

Plan to Develop Wood Energy in the West

The Western Development Commission (WDC) has appointed consultants to devise a strategy to develop the wood energy sector in the Western Region.

Speaking at the appointment, Bernadette Phelan, Rural Development Executive with the WDC said,

“This is an important step in the ongoing development of the renewable energy sector in the Western Region. Targets for renewable heat become, in reality, targets for wood heating, so when we talk about using more renewable energy we are really talking about buildings like hotels, hospitals and schools using wood for their heating needs.”

The new plan, to be published at the end of 2007, will set growth targets and map the long-term direction of the wood energy sector. It will also identify what needs to be done to address any development barriers, and raise public awareness of the benefits of using wood for heating medium and large businesses and organisations.

The consultants, Steve Luker Associates and DARE Ltd, are wood energy experts who have carried out similar work in Scotland, England and elsewhere in Ireland. Consultation with public and private interests including foresters, farmers, the wood supply industry and end users of wood heating will be carried out over the coming months.

Ms Phelan added *“There are opportunities for foresters and farmers in wood energy. Approximately 11.5% of the Western Region is afforested and there is growing awareness of the benefits of using wood for heating, so there is an increasingly good fit between supply and the growing demand. There was some concern about the ability of the wood sector to cope with customer demand. However, research undertaken by the WDC shows that this is not the case”.*

“We established a Regional Wood Energy Advisory Group representing public and private interests. Its report, Wood Energy Development in the Western Region, showed that market growth would not be constrained by the availability of the wood resource” Ms Phelan noted.

“The report gave a conservative assessment that by 2015 the Western Region will sustainably supply 423,000 green tonnes of wood fuel per annum. This exceeds optimistic estimations of market demand by more than 100,000 green tonnes per annum. What this really means is that by 2015, based on the existing forestry resource, the Western Region has the potential to produce enough wood energy to heat over 200 medium - large scale heat users such as hospitals and large office blocks”.

The WDC says that implementation of the agreed strategy will begin in 2008. It points out that this will require commitment and partnership of the various stakeholders in the region, and at national level, if the subsequent economic, social and environmental benefits are to be achieved for the region.

“A vibrant wood energy sector has significant economic and employment potential. Using wood fuel displaces imported oil, and a high proportion of the benefits of the wood energy market are retained in the local economy. Furthermore, wood energy is naturally job intensive because of the need to have a fuel supply chain, so that will be good for employment in the region,” said Ms Phelan.

She concluded,

“Rural development is an important part of the WDC remit. We are committed to supporting the development of the wood energy sector and the opportunities it presents for foresters and for farmers to increase their off farm income.”

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