



Limerick and Tipperary Woodland Owners Ltd.

Presentation to the JCAM on the “Report of the Independent Review Group into the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine’s response to Ash Dieback.” Wednesday 25th October 2023

Introduction:

Firstly, many thanks are due to the Chairman and all Committee members for the invitation to come before you all once again.

I will introduce our representatives.

I will then give a brief outline of our response to this review report and our concerns re the official response to date.

We in LTWO have been at the forefront of representing ash plantation owners. This is our fourth time presenting to this, and the previous committee, since 2019.

With fair dues to the Committee members from across all political divides they have accepted that the affected landowners have been dealt an enormous injustice.

It is arguable that the inadequate initial response by the DAFM through its forest service was through a mistaken belief that the measures they chose might work. However, since 2017 there is no justification to hide behind for the way in which they treated affected landowners.

With prior experience we were highly skeptical as to what this review might be set up to accomplish. But we decided to meet with the three independent expert reviewers and were immediately impressed by the way they engaged with each group in researching the issue so comprehensively.

Whilst we suspected that commissioning this review was just an exercise to delay taking action, we have to commend Minister Hackett for finally commissioning an independent review. She promised a review of Ash Dieback as far back as the Spring of 2021. At least we have it now.

We gratefully recognise that this committee published its report entitled “Issues impacting the Forestry Sector in Ireland” dated 02/03/2021 in which it recommended practically everything to do with Ash Dieback resolution that we had advocated. It is not lost on us that the situation was deemed urgent back then and yet none of the action needed was undertaken by the Minister and her officials. Therefore, we are fearful that the recommendations in this review, even though it

was commissioned by the Minister, will suffer the same fate and be found gathering dust on a DAFM shelf many years from now. But, somehow, I do not think the general public will accept that.

At this point we thoroughly welcome the findings of this review and thank the three reviewers for their recommendations. Those we represent have been totally vindicated once again. But, sadly, this is not enough. This review will only be of benefit if the recommendations are implemented. Since we hosted the first National Ash Dieback Conference in March there has been a significant unified call from private forestry representative groups, including IFA and organisations in the wider field, such as SEEFA, for immediate implementation of the review recommendations.

The recommendations are quite simply set out as:

- Ash dieback is national emergency, for which rapid action response is imperative, because standing trees are becoming more dangerous and less valuable with each lost opportunity to deal with the disease.
- Equity is needed for ash plantation owners. A new partnership arrangement, involving landowners in a designated task force to detail and manage a specific new scheme, is a must. There must be time bound objectives and targets in the management of this scheme.
- The State must pay for clearance, re-planting or returning to other production, offset losses encountered pending restoration to established forest status.
- The State must change its approach and introduce disease risk sharing for forestry on private land.
- Implementation of this Report's recommendations is vital in order to restore trust and confidence in forestry

It is disturbing that the Minister and her officials, having been given this report over five weeks ago, have failed to approach ash dieback representative groups with a view to setting up the recommended task force envisaged in the recommendations. The ash task force has to include growers. This according to the report is warranted by such a catastrophic disease.

In all official utterances on the subject, so far, lack any sense of urgency or recognition that this is an emergency.

Both senior and junior Ministers' initial response to this report was to call for ash plantation owners to sign up to the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (RUS). In light of this scheme having been utterly trashed by the reviewers as unfit for purpose, and silviculturally flawed, this call is repugnant to our members. The promise, that, if any amendments are made to the RUS, applicants will be eligible to receive them does not go down too well with plantation owners.

The report states that the process for handling and processing the RUS applications was an utter failure and referred to workstream 3 in project woodland, which remains incomplete. Workstream 3 in project woodland was dealing with organisational development. The review points to a big cultural problem in the forest service. There are many really talented, and dedicated personnel, in the forest service ranks. The cultural malaise would appear to be more in the overall direction of the service, where the idea of providing a service and serving customers does not appear to be a priority.

Our members are not going to sign up to the RUS. It is evidence of the depth of the disconnect in the DAFM forest service's top personnel advising Ministers that they, still at this stage, refuse to accept reality. The RUS is dead in the water. It was so from its inception because it was designed to achieve a set of impossible goals and omitted the needs of the plantation owners affected by the disease. Technical flaws and leadership failure by the State in the introduction of the RUS led to minimal uptake and further negativity of farmers towards forestry and the DAFM forest service. They need to change tack.

It appears that the whole focus of the Forest Service is to forge ahead with promoting the new afforestation schemes, while leaving ash dieback resolution to be dealt with somewhere in the future. But this approach is fundamentally flawed just like so much of the forest services direction over the last ten years.

Probably the most salient finding in this review is that natural justice would appear to demand state aid for loss in forestry due to disease. It goes on to state that EU policies do not follow this principle, It further says "The heightened awareness of woodland disease by farmers arising from the ash Die-back issue brings the State Aid limitations into sharp focus as the State seeks accelerated afforestation to meet Climate targets. Given that forestry objectives in Ireland are heavily dependent on persuading farmers to make a permanent land use change to woodland, this is likely to be a long-term challenge for successive forestry programmes." But it does point out a path for innovative ways to bring about natural justice and recommends doing so. This is something we hope to develop further in the discussions.

I conclude by saying that the future of Irish forestry rests upon proper implementation of this report's recommendations in full as an immediate priority. We need a straight-forward disaster type response. It needs to be a simplified approach with fast-track permission to clear the trees. We need to make sure the machinery to deal with this task is available. The ex gratia payment is vital to help people badly hit by unnecessary losses caused by official inaction. Premiums are vital to give people an income.

We are not alone in holding the opinion that the forestry programme will not succeed until ash dieback is sorted once and for all. If Ash Dieback is not resolved the forestry risk issues that came to light with the disease will gain a lot more attention. When landowners seriously assess the risks involved in planting under the new terms and conditions they will be very slow to sign up to the new schemes, Those with sense will seek legal and family advice. In today's land market there are many other more lucrative ways of land utilization that do not entail permanency of land use and unreasonable responsibility for dealing with the very real risk of disease afforestation. Landowners see what has been happening to the 6,500 landowners, who planted ash for profit and they see that they are being enticed by the similar incentives. Farmers are not fools and the Forest service directors should take note of this.

Thank you

Simon White, LTWO Ash Dieback Committee Chairman
John O'Connell, LTWO Ash Dieback Vice Chairman
Maura Duggan, LTWO Secretary