

**Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine - Tuesday, 20 July, 2021**

**Re: relating to peat and the horticultural industry.**

**DAFM - Opening statement**

The Irish horticultural industry makes a very significant contribution to the Irish gross agricultural output with a farm gate value of almost €477 million in 2019, which is the 4th highest sector in term of output value. The horticultural sector generates an important economic contribution where an estimated 6,600 are employed full time in primary production activity and a further 11,000 employed in value added and downstream businesses. In this regard, Peat use is currently used in varying degrees, primarily by the Amenity and Mushroom sectors and to a less extent for vegetable propagation.

Peat use by the Horticulture Sector Peat is approximately 90,000 tonnes (250,000m<sup>3</sup>) per year. For mushrooms 113,000m<sup>3</sup> or 40,647 tonnes (10 - 15Ha) used, the remaining 137,000m<sup>3</sup> or 49,280 tonnes (262Ha) for amenity and soft fruit. The sector has indicated that this accounts for 1.9% of total historic annual peat extraction or equates to 0.12% of total Irish peatlands. The amenity nursery sector has been reducing peat usage with most growers now using reduced peat levels in growing substrate, where the peat is blended with material such as bark fibre or coir at levels of between 10%-30%. There are efforts within the Mushroom industry here and internationally looking at alternatives to peat however there are no suitable or viable alternatives to using Irish peat for mushroom casing. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has funded two research projects commissioned by Ireland's mushroom producer organisation CMP. The Teagasc report "Challenges in Peat supply for growing media and mushroom casing in Irish Horticulture" notes that finding peat growing media alternatives for plant and food production is a particular challenge as peat based growing media is a highly valued ingredient in complex and diverse production systems including propagation.

The professional domestic horticulture sector has committed to continuing to increase the use of other products in the growing media blend with a transition to peat free

In addition to these developments, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is actively looking at alternatives to peat. It has also recently sought further research be

conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Regarding the future use of peat moss in the horticulture sector, DAFM contributed to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage report on the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry. In addition, DAFM fully participated and contributed to Minister Noonan's peat working group which included representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace, as well as facilitate funding of targeted research.