



**Opening Statement to The Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine to discuss the  
impact of peat shortages on the horticulture industry.**

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IFA welcomes the opportunity to discuss **the impact of peat shortages on the horticulture industry**. Peat shortages will have direct relevance to Horticultural producers but will also be of indirect concern to our grain, poultry and forestry members.

The IFA Horticultural Committee is comprised of a number of sub-committees namely the Soft Fruit, Field Vegetable & Protected Crops and Mushroom Committees. Each sub-committee has its own separate chairperson. In addition, the Irish Hardy Nursery Stock Association (IHNSA), which is the representative body of nursery stock, tree and bedding plant producers, is a commodity sector within the Horticulture sector of the IFA.

The Irish Horticulture sector is a significant contributor to the Irish economy with a farm gate value of €437 million. It employs an estimated 6,600 while a further 11,000 are employed in downstream businesses. Of the total €437 million output, the output value for the sectors that use peat as an input are, Mushrooms €119m, Protected Fruit €38m, Protected Vegetables €29m, Nursery Stock €36m and Protected Ornamental Crops €19m.

In recognition of the trend towards plant-based diets the Report from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on climate action, has recommended expanding the Irish Horticulture sector to avail of opportunities for import substitution and farm diversification. In addition, the recent government Ag Climatize report recognised the importance of expanding the Irish Horticulture sector.

Although the Irish Tillage sector is not directly affected by peat shortages mentioned it does depend significantly on the mushroom compost sector as an outlet for 130,000 tonnes (40% of production) of mainly wheaten straw per year. This sector already has seen a decline of 20% in planted area since 2008 so a loss of this market would have dire consequences for the sector.

The poultry industry depends on the mushroom sector as an outlet for over 50,000 tonnes of chicken litter per year. This use of poultry manure in the mushroom compost industry is an excellent example of waste valorisation within the bioeconomy.

Farmers involved in farm forestry depend on native tree nurseries for planting material. Peat is the substrate of choice for these nurseries.

The IFA is acutely aware of the environmental, and societal importance of peatlands along with their economic value. As one of the members of the Peatlands Council, which oversaw the drafting of the National Peatlands Strategy we are committed to working with all stakeholders to review the use of peat in the Horticulture Industry.

While cognisant of the environmental importance of peatlands and the need to look at alternative substrates for use in the horticulture sector, unfortunately there is no viable alternative to peat at the moment in sections of the commercial horticulture sector. Where the few and limited options are available, they may have cost or sustainability issues which leave their widespread use impractical. If alternatives are to be found then there must be considerable resources directed to this area.

It is estimated that up to 50% of the Irish Horticulture sector relies on peat, particularly the mushroom, ornamental and soft fruit sectors therefore, cessation in the use of peat would have severe negative effects. Producers would either have to close their business or import peat, which would add extra cost to their

business. In the current market environment, it would be impossible to retrieve these costs from the market. This would also have adverse knock-on effects for the tillage, poultry and forestry sectors resulting in a considerable blow to the rural economy.

It would be unacceptable and hypocritical to ban the use of peat in Ireland while importing it from another EU or third country. In addition, an integral part of government policy in dealing with the issues of climate change is to expand and not to undermine the Irish Horticulture sector. The demise of the horticulture, tillage or forestry sectors in Ireland, would certainly hinder Ireland in meeting its objectives and obligations relating to air, climate, water, nature and the environment.

It is important to put in context, the amount of peat which is extracted for use in the horticulture sector, as a percentage of the overall peat area in Ireland. According to industry sources there were 5,500 ha of peatlands harvested for the production of peat for horticulture. However, since Bord na Mona ceased production, a maximum of **0.16% of total Irish peatlands** will be used for horticultural peat harvesting. In general, much of the peat used in the horticulture sector is recycled in some form and does not carry the same environmental impact as using it as a source for power generation.

In addition to Bord na Mona's decision to exit the harvesting of peat for horticulture there are also issues regarding the granting of planning permission and licensing of existing and potential peat extraction points. Due to a Supreme Court decision earlier this year, there has been no harvesting of peat on bogs over 30ha resulting in big reduction of stocks required by the horticulture sector. This situation must be rectified immediately otherwise there will be no native peat available for next season.