in this national effort, by encouraging more landowners to make this decision to create new native woodland.

## Outline of the WEF

The WEF will operate as follows:

- **STEP 1:** Farmers and other landowners interested in planting native woodlands may opt into the WEF as part of their standard application under DAFM's existing Native Woodland Establishment Scheme.
- **STEP 2:** DAFM undertakes its standard evaluation procedure (which assesses the environmental and silvicultural suitability of the proposal) and, if appropriate, issues approval for the planting of native woodland.
- **STEP 3:** The Registered Forester (or Forestry Company) working on behalf of the landowner, provides a participating Natural Capital Facilitator (NCF) with details of the proposed woodland.