



Just Forest's Secretary, Tom Dolan (left) and co-ordinator, Tom Roche (right) were pictured with Chairperson, Mary Humphreys during her visit to Tullamore last week. The visit co-incided with the adoption of a timber purchasing policy by Offaly Co. Co.

History Made As Timber Policy Adopted

Offaly County Council made history last week by becoming the first local authority in the country to adopt a timber purchasing policy.

All timber and wood products purchased by Offaly County Council should now come from well-managed and sustainable Irish sources.

This follows the adoption last week by the Council of a new timber purchasing policy, recommended by the Council's Housing, Community and Cultural Strategic Policy Committee.

The policy proposed by Cllr

Dervill Dolan also includes a pledge to as much as possible and practicable, source such products from independently certified sources.

The Council is also committed to promoting a public understanding of the need for consumers to support well managed and sustained forestry in their lifestyles and buying practices.

The policy was developed by Just Forests in association with the members of the Housing, Social and Cultural Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) and Brendan Clarke of Offaly Co.

Co. and will apply to all future council contracts involving timber and wood-based products.

Just Forests' chairperson, Mary Humphreys remarked this week during a visit to Tullamore: "Just Forests are heartened that Offaly County Council, which has been understandably cautious as it has come to know Just Forests and its work, is quickly taking responsible timber sourcing seriously and ultimately the future of the world's forests. We believe this action will also open the door for other local authorities to follow."

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Timber Row Blazes Again

OFFFALY County Council has defended its use of West African timber in the construction of its new civic offices in Tullamore.

The issue had come to public prominence after Offaly Community Forum has asked the council to explain why it had

pendent its participation in various council bodies, including the Offaly Community Forum, the Offaly Heritage Forum, and the Housing, Social and Cultural SPC, until it received what it described as "an honest and reasonable reply".

This week, County Manager,

chasing policy adopted, Mr Sweeney said that the council had committed itself to the principle that all timber and wood products sourced would be established as coming from well-managed and sustainable sources.

The council had also committed

explained that the policy which was adopted "post-dates the building contract for the building".

Notwithstanding that, the council had sought, in discussions with architects, to ensure that all timber came from well managed and sustainable forests.

He went on to read from an architects report into the nature of the timber required for skeletal timber posts and beams and for cladding.

The architects had stated that although some FSC indigenous hardwoods were available, they were not suitable for technical reasons. Investigations into the sources of Iroko timber on the market had revealed that no FSC certified Iroko was available, the architects said.

However, they explained that two companies had confirmed that Iroko timber which they provide comes from well managed and sustainable sources. Their suppliers were working towards getting FSC certification, the architects added.

Mr Sweeney said that the council had to have regard both to the quality of the product and the cost efficiency.

Cllr Marcella Corcoran Kennedy queried if any timber from certified forests would be used inside the building.

Cllr Molly Buckley said that whilst she accepted what the county manager had said: "I would feel that Offaly County Council has to take leadership on this. If we are to talk about forest conservation, it has to start with us."

Cllr Sean O'Brien said he welcomed the manager's clarification of the issues but claimed that the failure of the council to communicate with Just Forests on the issue had caused the difficulties.

Tom Roche, Director of Just Forests had received no reply to correspondence by letter, e-mail and telephone to the council, Cllr O'Brien claimed.

However, the Director of Service, Bernadette Kinsella defended the council's response to the issue, claiming that there was misinformation out there.

She said the architects were involved in a lengthy telephone conversation with Just Forests and had also written a very detailed letter.

"From my viewpoint, the issues there were responded to," she said.

However, Cllr Sean O'Brien argued that if an organisation had written to a specific member of staff, they should be entitled to a reply.

Ms Kinsella replied: "I'm satisfied that the issues raised were responded to in full."

On a different issue, Cllr Tommy McKeigue claimed that joineries in Offaly had indicated they would go out of business if such timber policies were adhered to in full across the country.

Cllr John Flanagan agreed that 350 good quality jobs existed in the timber industry in Offaly.

Meanwhile the council adopted further timber purchasing policy guidelines as proposed by Cllr Dervill Dolan.



The new offices of Offaly County Council currently under construction at Charleville Road

breached a ground-breaking timber purchasing policy.

This followed criticisms from Tullamore-based environmental group, Just Forests, of the council's use of the West African Iroko timber.

As a result the group had sus-

Niall Sweeney told councillors that there was "a misleading belief in the public domain" regarding the issue. He stressed that the council had not been in breach of its timber purchasing policy.

Quoting from the timber pur-

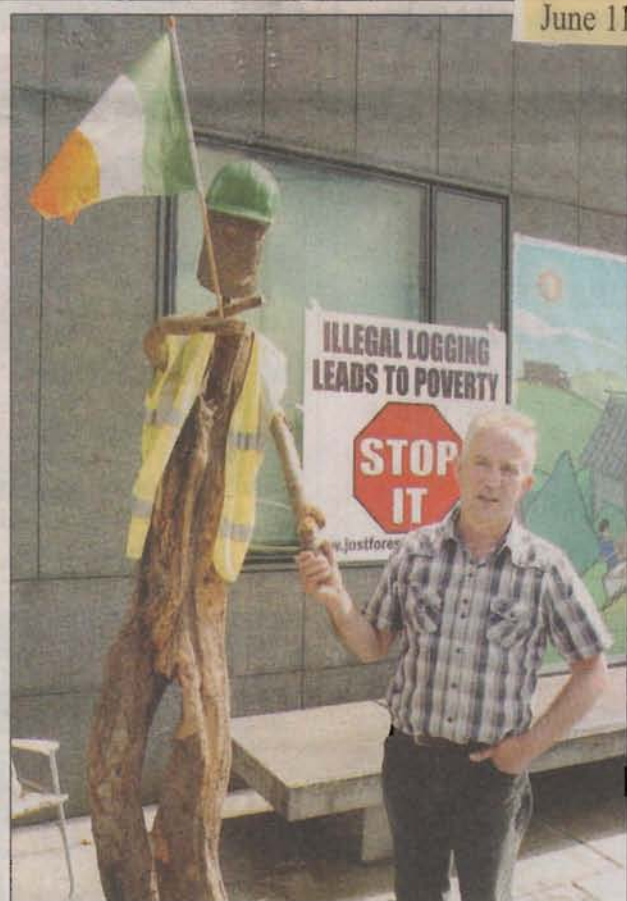
ted itself, as soon as possible, that all timber purchased would be certified by the Forest Stewardship Council or by its equivalent.

He told councillors it was clear that the council had not breached this policy. And he



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Tom Roche protests outside Aras an Chontae against the council's timber use.

Forest Activist Vows To Continue Council Protest

By Ger Scully

AN environmental activist has vowed to continue his protest highlighting Offaly Co. Council's failure to implement its own timber policy.

Rhode based Tom Roche began his action outside Aras an Chontae on Monday morning and will continue to protest for another three days.

Mr Roche, founder of the Just Forests charity, said he was overwhelmed by the support he has received from the public and has secured over 200 signatures on a petition which he will give to council officials on Friday evening. In 2001 Offaly Co Council became the first local authority in Ireland to formally adopt a timber procurement policy in a bid to ensure they excluded illegally-logged timber/wood products from their building works.

'Seven years on and Offaly Co Council's timber policy is still not put into practice,' an irate Mr Roche told the Tribune this week.

'While my protest is focused mainly at Offaly Co Council it is also a wake-up call to other local authorities and national Government that time for real action on our global responsibilities has long since passed,' continued Mr Roche.

'The protest symbolises the links between tropical deforestation and increasing poverty

County Council do have a timber policy since 2001 they do not implement it and after last Tuesday's (3rd June) Housing Social and Cultural Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) meeting, which I attended, I am not convinced that they will implement their policy in the foreseeable future unless persuaded to do so. The meeting was quite stormy and well-seasoned politicians stormed out,' claimed Mr Roche.

Mr Roche said that he had secured the support of the Taoiseach when he was Minister for Foreign Affairs for his organisation's 'Good Wood Policy' guide. The current Co Manager, Pat Gallagher also invited Mr Roche to make a presentation to the Oireachtas sub-committee on Overseas Development Co-operation when he was chairman of the body during his tenure as a Labour party Senator.

Meanwhile, speaking to the Irish Examiner, Sean Murray, Offaly Co. Council's Director of Services, said the body was very conscious of the need to verify the sources of timber used in public building projects but practical considerations had to be taken into account.

'The use of the word 'only' in the sense that we should only use certain timber is overly restrictive. We have a policy of utilising timber from sustainable sources insofar as is practical,' he said.

Roche moves campaign to town centre as council defends timber policy

LAURA RYDER
reports

JUST Forests' Tom Roche has today moved his campaign highlighting Offaly County Council's failure to implement its own timber policy from Aras an Chontae to the town centre.

Director of Services at the council Sean Murray, however, told the Offaly Independent that Mr Roche is "factually incorrect" and said Offaly County Council is promoting the policy it adopted on April 18, 2001.

Mr Roche originally planned a hunger strike outside council offices, but was convinced against that course of action after emails and phone calls asking him not to go down that route. Instead, he has this week collected about 250 signatures for a petition looking for Offaly County Council to immediately put into practice a timber procurement policy it adopted seven years ago in a bid to ensure it excludes illegally-logged timber from its building works.

"We worked with them back in 2001 and they were very proud to be the first council in Ireland to formal-



Tom Roche Just Forests protesting outside Offaly County Councils Aras An Chontae building

ly adopt such a policy," Mr Roche said yesterday. "But that was seven years ago and they have never put it into practice."

Mr Roche said that since then approximately 200 million hectares of forest has been certified worldwide.

"It's not a money thing," he said yesterday. "Destroying an eco-system gives nobody anything. Certified forests ensure everything society

depends on."

"We're not against the use of timber," he continued. "We want to see people using wood, but making sure it comes from properly managed forests."

Mr Roche said the plan now was to stay in town centre, outside the Bridge Centre, today and tomorrow collecting signatures. These signatures would be passed on to Offaly County

Council next week, and Mr Roche says he is hoping for a formal response from Offaly County Council at that stage.

"Hopefully they will see the public support for the stand and see the sense in implementing the policy," he said, adding that making the change could be a "very proud moment" for the council. Mr Murray defended the council yesterday however, saying that it did endeavour to use timber from sustainable Irish sources in its projects.

"We do promote our timber policy, but we have to do so in context of other legislations," he said. He added that the issue was not a "single item agenda" and said it was not possible for Offaly County Council to force a contractor to use timber from sustainable forests.

"The law of the land has to change. Building regulations have to change," he said.

Mr Murray said that he had written to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government earlier this year, requesting changes in building regulations.

"We're not just ignoring this, we're following it," he said.

Forest activist begins hunger strike

by Caroline O'Doherty

AN environmentalist who won praise for his work from Brian Cowen is to go on hunger strike in the Taoiseach's constituency today to protest at alleged inaction on his cause.

Tom Roche, founder of the charity Just Forests, has been campaigning for a ban on the use of imported timber that cannot be proven to be from sustainable forests or is not guaranteed to have been legally felled.

He claims thousands of tonnes of wood brought into this country for construction each year originate in west Africa, South America and other developing regions, where forests are disappearing due to bad management and corruption, leaving local people destitute.

Offaly County Council was the first local authority in the country to adopt a policy of using timber certified as ethically sourced in its construction projects but that was seven years ago, and Mr Roche claims the council has not lived up to its pledge.

He says his decision to stage a hunger strike outside the council's head-



Tom Roche, founder of the charity Just Forests, in the workshop at his home in Rhode, Co Offaly.

Picture: James Flynn/APX

"Local authorities are very influential and should be leading by their actions," he said. "If every local authority adopted this policy — and acted on it — it would have a knock-on effect across the entire construction sector."

Mr Roche, a furniture maker from Rhode, Co Offaly, received praise for his efforts from Brian Cowen when, as minister for foreign affairs in 2002, he launched the Good Wood Guide published by Just Forests. Earlier this year Mr Cowen also sought answers on Mr Roche's behalf about the source of timber used in hoardings during the construction of the new Irish

na but it had not been possible to identify the company or sawmill involved.

But despite having a high-ranking ally in Mr Cowen, plus the stated support of Offaly County Council, Mr Roche says no practical efforts have been made to force importers and builders to seek guarantees that the timber they use is ethically sourced. Guarantees exist under the internationally recognised Forest Stewardship Council and similar certification schemes.

Environmentalists say as much as 60% of all timber imported into the EU is unethically sourced and, while the volume used in Ireland is hard to quantify, if only 10% of the wood

Sean Murray, Offaly County Council director of services, said the council was very conscious of the need to verify the sources of timber used in public building projects but practical considerations had to be taken into account.

"The use of the word 'only' in the sense that we should only use certain timber is overly restrictive. We have a policy of utilising timber from sustainable sources insofar as is practical," he said.

"We have included in our own tender documents that sustainable timber be used where possible but we cannot really insist upon it. There are national procurement rules that

Cost was also a factor, he said. "Most tenders must be considered on the basis of their economic advantage. People would be less than pleased if the price of our social housing suddenly increased because we did not choose the most economically advantageous option."

However, Mr Roche said cost was relative. "There are even greater long-term costs — in terms of the environment, climate change and human rights — if we ignore this issue."

Mr Roche, who is 58 and single, said he would take his hunger strike "one day at a time".

"I am not taking this lightly. I have friends who don't want me to do it but

paugh but not his form of protest. He said a decision was taken last week by the council's strategic policy committee (SPC) on housing — on which Mr Roche is a community representative — to hold a joint meeting with the SPC on the environment to examine what practical steps could be taken.

"I understand that Tom is passionate about this but this is not something that we, as councillors, would willingly disregard or not want to be meaningfully implemented. We are working on it," he said.

In May, Mr Roche received a letter from then taoiseach Bertie Ahern assuring him that Ireland was "fully supportive" of

St. Patrick's Day protests at Council offices in Mullingar



BY DAN FINN

A man staged a protest and 24 hour fast outside the Arts Centre in Mullingar on St Patrick's Day in protest against the Council's use of illegal plywood.

Tom Roche, co-ordinator of Just Forests, a forest campaigning group, held the one-day fast after a secret investigation revealed that Chinese plywood containing two species of endangered tropical hardwood is currently being used in the construction of the new

Civic Offices in Mullingar, County Westmeath.

TESTS

Plywood samples taken from the Mullingar site were tested in Hamburg University and the results revealed that the species used in the cladding included bintangor and nyatoh (pencil cedar).

Both these species are found in forests of south East Asia, and often used in the manufacture of Chinese plywood- an issue which has been highlighted in recent years, as these species are often logged illegally and unsustainably.

Speaking to *Topic*, Mr Roche said: "By using endangered tropical hardwood in the construction of this building Westmeath Co Council is trashing some of the world's last remaining rainforests. It also makes a mockery of the Irish Government's claims to lead on the issue of climate change, as forest destruction is one of the main causes of global warming. The Council like all other Local Authorities in Ireland and the Government needs to introduce a tough new policy on this, or it risks further scandal and significant job losses."

*St. Patrick's Day 17 March 2009
outside Mullingar Civic Offices*