



**Opening Statement by IFA President Tim Cullinan
to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine
Tuesday 2nd March 2021**

Rewetting of Bogs and the Impact on Drainage for Surrounding Farmland

Chairman and Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting IFA to address you here today to discuss Bord na Móna's proposed Peatlands Climate Action Scheme and the possible negative implications it may have for farmers.

I am joined by IFA Deputy President Brian Rushe.

Farmers, whose land is adjacent to the bogs proposed for rehabilitation under this scheme, are extremely concerned about the impact this project will have on their land. At a recent IFA meeting on this topic over 200 members of the public attended to voice their concerns about aspects of the project, as well as the lack of consultation and opportunities for local stakeholders to input into the process.

Background

Peat bogs have played a historic role in Ireland's economy and culture. Peat has been used as a fuel in Ireland for many centuries.

The modern Irish peat industry was established in the 1930s when the Turf Development Board was set up to manage peat development. In 1946, Bord na Móna was established to develop Ireland's peat resources for the economic benefit of Ireland. Boglands across Ireland were drained by Bord na Móna to expand peat production. This peat was used to generate electricity for Irish towns and villages.

The An Bord Pleanála decision in July 2019 in effect terminated the usage of peat for the generation of electricity and had the domino effect of effectively closing down the harvesting of bogs over a wide area of several Midlands counties, including parts of Roscommon and East Galway.

This was the driver for Bord na Móna to adopt their Brown to Green Strategy and to become a key enabler of Ireland's climate action policies with projects such as Peatlands Climate Action Scheme.

The Peatlands Climate Action Scheme involves the rehabilitation and restoration of 33,000 hectares in over 80 Bord na Móna bogs. Thereby rewetting the bogs which have been historically drained and intensively harvested. The main objective of the scheme is to use peatlands to facilitate the carbon storage and it is estimated that over 100 million tonnes of carbon and potentially more in the future would be sequestered.

I understand the challenges of COVID-19 and the impact of the restrictions on one's ability to be able to hold public meetings or events, but the lack of communication by Bord na Móna with local stakeholders is unacceptable. There are a large cohort of farmers, whose lands border the planned rehabilitation sites that have had not communication with Bord na Móna to date.

Key Concerns

I will briefly go through some of the key concerns of farmers as regards the planned rewetting of the bogs:

Flooding

Farmers have been advised in the past, to carry out agricultural land drainage to increase grass yields and lower their production costs. The drainage of certain areas of land near these boglands were long term projects carried out by local farmers, requiring a large capital investment and a long period of time to reach the standard that they currently at. It is therefore understandable that plans which may impinge on this previous work will not be easily welcomed by this group of farmers.

Farmers who manage the land bordering the designated areas under the Peatlands Climate Action Scheme depend on their established drainage systems to channel water from their land. There is a concern that the rewetting process involved in the project poses a threat of flooding and waterlogging to privately owned farmland nearby. There is an additional concern in the wider community that the local water table will be altered by this rewetting process and may cause the development of new flood plains.

Health & Safety

Flooding is a serious issue for some farmers, with flooding becoming more severe in recent years. Flooding as a result of rewetting bogs will undoubtedly increase the health and safety risks on neighbouring land and roadways.

An increase in the level of water in drains and in land surface depressions could potentially become a hazard for animal welfare, machinery operation and farmer access to nearby sites especially during periods of wet weather. Farmers need more information on the possible risks ahead and what mitigation measures are to be put in place by Bord na Móna.

Turf Cutting

A key concern of farmers, and other members of the community in these areas, is that those with turbary rights are allowed to continue to cut turf. Any farmer or landowner who has traditionally cut turf in these areas with established rights there must be allowed to continue this practice.

People in these situations have expressed fears of potential fuel poverty as they are completely dependent on turf for home heating. For people in the midlands, and other counties with a long tradition of turf cutting, turf continues to be a main source of home heating e.g. In Offaly, 38 per cent of households still use turf to heat their homes. Bord na Móna must engage with these individuals and ensure issues around private turf cutting is resolved before moving forward with bog rehabilitation plans.

Property Value

There is a growing fear that the accumulation of the above-mentioned potential impacts will have a detrimental effect on property value in these areas. With a higher risk of flooding and health and safety concerns, land may be less appropriate for certain farming systems thus lowering the value of the property.

Farmers were given little input in the planning of the rehabilitation of peatlands and at a time when farmer livelihoods are already extremely vulnerable, an impact on land value would be another blow to these local farmers.

Future Ownership

The work that will be carried out as part of the Peatlands Climate Action Scheme will have long term implications for the designated sites and neighbouring land. The maintenance of these areas in the future as well as under any new ownership needs to be discussed and agreed with farmers and the local community.

Landowners need reassurance and a guarantee from Bord na Móna regarding potential future ownership of the designated bogs under the scheme and the future ownership of Bord na Móna itself.

Any new management of these bogs must not affect adjoining landowners or have any negative impact on their property in the future. Any new management must upkeep the maintenance as agreed with Bord na Móna.

Measures to address farmers' concerns

To alleviate farmers concerns and ensure the success of the Peatland Climate Action Scheme, Bord na Móna must improve communication with those impacted, IFA propose the following measures:

- Proper consultation with local landowners, community stakeholders and other affected parties.
- Establish a local working group for the bogs proposed under the scheme to keep local farmers informed in the planning and development processes and allow for suggestions to be made directly to Bord na Móna.
- For the farmlands surrounding bogs a detailed site-specific hydrological assessment should be put in place prior to work being carried out, in order to gauge the long-term effect rewetting may have on the farmlands implicated. This would help to communicate a clearer assurance to farmers and the local community.
- A health and safety assessment of surrounding farmland and roadways for each specific site should be carried out to ensure potential issues are considered and measures are put in place to mitigate against them.
- Bord na Móna to engage with those with Turbary rights to ensure issues around private turf cutting are resolved before moving forward with bog rehabilitation plans.
- Bord na Móna to consider the impact on property value to surrounding land and communicate with these landowners.
- A long-term plan needs to be published which covers different scenarios of future ownership of Bord na Móna and how maintenance responsibility will be considered.

Conclusion

I would like to acknowledge Bord na Móna's engagement with IFA. The establishment of a Working Group, of which the first virtual meeting was held in early February, is a very important forum to discuss and get answers to farmers legitimate concerns with regards the Peatlands Climate Action Scheme.

The scale of the project is ambitious, and the timeline for implementation short, particularly in light of the current COVID-19 restrictions but it is vital that communication between Bord na Mona and local communities is improved.

These are the farmers and communities that are directed impacted by the plans and they must be given assurance that their land will not be adversely impacted.

Thank you.