



Tithe an  
Oireachtais  
Houses of the  
Oireachtas

## **An Comhchoiste um Thalmhaíocht, Bia agus Muir**

Tuarascáil Taistil – Cuairt na Toscaireachta ar Cornacrieve Mushrooms Limited, Contae Mhuineacháin, agus ar Commercial Mushroom Producers Co-Operative Society Limited, Contae Mhuineacháin

Márta 2024

## **Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine**

Travel Report – Delegation Visit to Cornacrieve Mushrooms Limited, Co. Monaghan, and Commercial Mushroom Producers Co-Operative Society Limited, Co. Monaghan

March 2024



## Membership

The following Deputies and Senators are members of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Dáil Éireann and the 26<sup>th</sup> Seanad Éireann.



Sen. Victor Boyhan  
Independent



Sen. Lynn Boylan  
Sinn Féin



Jackie Cahill T.D.  
Fianna Fáil  
[Cathaoirleach]



Michael Collins T.D.  
Independent



Sen. Paul Daly  
Fianna Fáil



Michael Fitzmaurice  
T.D. Independent



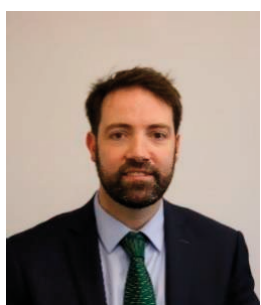
Joe Flaherty T.D.  
Fianna Fáil



Paul Kehoe T.D.  
Fine Gael



Claire Kerrane T.D.  
Sinn Féin



Brian Leddin T.D.  
Green Party



Sen. Tim Lombard  
Fine Gael [Leas-  
Chathaoirleach]



Johnny Mythen T.D.  
Sinn Féin



Sen. Denis O'Donovan  
Fianna Fáil



Michael Ring T.D.  
Fine Gael

## Table of Contents

Membership .....	1
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Committee Delegation .....	3
<b>Briefing .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Visit to Cornacrieve Mushrooms Limited.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Peat casing reduction trials.....	7
<b>Visit to the Commercial Mushroom Producers Co-Operative Society Limited. 10</b>	
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Terms of Reference.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Powers of Select Committees (DSO 96 and SSO 72) .....	14

## Introduction

The Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine (“the Committee”) work programme includes the topic of *Horticultural Peat*.

In May 2023, the Committee wrote to Mr. Charlie McConalogue, T.D., Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (the “Minister”), to highlight the impact of the shortage of peat growing medium on the horticultural industry. In reply, the Minister outlined some of the ongoing actions which were being taken to address the issue. For example, the Minister highlighted the “Beyond Peat” project, the aims of which are, among others, to develop peat alternatives, and to fund research projects through the EU Producers Organisations scheme for fruit and vegetables. The Minister also issued an invitation to the Committee to visit a commercial mushroom production site, so that the Committee could make itself aware of the research being undertaken on the development of horticultural peat alternatives.

The Committee, at a private meeting on 28 August 2023, agreed to avail of the invitation.

## Committee Delegation

The visit to the commercial facilities in County Monaghan were attended by the following members of the Committee (the “Delegation”):

- Jackie Cahill T.D., *Cathaoirleach*;
- Senator Paul Daly;
- Senator Victor Boyhan; and
- Michael Fitzmaurice T.D.

On Monday, 20 November 2023, the Delegation undertook separate visits to both Cornacrieve Mushrooms Limited (“Cornacrieve Mushrooms”) and the Commercial Mushroom Producers Co-Operative Society Limited (the “CMP”), to gain an understanding of the sector and review the development of alternatives to the use of peat for horticultural use.



Matt Carthy T.D. joined the Delegation on site at Cornacrieve Mushrooms and Senator Robbie Gallagher joined the Delegation on site at the CMP.



*Fig.1 - The Delegation at Cornacrieve Mushrooms, together with Matt Carthy T.D., and accompanied by Producer Groups and Officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.*



*Fig. 2 – The Delegation at the CMP, together with Matt Carthy T.D., Senator Robbie Gallagher, and accompanied by Ms. Orla McManus, Chief Executive Officer.*

The Delegation was accompanied by the Clerk to the Committee, Mr. Christy Haughton.

The commercial producers undertaking peat casing reduction trials have asked the Delegation not to disclose the composition of the peat casing substitute, as it is deemed to be commercially sensitive. Arising from this request, this report will not disclose the composition of the peat casing substitute.

## Briefing

The following officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine met and accompanied the Delegation during the visits to Cornacrieve Mushrooms and the CMP:

- Ms. Deirdre Fay, Head of Horticulture and Plant Health Division; and
- Dr. Rachel Wisdom, Agricultural Inspector, Horticulture and Plant Health Division.

## Visit to Cornacrieve Mushrooms Limited

On Monday, 20 November 2023, the Delegation visited Cornacrieve Mushrooms, in Emyvale, Co. Monaghan, and met a number of representatives from various mushroom producer organisations (the “Producers”):

- Mr. Peader Mc Gee, Host, Cornacrieve Mushrooms;
- Mr. Des Mc Guigan, Goldcircle Mushrooms;
- Mr. Joe Giltinane, Farm Fresh Produce;
- Ms. Katie Wray, Northway Co-Op; and
- Mr. Ciaran Cuddy, Harte Peat.

A number of contributions were made by other producers and staff members not included in the list above.

The visit commenced with a discussion with the Producers, on the day-to-day operations and the challenges facing the mushroom industry. The Delegation heard that higher input costs, staffing, administrative requirements and access to horticultural peat supplies were among the main concerns of the industry. A questions and answers session then took place between the Delegation and the Producers. When the questions and answers session was completed, the Cathaoirleach emphasised that the purpose of the visit of the Delegation was for the Committee to be brought up to date on the peat casing reduction trials.



## Peat casing reduction trials

The Delegation was guided through the mushroom production processes using horticultural peat and the peat casing substitute. It was disclosed that the optimal production per square of growing medium is 36 kg, comprising 75% white mushrooms and 25% brown mushrooms, which have a higher value than white mushrooms. Cornacrieve Mushrooms informed the Delegation that it sources its horticultural peat from Northern Ireland.

The Delegation viewed the ongoing peat casing reduction trials using peat substitute and held discussions with the Producers and staff on the outcome of the trials, and following was disclosed:

- Various percentages of peat casing substitute have been trialled with horticultural peat – 30%, 50%, 70%, 100% - and the findings indicate that the use of a peat casing substitute which composes 50% or less of the horticultural peat, returns a yield of mushrooms which is approximately 6-8% less when compared with traditional peat. Furthermore, once you increased the peat casing substitute level beyond 50%, the yield reduces significantly, up to 50% in the trials when using 100% of peat casing substitute. The Producers informed the Delegation that this would not be commercially viable.
- In relation to the cost arising from the use of peat casing substitute, it was found that the greater the percentage of use of the substitute, the higher the cost in comparison to horticultural peat, i.e. 30% peat casing substitute was found to increase costs by 30%.
- The costs associated with the trials are currently being borne by the Producers, which is supplemented by funding from Enterprise Ireland. The Producers informed the Delegation that the funding from Enterprise Ireland should be sustained for a longer period, so that the trials in this regard can be continued.
- Various types of peat casing substitutes have been trialled and trials continue, again with varying degrees of success, but there is confidence that a commercially viable 100% peat casing substitute for horticultural peat will be in place by no later than the end of 2030.

- The by-product arising from using peat casing substitute, requires a number of processes post-mushroom production to ensure sterilisation, and the Producers informed the Delegation that a use for the by-product needs to be found.



*Fig.3 – An example of a mushroom production and research facility at Cornacrieve Mushrooms.*



*Fig.4 – A further example of a mushroom production and research facility at Cornacrieve Mushrooms.*

The Delegation acknowledged the outcome of the trials and the degree of success, but queried why the horticultural peat which was being used is being sourced in Northern Ireland. The producers highlighted the difficulties in sourcing peat in Ireland, and the failure to harvest sub-30-hectare plots of bog. The Producers believed this failure was due to the complexity of the planning, licence and regulatory compliance requirements applicable to harvesting horticultural peat. The Producers specifically referenced issues around licencing and hydrological testing. If these requirements could be simplified or set aside in the case of the Loughlin Bridge site, it would be possible to source horticultural peat in Ireland and this would reduce the Producer's input costs.

The Producers also emphasised that the harvesting of sub-30-hectare plots of bog would not be required beyond 2030, or even sooner, as they are confident that a commercially viable peat casing substitute will be in use by no later than 2030.

The Delegation expressed its gratitude for the support it received during the visit.

## Visit to the Commercial Mushroom Producers Co-Operative Society Limited

The Delegation then proceeded to the CMP, at Tyholland, Co. Monaghan, and met with the representatives from the CMP (the “Representatives”), as follows:

- Ms. Orla McManus, Chief Executive Officer, the CMP;
- Mr. Bert Stewart, Chairperson, the CMP;
- Mr. Ronnie Wilson, Founder, Monaghan Mushrooms;
- Mr. Paul Wilson, Chief Executive Officer, Monaghan Mushrooms;
- Mr. Mel O’Rourke, Industry Consultant to the CMP;
- Ms. Jude Wilson, Chief Scientific Officer, Mbio; and
- Ms. Helen Byrne, Principal Research Officer, Mbio.

The visit commenced with a discussion between the Delegation and the Representatives, with the Representatives outlining the history of the CMP, the day-to-day operations and the current challenges it faces. The Delegation noted that the challenges faced by the CMP mirrored those previously disclosed during the visit to Cornacrieve Mushrooms.

A questions and answers session then took place between the Delegation and the Representatives. The Delegation was informed that the CMP has the objective of creating a mushroom industry which does not use horticultural peat for its mushroom production by 2030. The CMP is currently undertaking growing trials and research relating to the development of a substitute for mushroom casing peat. The Representatives informed the Delegation that an evaluation of growing practices for both white and brown mushroom crops had been undertaken in 2022. Horticultural peat continues to be imported, but the CMP is targeting a move away from this.

When the questions and answers session was completed, the Delegation proceeded to the mushroom production and research facility.





*Fig.5 – Michael Fitzmaurice T.D., is given a tour of the mushroom production and research facility at the CMP, by Ms. Orla McManus, Chief Executive Officer, and Ms. Helen Byrne, Principal Research Officer, Mbio.*



*Fig.6 – An example of a mushroom production and research facility at the CMP.*



The Delegation viewed the ongoing horticultural mushroom peat casing reduction trials using casing peat substitute and held discussions with staff, including the Principal Research Officer, Mbio, Ms. Helen Byrne, and the following was disclosed to the Delegation:

- If similar conditions of production are applied to the growing of mushrooms using traditional horticultural peat and the growing of mushrooms using 100% horticultural peat-substitute, then similar yields are possible.
- It is possible to extend the shelf life of mushrooms grown with horticultural peat-substitute, but this time extension is not significant.
- The by-product of mushroom production using horticultural peat-substitute can be reused, and this is unique.
- Mushroom production using horticultural peat-substitute is a water-intensive process, but this results in wastewater as part of the by-product which has a high salt content, and more work needs to be done on how to find value in the wastewater.

The Delegation acknowledged the outcome of the trials and the degree of success achieved to date.

The CMP emphasised that there is a continuing need to ensure the production of Irish indigenous peat, but this has been significantly impacted by the current planning, licensing and regulatory compliance requirements. The CMP also highlighted that there may be an opportunity for increased efficiency in this regard, through the current draft planning regulations which are under discussion. Lastly, the CMP informed the Delegation that the amount of peatland which is required for the provision of horticultural peat would comprise a relatively small portion of the total hectares of peatland in Ireland.

The Delegation expressed its gratitude for the support it received during the visit.

## Conclusion

In visiting both sites, the Committee has gained a deeper understanding of the issues which must be tackled in the mushroom industry. In particular, the Committee notes that access to Irish peat as a mushroom growing medium is often subject to onerous bureaucratic requirements, and so there is a need to develop commercially viable alternatives as soon as practicable.

The Committee is of the opinion that conditions applicable to the harvesting of horticultural peat on sub-30 hectares sites should be reviewed with the objective of simplifying the process to provide permission to harvest specialist horticultural peat for commercial users. The current draft planning bill may provide opportunities to address some of the onerous bureaucratic requirements to harvest horticultural peat.

## Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

### Powers of Select Committees (DSO 96 and SSO 72)

#### **DSO 96**

Unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, a Committee appointed pursuant to these Standing Orders shall have the following powers:

10. power to—

- (a) engage the services of persons with specialist or technical knowledge, to assist it or any of its sub-Committees in considering particular matters; and
- (b) undertake travel;

Provided that the powers under this paragraph are subject to such recommendations as may be made by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen under Standing Order 120(4)(a).

#### **SSO 72**

Unless the Seanad shall otherwise order, a Committee appointed pursuant to these Standing Orders shall have the following powers:

10. power to –

- (a) engage the services of persons with specialist or technical knowledge, to assist it or any of its sub-Committees in considering particular matters; and
- (b) undertake travel;

Provided that the powers under this paragraph are subject to such recommendations as may be made by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen under Standing Order 107(4)(a).



## Houses of the Oireachtas

Leinster House

Kildare Street

Dublin 2

Do2 XR20

[www.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtas.ie)

Tel: +353 (0)1 6183000

Twitter: @OireachtasNews

## Connect with us



## Download our App

