



Macra na Feirme

Opening Statement by Macra na Feirme President Thomas Duffy to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food & the Marine – On TB Eradication Scheme

9th March 2021

Chair and Committee Members

We appreciate the opportunity to represent the views of young farmers on the ongoing challenge of TB Eradication Scheme. I am joined here by Derrie Dylan, Head of Policy and Membership.

Macra na Feirme is the national representative body for young farmers and rural young people with over 10,500 members across 31 regions. Representation of young farmers is carried out via Young Farmer Discussion Groups in each of the regions with elected Young Farmer Officers and policy creation through the National Agricultural Affairs Committee.

Macra has identified three key elements which must be emphasised in order to ensure fairness and future successful of the TB Eradication Scheme, these are addressing uneven risk, reversing trends and proactive preventative management.

Although all farmers face significant challenges, both financial and physical due to the restrictions imposed as a result of TB breakdown, young farmers are generally more exposed due to the higher level of borrowing of many young farmers. Due both to servicing of debts, often at higher interest rates, and lower levels of existing infrastructure such as animal housing and slurry storage restrictions on trade can significantly impact the financial viability of new entrants and young farmers. In areas with repeated breakdowns, or so called 'blackspot' areas can often actively discourage generational renewal in those areas.

In addition to this the continued use of herd categorisation may place an additional obstacle to young farmers as new entrant will be classified C1*, although DAFM have included the "*" to indicate no prior tests, this adds a level of complexity to young farmers in the open market.

Although significant reductions in the rate of positive TB tests between 2000 and 2016, the trend of increasing herd incidence rate has resulted in nearly 4.37% of herds tested resulting in a breakdown, up from its historic low of 3.27%. This increase has been devastating on the farm families it has impacted upon.

However many farms even at the lowest levels seen in 2016 continued to suffer as a result of ongoing breakdown in particular in localized areas such as regions of Cavan/Monaghan and Wicklow. Macra welcomes the focus on priority areas and increased advisory and assistance as laid out in the TB Eradication Strategy. However we must ensure that these farms are not significantly disadvantaged as a result of factors outside their control due to the activity in their surrounding area.

Given the direct contribution of €35 million alongside significant personal expenditure it is essential that the aim of TB eradication by 2030 must remain the focus.

While support is often offered following a positive herd test, the potential of preventive management to reduce risk of herd breakdowns occurring is in Macra's view not significantly promoted.

While biosecurity is a key element of the scheme with much positive impact as a result of the measures taken up, many factors influencing herd breakdown are beyond the control of farmers.

Control of wildlife vectors of TB remains an essential element to the control of TB spread. The commitment to the identification and removal of infected badgers is essential. Macra welcomes the moves around increased identification of badgers setts in particular the involvement of farmers offering local knowledge. In addition a greater commitment to the culling of deer where density is indicated as being a significant factor is the spread of TB to livestock such as established in Wicklow within the strategy is also welcome.

Other elements are less well explored such as genetic resistance to TB is under utilized despite significant research undertaken to support the potential of AI selection for farmers. Approximately between 12% and 18% of the difference in susceptibility to TB in livestock is attributed to genetic makeup. While this will not resolve all issues, and genetic resistance will not be sufficient to overcome an overwhelming environmental infection risk, significant knowledge transfer is needed to increase this uptake.

If these elements are addressed Macra na Feirme is confident that the aim of TB eradication can be achieved by 2030, put only with the full buy in from farmer stakeholders.