



9 March 2021

**RE: Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine**

I would like to thank the Chairman, Deputies and Senators for inviting the Department to appear before them today. My name is Paula Barry Walsh and I am Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer. I am joined by Eoin Ryan (Senior Superintending Veterinary Inspector) and Colm Forde (Principal Officer) who are both responsible for policy related to the Bovine TB Eradication Programme (BTEP). We welcome the opportunity to appear before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine to contribute to the discussions the Committee is having with stakeholders on the renewed Bovine TB Eradication Strategy (BTEP).

DAFM officials last presented to the Committee on TB in late 2018 following the establishment of the TB Stakeholder Forum. The Forum was tasked with developing proposals consistent with ambition to eradicate TB. At that time, TB levels were close to historic lows following many years of collaborative efforts to reduce disease incidence and we stressed our ambition to build on this progress to push on towards eradication.

In 2018, 3,874 herds entered a TB restriction and there were just under 17,500 reactor animals. Unfortunately, developments since then have not been positive. 2020 saw the highest rates of TB in a decade. While final figures will be confirmed shortly, we know that more than 4,620 herds entered a restriction last year and there were over 23,000 reactors. That means since we last addressed the Committee, we are seeing an additional 14 farm families per week have to deal with the worry and uncertainty a TB restriction represents. We are also seeing in excess of 100 more reactors being taken off farms each week. These stark figures highlight why we are urgently engaging with stakeholders to implement the actions outlined in the TB Strategy.

Things do not have to be this way, and with the publication of the TB strategy based on the recommendations of the TB Forum, we are collectively taking steps towards a future where TB levels are significantly reducing over time; a future where farmers are provided with the information they need to make the right choices for their circumstances to reduce their TB risk; a future where DAFM and stakeholders together discuss the hard choices to further reduce TB transmission pathways and protect more cattle. In addition, this will lead to a future where there is a diminution of farmer costs to the TB programme as well as an easing of anxiety and distress for many farm families.

**Why does Ireland have a TB Programme**

It is important to reflect on why Ireland has a bovine TB eradication programme. When introduced in the 1950s, the Programme's primary objective was to protect trade with the UK thereby supporting the livelihoods of Irish farmers. On accession to the EU, it was and remains a requirement of EU trade law to have a BTEP. This enables Irish farmers to access the EU



single market for our cattle, meat and milk. As a country that exports 90% of what we produce access to international trade markets is fundamental. Our export markets have grown substantially in value and volume to Third Countries in the last 10 years, and it is notable that in some cases, TB is a significant consideration in the context of trade and certification requirements.

### **National Farmed Animal Health Strategy**

The establishment of the TB Stakeholder Forum in 2018 is consistent with the principles contained in the National Farmed Animal Health Strategy (NFAHS). The NFAHS sets out a commitment for extensive consultation with stakeholders in developing common solutions across the breadth of farmed animal health issues. The considerations of the TB Stakeholder Forum were framed by the NFAHS principles. These are:

- Working in Partnership
- Acknowledging Roles and Responsibilities
- Reflecting Costs and Benefits; and
- Prevention is Better than Cure

### **Bovine TB Strategy – Disease measures**

These considerations ultimately resulted in the Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030 which was published in mid-January.

The key actions in the Strategy are:

- Preventing spread from herds with a high risk of recurrence
- Enhanced actions to clear infection from extended breakdown herds
- Addressing the risk from inconclusive animals
- Action Plans for areas with increased localised bTB levels
- Aligning with changes in the EU Animal Health Law bTB regulations
- Reducing the risk posed by badgers
- Reducing the risk posed by deer
- Tailored, simplified communications between DAFM and herdowners
- Clearer messaging of the risks of bTB transmission and how to address these
- Biosecurity advice delivered to farmers, with a focus on practical, clear and effective actions to reduce risk and incentives risk-lowering behaviour.

The strategy also commits to systematic monitoring and evaluation of the programme, to updating the strategy in response to changing risks, and to regular strategy reviews. By evaluating the degree to which progress is matching the long-term goal of driving disease



levels down towards eradication and addressing this with stakeholders through the TB Forum, the strategy will continue to evolve.

### **Finances of the Programme**

In 2020, there were over 9 million individual animal TB tests in over 100,000 herds. Delivering the TB Programme in any given year represents a massive logistical operation achieved through the cooperation of farmers, vets and DAFM officials right across the country.

It also represents a significant financial commitment from farmers and taxpayers. Last year, it is estimated the Programme cost €99 million. When we last addressed the Committee in 2018, the Programme cost €90 million. So we've seen a €9 million (10%) increase in just two years. While the farmer contribution is significant at an estimated €35 million, this has remained broadly stable since 2018. Conversely, the contribution from the Irish taxpayer increased by over €11 million from €47 million to €58 million between 2018 and 2020. This rate of increase is not sustainable.

For many years, Ireland's TB Programme has been financially supported by the EU. However, in recent weeks the Commission has reiterated its intention to phase out support for the TB Programme citing funding pressures for other emerging diseases throughout the EU. EU support was €9 million in 2018 and is likely to be €4 million in respect of 2020. We expect funding to cease in the next 2-3 years. This funding gap will have to be addressed by the remaining stakeholders and is a potent reminder of the need for collaboration and urgency of action to decrease the disease levels.

### **Working in Partnership**

In driving strategic change in the Bovine TB Programme in Ireland, the Minister has consistently highlighted the critical role of stakeholder collaboration. Reflecting this, implementation of the TB Strategy is being facilitated by a new governance structure designed to ensure all perspectives are taken into account. The existing TB Stakeholder Forum is now being supported by three working groups – scientific, finance and implementation. Each group has an independent Chair to deliver on their specific Terms of Reference. The Working groups all report back to the Forum.

The finance working group held its first meeting last Thursday, March 4<sup>th</sup> while the implementation group met earlier today; the scientific group is expected to meet within the next month. These are important and welcome developments as we all strive to reduce the burden of TB on Irish farmers.

### **Next steps**

We know how TB spreads and we know what the risk factors are, and we need to work together with stakeholders to agree the ways in which those risks can be further reduced. The new TB strategy sets out how DAFM and stakeholders will continue to engage on these issues, which will involve some difficult choices. By building our policies on a foundation of science and by providing practical science-based advice which farmers can act on to reduce their risks,



we can together focus our efforts to protect cattle from infection and farmers from the stress, uncertainty and costs of a breakdown.

Vaccinating badgers enables cattle and therefore farmers to be protected while safeguarding a native Irish wild animal population. Scientific research carried out in Ireland over many years has demonstrated the effectiveness of badger vaccination. We also know that farmers can take practical steps to reduce the risk from badgers, by badger-proofing feed stores, raising troughs, fencing off setts, and similar actions to reduce indirect contact between cattle and badgers. We are providing information and advice on this to farmers by a range of means, including SMS texts, videos, leaflets and farmer meetings. By combining these practical farmer-led risk reduction actions with the policy of vaccination to prevent breakdowns and targeted licensed badger removal where necessary in response to spillover from badgers to cattle, we can greatly mitigate the risk of TB at the wildlife/cattle interface.

It is important that farmers are empowered to make the best choices for their own circumstances to protect their cattle from TB. It is critical that they are given practical advice based on scientific research about how they can reduce their TB risk and to give them relevant, useful information about their own herds and their own cattle so that they themselves can make any management changes which may be necessary if they wish to avoid the costs and stress of a breakdown. The advice on how to reduce TB risk has remained generally consistent over many years, as has the challenge of encouraging farmers to act on it. Stakeholder endorsement, through the TB Forum, of this advice may further encourage farmers to take active steps to reduce their TB risk.

By working together within the TB Forum framework, stakeholders can shape these discussions so that the choices we collectively make are supported by the groups who will benefit from a reduction in TB. It is also important to note that stakeholders have a responsibility to engage with these difficult choices and that if additional measures to reduce TB are not supported by stakeholders, that is likely to have an adverse impact on future TB trends.

## **Conclusion**

We now have the building blocks in place to implement additional measures to the existing TB Programme that can lower disease incidence and result in less farm families having to endure the challenges associated with a TB restriction.

We are committed to constructive engagement with all stakeholders in helping the farming community. I sincerely hope that the next time we address the Committee on bovine TB, we'll be in a position to outline a positive picture of reducing TB incidence and a trajectory towards eradication.