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| January 8th, 2019, Macroom and District Environmental Group Complaint concerning state sanctioned old growth native oakwood destruction in the Silvergrove townland, in the Toon River Valley, in County Cork

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8 Jan at 4:13 PM

Re: For the urgent attention of the OEE (Office of Environmental Enforcement)

A Chairde,

Please take note that ongoing clearfelling of old-growth oakwood in the townland of Silvergrove/Doire Airgead in the Toon River Valley upriver of the Gearagh SAC demands immediate intervention by our EPA office of environmental enforcement (OEE).

The following state agencies charged with guardianship of vulnerable and rare species and habitats have been notified:

Eugene Curran, County Cork Forestry Inspector;

Kevin Collins, Environment, Forest Service, Johnstown Castle, Co. Wexford;

Helen Spencer, Felling Section, Forest Service;

Dr John Cross (Former Chief Scientific Advisor, NPWS);

Dr Jenni Roche, Woodland Ecologist, NPWS;

Declan O'Donnell, District Officer, NPWS;

Dr Ciaran O'Keeffe, Chief Scientific Advisor, NPWS;

Cork County Council Environmental Section;

Minister for Agriculture, Michael Creed TD;

and Garda Anne-marie Kelleher, Macroom Garda Station.

 We wish to make you aware of serious damage to native woodland in the Toon Valley which has apparently been undertaken under licence from the Forest Service. The woodlands in the Toon Valley lie 5 km southwest of the Gearagh in mid Co. Cork (Irish Grid reference: W 24775 69357). These woods are quite extensive and were noted as being the highest scoring of the top 19 un-designated sites ranked by conservation assessment score in the 2008 Native woodland survey.

Our group was seminal in the designation of the Gearagh as a national nature reserve 34 years ago. It is has since been designated an SPA (Special Protection Area); SAC (Special Area Conservation); NHA (Natural Heritage Area), UN Biogenetic Reserve, and Ramsar Site under the UN Wetlands Convention. During 1987 we campaigned for designation of the contiguous woodlands, bisected by the Toon river but this was unsuccessful at the time. Dr John Cross (formerly of NPWS) commissioned a survey of the Toon woods by Blackthorn Ecology, mapping the old-growth oak woodlands, with the intention to draw up a site boundary for a proposed NHA. Dr John Cross described these woods to members of MDEG as "the finest un-designated oakwoods in the country".

In late December/early January (over the Christmas period), a large area of woodland was essentially clear-felled with some trees left. The structure of the woodland was fundamentally altered, including the complete removal of the understorey. Many of the remaining trees are unlikely to remain standing as they are now vulnerable to wind-throw due to drastic change in tree density and structure. What has taken place is not formative thinning by any stretch of the imagination and is essentially clear-felling. On visiting the site members observed piles of oak trees awaiting for removal off-site.

We understand that under the current environmental liability regulations (ELR) the OEE (Office of Environmental Enforcement) are charged with the protection of species and habitats arising under the Wild Birds Directive (1979); Habitats Directive (1992); and the Wildlife Act (1976, as amended) etc. that are known to be under threat whether within designated sites or not. Within this townland (Silvergrove) with its old-growth oak wood we have known of the presence of the lesser horseshoe bat, an Annex 2 priority species, during its hunting cycle with its maternity roost nearby. This townland drains into the Toon Valley with an internationally important population of freshwater pearl mussel, also an Annex 2 priority species, which is genetically one-and-the-same as the Gearagh population of mussel. The Toon river flows into the Gearagh SAC and siltation may be impacting on the integrity of this site; moreover, on visiting the site on January 7th we saw no evidence of infrastructure to prevent soil run-off.The Toon Valley woods including Silvergrove represent one of the most important red squirrel colonies in Munster (Annex 5 strict protection species). On Sunday evening one of our members was notified of two red squirrel carcasses along the public road through the works. An Annex 2 priority species, otter, occurs the length of the Toon river.

As we write this email at an emergency meeting of this group the machines continue to extract Canopy Oak under a licence (licence no. GFL 20650) issued by the Felling section of the Forest Service. We, MDEG of 33 years standing, appeal to the OEE to intervene immediately to halt all further works at this site pending an environmental impact assessment/appropriate assessment.

Le gach dea-ghuí,

Donal O'Leary on behalf of

Macroom District Environmental Group (MDEG)