Exotics: a threat or a benefit
Opening remarks

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Honoured guests.
It is my pleasure to welcome you on behalf of
the Ministry of Agriculture to this confer-
ence, which is being held in the cradle of
Icelandic forestry.

As you already know or will soon see for
yourselves – far too large an area of Iceland
is barren – far in excess of what it should be,
considering the geographical situation and
the climate of the island.

We have reliable records that tell us that
when Iceland was settled in 874 A.D. the area
of vegetation was much more extensive than
it is today. It is estimated that some 60–70%
of the land area was vegetated and birch wood-
land covered at least 25%. In a document from
1100 we read that “At that time Iceland was
covered by wood, from the shoreline to the
hillsides”.

It is beyond dispute that the present state
of the vegetation is due to man’s interfer-
ence. The low-growing birch woodland, which
needs a long period to regenerate, was ruth-
lessly felled to provide timber for housing
and shipbuilding, it was made into charcoal
and the sward used to graze domestic ani-
mals. The vegetation type providing the
greatest protection was relentlessly felled, allow-
ing wind and rain to blow and wash away the
soil, which together with the ocean surrounding
us, is our most valuable natural resource.

It is unbelievable how recently the final epi-
sodes of this tragic event took place. Two cen-
turies ago the hillsides on the other side of
this mighty river, here close to us, were clothed
with tall birch forest. Today they are for the
most part barren, although efforts are being
made to recloth them. On this side of the lake,
as you will see in due course, we find a thriving
forest. The reason for this is that here the
land has been fenced off and man has striven
for almost a century to heal the scars.

In the contrast between the two sides of
the lake you can see in a nutshell the proof
of what Icelanders could do to improve their
land in other areas – creating a new and val-
able resource and at the same time making
it more habitable.

Organised forestry began in Iceland at the
turn of the century. The first planting trials
were made at Thingvellir, Iceland’s most
holy ground, where our first parliament –
the Althing – was founded in 930 A.D. They
were planted in 1899 at the instigation of a
Danish ship’s master, Carl Ryder, who sailed
regularly between Iceland and Denmark. He
was shocked by the poverty and nakedness
of the land and felt that by planting forests
the Icelanders lot would be improved. For-
esters count the beginnings of Icelandic for-
ery from this event.

The first forestry legislation was enacted
by the parliament in 1907. In the beginning
forestry was fraught with difficulties. The
general public did not believe it was possible
to grow forests on the island and considered
the land better used for grazing. The sheep
grazed more or less unchecked on the home
range and had complete freedom of the heaths and mountain pastures. In addition the general opinion of the farmers was that they themselves should reap the profits of their investments and not future generations. There was little understanding of the long-term benefits which could be achieved by planting forests.

Things changed for the better after 1935 when a new and dynamic forestry graduate took over the direction of the Forest Service and initiated a vigorous campaign for afforestation. Since then there has been a steady increase of support in favour of forestry and today forestry enjoys the goodwill of most people in the country. Farmers and other landowners aspire to plant forests on their estates and the state budget allocates annually considerable sums to forestry, to subsidise planting, fencing, education and research.

In addition to the work of the Forest Service a large slice of the success can also be accredited to the forestry societies. The Icelandic Forestry Association was founded in 1930 at Thingvellir and operates as a national alliance for all the district forestry societies. There are 50 forestry societies in the country today and their total membership makes them one of the most influential groups in the country, next to athletic societies. The Forestry Association took the initiative in instigating one of the most ambitious forestry projects ever started in Iceland – the Land Reclamation Forestry Project.

On the occasion of its 60th anniversary in 1990 the Forestry Association presented its idea to the public in an effort to increase forest planting. The response was magnificent. So much money was donated that we could begin to plant new forests on 80 different sites scattered around the country. The stands were planted on eroded and on partially vegetated sites and were called land reclamation forests. We continue to plant in the land reclamation forests annually and have received generous support from the Forest Service in the form of planting-stock. All the planting work is done by volunteers who have donated thousands of days free labour.

But we can grow forests for other purposes than to combat erosion or to provide shelter and amenity. In some areas our land can support forests which will provide us with timber and yield a profit. And we have begun to use exotics which thrive under our conditions although they were unable to reach us under their own steam, due to the long distances between their natural range and Iceland. Here it was necessary for man to lend a hand.

By planting production forests on farmsteads we are creating a new employment opportunity for the rural areas and a future source of income.

We also lay an emphasis on planting shelterbelts. Their value for protecting vegetation and domestic animals are well known, especially in our stormy land which is claimed to be the windiest country on earth to be permanently inhabited.

We know today that many more tree species can grow here than those that nature introduced by herself, but the growing conditions here are in many ways special as you will find out during your visit. The climate varies between regions within the country and many other site factors must be considered. This calls for a dynamic research programme. It is in this field that we have made most progress during the last few years. We have acquired many young, well-educated and progressive scientists in forestry research and we strive to create good working facilities for them in their endeavours, because we must do what is best for forestry in our beautiful land, which some call “the Blue Land”, others “the White Island” and now there are others who wish to see that the colour green becomes more visible.

It is, therefore, especially pleasing that this meeting of specialists in tree-breeding, forest genetics and silviculture from our closest allies should be held in Iceland. I hope that you will all gain much pleasure and new knowledge and formally declares the meeting open.