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► To cite this version:

Philippe Deuffic, A. Ni Dhubhain. The end of happy days: how Irish forest stakeholders are moving from risk denial to climatic adaptive strategies.. IUFRO 125th anniversary congress, Sep 2017, Freiburg, Germany. pp.6. hal-02606552

HAL Id: hal-02606552

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02606552>

Submitted on 16 May 2020

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IUFRO 2017

Scientific session: 34 D9 - Institutional drivers and barriers for the management of climate related hazards in the forest, **KG I - 1199 (Uni Freiburg)**, Time: **Mon. 18/09/2017, 08:00 - 10:00**

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Title : The end of happy days: how Irish forest stakeholders are moving from risk denial to climatic adaptive strategies

Abstract: In Ireland the political consensus to expand forest cover has not been really questioned for the last five decades, neither by policy-makers nor by forest owners' representatives. But in the last five years, Irish private forest owners have experienced for the first time in their life several major severe catastrophes: the outbreak of *Phytophthora* on larch in 2010, the arrival of *Chalara* on ash in 2012, and a catastrophic windstorm on Sitka spruce plantations in 2014. All these events have shaken their convictions and beliefs about the real benefits of afforestation. For forest policy makers, framing discourses and defining strategies about risk management is now a priority in order to reassure forest owners, to incentivize them to plant again and at the same time to warn them about future risks related to forestry. Our paper aims at exploring how policy makers and forest owners are managing these multiple risks and what strategies they favour. Firstly we will see how recent climate related events have amazed forest owners and stakeholders. Secondly we will see that structural factors (wood markets, insurance costs) and individual beliefs (mistrust in institutional discourses, routines) have hampered the implementation of adaptive strategies. Thirdly we will analyse how economic incentives (reconstitution scheme), legal instruments (ban on planting some tree species) and communications tools have contributed to assist forest owners in their decision-making, in particular to reconstitute the forest after the storm Darwin. Finally we will see that Irish forest stakeholders are now gradually moving from risk undervaluing to risk integration and management.

Keywords : forest owners, perception, climate change, adaptive strategy

In Ireland forest cover expands from 1% in 1920 to 11% now. This afforestation programme mainly based on fast-growing trees such as Sitka spruce started in the public forest and has been extended to private farmlands from the 1980s. Except minor protest from environmental NGO, there is a political consensus to boost afforestation that has never been seriously questioned neither by policy-makers nor by forest owners' representatives and the new revised for policy confirm this trend for the next decade

Framing forestry with attractive arguments

To secure this pro-active forestry policy, it still has been very strategic for the Ministry in charge forest **to frame discourses** in a very positive way. For the sociologist Erwin Goffmann, frames are structures of beliefs, values, and perceptions through which social **actors reduce the complexity of an issue in**

order to support a certain understanding and promote a specific agenda. Through frames, a multifarious issue is translated into simpler terms, and only certain aspects of it are stressed. To do so, DAFM with the active support of forest companies have framed forestry as an activity with many advantages such as forestry is “100% grant aided”, “Your income is secured for up to 15 years”, “forestry enhances the environment”, etc; . This active policy was very successful in particular in the private sector as private forest counts now for 47% of the Irish forest areas. But this idyllic situation suddenly changed in only 4 years. It started with the outbreak of Phytophthora on Larch, an **increase by three** of forest fires and the arrival of Chalara on ash. Last but not least: a very severe gale, storm Darwin, in Feb 2014. Irish forest community is used to live with storms but storm Darwin was of a different calibre as it blew down 8,000 ha, and impacted 500 private forest landowners for the first time of their life ; After these series of events, Irish forestry seemed to be at a crossroads: Our hypothesis is that Irish forestry players, i.e forest policy makers, forest stakeholders and private landowners, are slowly moving from risk denial to the implementation of a risk management strategy. But how and why ?

Methods and data

In 2016, we carried out a survey in order to see if and how policy makers and forest owners were managing the damage induced by Darwin , which strategies they favoured. We interviewed 45 people

- forest stakeholders in DAFM, forest owners association and forest enterprises
- PFO diversely impacted by natural hazards and mainly by the storm : from 10 to 80% of damaged trees

Managing the catastrophe under pressure

As mentioned by Lidskog after Storm Gudrun in Sweden, catastrophic events let very little time for desktop research and reflexive actions, or as Birkland said after hurricane Katrina, no room for fantasy contingency plan. For forest authorities the main issue consisted in governing risk properly. While a series of intricate issues emerged just few days after the storm, forest authorities reacted very rapidly but also very basically in the first weeks following the storm by :

- **Implementing of a task force** to coordinate safety services and forestry services, to assess damage and above all to avoid more casualties
- **Defining the level of crisis they faced:** In Ireland, due to bad weather conditions, forestry firms were unable to get their planes in the air to achieve these surveys for at least one month. So the first significant evidences came to the task force from very **different, informal and spontaneous sources** in the two next weeks (phone call from forest managers /e-mail/reports from local forest inspector /meeting on the

ground with forest owners, etc). These **scattered pieces of information** allowed qualifying the storm from “normal” to “catastrophic” event. However, to get a better assessment, it took nearly two months to choose a more systematic assessment method by satellite (the RapidEye method) and, first of all, to get financial agreement between forest stakeholders {McInerney, 2016 #3637}.

- **Accelerating the procedure** to obtain more rapidly felling license by reducing delay from 4 months to 1-2 weeks when trees were clearly blew down; however, it still took 3 or 4 months to issue felling license in special envtal protection areas
- the state asked to the public forest bodies to **postpone their harvests** to avoid an excess of timber on market and a price collapse. Public forests played the role of “**wood price buffer/price shock absorber**”
- **Introducing a series of forestry advisory clinics** to support forest owners on the ground

Two years after the storm, the situation seemed to be under control and everything that could be done seemed have been done ; most of windblown trees were harvested, wood price dropped but just a bit (by 20% in average). Forest authority could **move to the second step** of the recovery process: to reforest land. But there were some signs that PFO would not agree unreservedly

Disarray and disappointment:

When we carried out survey with private forest owners, even two years after the storm, many forest owners were still in a state of psychological shock. Many of them firstly mentioned the economic loss because they did not get the **profit/return on investment** they expected and most of them lost their future pension plan. They also had the feeling **a sword of Damocles was hanging over their head since** the part of the forest that has not been battered by storm Darwin could be impacted again. Beyond this economic impact, storm Darwin had huge, almost invisible, and deeply depressing effects on forest owners’ state of mind. Some of them lost trust in the future and had as trong **feeling of frustration** because not being able to achieve their initial project. **Old stories, gossips and conflicts** were resurfacing as well. Traitors to the farmer community 20 years ago, they are now the guys who ignored the initial warning of their neighbours. Their social status **switched from “pioneer” to “forest dope or forestry idiot”** (by analogy with the “cultural dope” described by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel). Finally, they felt pioneer in all the dimensions : pioneer in terms of afforestation by the past and **pioneers in terms of risks** but without any safety net. They also felt to have been misled by promoters of the afforestation policy, not totally and correctly warned about the risk and finally to be a **collateral victim of an experiment (afforestation) that didn’t work very**

well. However a few forest owners also admitted they intentionally underestimated and ignored **initial warning**.

From reconstitution to procrastination

Considering these states of mind, what could be their strategy for the future? Some forest owners chose:

- **1) Perseverance and compliance to the law:** knowing that replanting is mandatory, these forest owners consider that forestry is still a profitable gamble and they are ready to play again but under conditions (reconstitution scheme, no thinning).
- **2) Compensation:** Forest owners admit they will not make as much profit as in the past with forestry. They compensate by investing time, energy and money in more self-satisfying projects such as investing in the farm rather than in forestry or in alternative forestry models (close-to-nature, introduction of broadleaves)
- **3) Detachment/adjournment:** forest owners accept to reforest the land but with a minimum of **investments** and they close the door as soon as trees are replanted
- **4) Denunciation/renunciation:** **They refuse to replant** even if it is not legal and knowing that they may be prosecuted; they want to prove that the forest obligation of replanting is irrelevant and not-economically viable. More worryingly for the Ministry in charge of forest, those PFO often **advise their neighbours not to plant their farmlands, moving from the status of promoter to afforestation detractor**

Supports and warnings

For DAFM and forestry stakeholders, avoiding forest owners' disengagement from forestry became a real challenge. **So framing discourse is strategic** for forest policy makers after storm Darwin as **they have both to reassure forest owners and in the same time to warn them about risks**. So how did they to proceed? Forest policy tools are supposed to steer individual behaviours and we can use a bit simplistic but traditional and convenient **analytical frame: Sticks/carrots/sermons (+ for prevention or recovery?)**

- **Main stick is the legal instrument:** since the beginning of the afforestation programmes in the 1920's Irish forest national laws coerce forest owners to re-afforest their holdings, even after natural hazards. And this compulsory and constraining rule hasn't changed with storm Darwin even if a DAFM representative tacitly admits that prosecution would be hard to proceed ;
- **information/knowledge:** At, first, DAFM tried to minimize the importance of the damage by saying only 1% of the forest area was impacted. However it was counterproductive to make as if damage

were insignificant; So DAFM and Teagasc organised **forestry advisory clinics** on how to deal with windblow in practice; DAFM also supported the **first conference on climate change** in feb 2016, admitting that Irish forestry is entering in a new era of uncertainty, and vulnerability.

- More globally, there is a higher integration of risk in Irish forest policy programmes, there were only 5 forest health strategic actions in the forest strategy defined in 1996. There are 12 in the renewed forest policy programme in 2014 plus a series of research programmes dedicated to risk prevention assessment and so on
- **Reconstitution scheme:** Initially, the DAFM was very reluctant to implement a reconstitution scheme; This lack of willingness was monitored by a more general reflexion at a national level about state investment policy and how **it could take less risk in private investment**. Another motive was **the scarcity of financial resources** at a national level (after the 2008 bailout) and the risk to **destabilize the emerging market of private insurance**. But there was a strong lobbying from farmers and forest owners association who frame their discourses in order to demonstrate that the reconstitution scheme was vital and cannot be circumvented; Finally opponents and supporters **met halfway**: the ministry of public expenditure has accepted a reconstitution scheme in 2016 with grants covering only half of the replanting cost and not the loss of timber value ;
 - **Technical tools** (Carrots): forest Service accept a larger panel of silvicultural options with
 - the introduction of **the “no thinning” option**. Before the storm, this option was denigrated by forest experts but now some of them support this option.
 - definition of new standards **for maximum top height that had been reduced**.
 - **Promotion of mixed forest/close-to-nature forestry** (already promoted before the storm and not disowned after).

Conclusion

Storm and the successive previous catastrophes have acted **as windows of opportunity** which finally **put the question of risk and climate change on the political agenda with clear warning on risk to forest in the future**. Storm may paradoxically foster and even reinforce afforestation and forestry policies. **The more forests are under threats, the more forest stakeholders are lobbying to achieve objectives** of the next afforestation scheme (2014-2020) and **the more active they are to maintain this objective on the politico-economic agenda**. However Technical measures still **reproduce a storm-sensitive forest** still based on Sitka spruce, with an obligation to replant even in very wind

sensitive areas. we can question the initial objectives of the afforestation policy which aimed to support farmers with low revenue. But, finally they are the ones **who clearly lost the more money.** Paradoxically , it's to those forest owners to support the industry by supplying wood whatever the costs are for themselves