

Opening Remarks to the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine 02 March 2021

Bord na Móna has gone through a period of remarkable change that has been largely driven by the climate emergency and the national response to it.

Three events of particular note in this recent period include the company adopting the Brown to Green strategy in 2018, the 2019 High Court ruling that peat harvesting on bogs over 30 hectares requires planning permission, and the January 2021 confirmation from the company that we would permanently cease peat harvesting and focus on renewable energy, recycling, peatland restoration and the provision of other low carbon goods and services.

Many members will be aware that Bord na Móna's transformation has been progressing for many years. Its origins can be variously traced back to landmark contributions to peatland conservation that started with Pollardstown Fen in 1972, the construction of the Bellacorick windfarm, Co. Mayo, in 1992, which at the time was Ireland's first commercial wind farm, and the beginnings of our involvement in renewable energy. In 2007 the Group entered the resource recovery businesses by offering an integrated waste management solutions service to its customers. Also, during this period, in the retail horticulture sector, the company began to widen and develop new product ranges by adding non peat diluents to growing media products in line with regulatory and market trends. The company commenced the co-firing of Edenderry Power by displacing approximately 40% of the peat fuel with Biomass in 2008. All of these developments were allied to a growing understanding and awareness of the value of peatlands beyond their use as a source of energy. Indeed, in the period up to 2018 the company rehabilitated approximately 15,000 hectares of peatland in line with our IPCC licence obligations.

These initial moves were sharply accelerated in 2018 when the company announced the "Brown to Green" strategy. This strategy dealt with some stark facts around the continued use of peat, recognising that in the short to medium term it was unsustainable from a legal, regulatory, commercial and environmental points of view. It was clear to us that, if we didn't respond appropriately, the challenge would overwhelm the company, cause significant unemployment and see Ireland lose a big opportunity to make progress on climate action. The Brown to Green strategy prepared the company for the challenges and enabled us to make the necessary changes. This strategy was to be achieved by a range of measures that broadly sat under two headings;

1. Reduce and eliminate the dependence of Bord na Móna on high carbon activities, including peat and coal.
2. Redirect and increase the level of investment in renewable energy, recycling operations, peatlands restoration and enabling new low carbon business operations.

This journey was significantly accelerated when in 2019 the High Court ruled that peat harvesting, on peatlands over 30 hectares, requires planning permission. Following the High Court ruling, for the first time in its history, Bord na Móna formally suspended all peat harvesting. The company made this suspension permanent a few weeks ago.

The second part of the strategy gave Bord na Móna a new purpose. It also enabled the company to deal with the events that brought it closer to becoming a fully sustainable business. Key to this was a number of significant investment decisions that saw the company take a leading role in delivering key aspects of national climate action policy. Last year it was announced that Bord na Móna was to accelerate a series of major climate focused projects across the 200,000 acre landholding. These include a series of largescale climate action projects, such as wind, solar energy, battery storage, increased biomass renewable electricity, renewable gas and demand-side assets for delivery in this decade.

Significant investments in recycling included investment in domestic waste recycling infrastructure, the development of the Littleton farm plastics facility, with our partners Sabrina, (on the site of a former briquette factory) in Co Tipperary and the expansion of operations of the national tyre recycling facility in Drogheda.

Regarding the matter at hand, at the end of 2020, Bord na Móna launched the Peatland Climate Action Scheme with exchequer and company funding, which will harness the natural power of peatlands to secure a store of over 100m tonnes of carbon in perpetuity, cut emissions, and sequester more in the coming years. We believe this scheme will also bring significant downstream benefits in terms of biodiversity, water and air quality and potential amenity opportunities for communities. Many members of the committee are familiar with these large tracts of peatlands and their industrial use. These wide expanses of peatland are now leaving that unique part of their history behind to deliver new dividends for the community. In the next few years following the rewetting process they will become stable stores of carbon, the upper layers and surface of these lands will teem with plant and animal life. They will be transformed into new landscapes of great natural beauty and grow new beneficial relationships with the communities around them.

As mentioned, Bord na Móna have extensive experience in this area. The company has already rehabilitated 20,000 hectares of peatlands, much of this in the last twenty years on bogs that were fully or partially developed for peat harvesting. This extensive area of peatland rehabilitation is located at a multitude of sites throughout our estate, adjoining private residences, communities, and thousands of kilometres of farmland and our farming neighbours. We have rehabilitated these tens of thousands of hectares of land quietly, effectively and with great care for adjoining landowners. This continues to inform our approach. The evidence and our experience of many decades is that Bord na Móna always seeks to be a responsible landowner working with and respecting the vital interests of our neighbours. These engagements have allowed us to allay concerns of our farming neighbours regarding water level management, boundary maintenance and boundary drains and are a very valuable part of the process for us. We will go into more detail on these, our remedies for specific issues and other matters with you in the question and answer session.

In advance of commencing peatland rehabilitation operations in the coming Spring the company commenced a rigorous consultation process with key stakeholders. Our employees were naturally the first group to be considered in this process. Our objective from the beginning was to ensure that though change was inevitable the transition for employees would be fair and just. This informed our approach throughout and in November we concluded an agreement with the Group of Unions on the reassignment of hundreds of peat employees into new roles involved in rehabilitating peatlands on our own, and third party peatlands. We will shortly have a total of 350 employees, who previously worked in peat harvesting and supply operations, reassigned into these new roles

We are also in close consultation with a range of stakeholders and numerous meetings with groups and individuals in the period since the announcement in late November. We have had multiple positive meetings and engagements with farming organisations, Local Authorities, individual local and national public representatives, the Midlands Regional Transition Team and the Just Transition Commissioner. We have engaged with national and local media where our team has answered questions and successfully allayed many of the concerns people may have on our plans. We have also published our plans on a new website dedicated to the rehabilitation and decommissioning of the peatlands and our community liaison team is answering individual queries from members of the public, neighbours and other interested parties. This is all in addition to the detailed programme of regulatory compliance that we have always undertaken under the Integrated Pollution control (IPC) with the EPA and the new regulatory system for the scheme that is now being administered by the NPWS. Finally, we report on progress of the scheme to the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. We will go through this in more detail with the committee but it is clear that there is a very significant programme of preparing rehabilitation plans, Natura Impact statements, engagement, communication, regulation, consultation and oversight involved in this scheme, which we fully support and endorse.

I have spoken about the many benefits and positive aspects of the move away from peat. That said I will not minimise the scale of the challenge that faced us, and for the many other businesses who are on the same journey as ourselves. It was not that long ago that our entire revenue and workforce depended on peat based activities. The change demanded of us was enormous and indeed there were many who predicted that it would overwhelm the company and cause thousands of people to lose their jobs. It is no small relief, to the nearly 1,500 people who go to work every day in Bord na Móna, and many members of the Oireachtas, that these dire predictions have been proven very wrong.

Hundreds of people previously employed in peat harvesting and transport are now working to restore peatlands, maintain a store of millions of tonnes of carbon, massively boost biodiversity and develop the potential for new amenities for communities up and down the country. Other parts of the organisation are also expanding and accelerating their work to support national policy in renewable energy, the circular economy and other new low carbon goods and services. Bord na Móna is hiring people to work in a range of areas connected to the new green economy and continues to be a substantial employer in the midlands of Ireland.

We have been presenting progress on this transformation for the past three years now and you will be aware that all of this didn't happen by accident. It happened with the help and assistance of many members of the Oireachtas, the Just Transition Commissioner, local authorities, the government and the European Commission. Most of all, this happened because we have a group of employees who worked hard to ensure that Bord na Móna would move past this challenge to become a renewed, revitalised and thriving company that is delivering for the people of Ireland. This renewed company is built on a strong foundation of service to the state and is now focused and working hard on the most pressing issue facing our present and future generations.

Ger Breen,
Head of Land & Habitats