



13<sup>th</sup> December 2023

## **Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas 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 Conor O'Mahony Principal Officer ERAD Division. I am joined today by Dr Damien Barrett (Senior Superintending Veterinary Inspector), Dr John Griffin, chair of the Scientific Working Group of the TB Forum and Teddy Cashman, chair of the Deer Management Strategy Group. We welcome the opportunity to appear before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food, and the Marine to discuss the Bovine TB Eradication Strategy.

The Department is acutely aware of the financial and emotional stress associated with a TB breakdown. It causes significant hardship for farmers and farming families, and this Department is committed to the objectives of the Bovine TB Eradication Strategy and programme which aims to reduce and ultimately eradicate this disease in Ireland.

### **Why we have a TB Eradication Programme**

The importance of Ireland's TB Eradication Programme in underpinning farm family income should not be underestimated. As a country that exports 90% of our livestock produce, access to international trade markets is fundamental. It is a requirement of EU trade law to have an eradication programme. This enables Irish farmers to access the EU single market for our cattle (including calves), meat and milk. There is also a requirement for access to third country markets. Our exports have grown substantially in value and volume to Third Countries in the last 10 years, and it is notable that in several cases, TB is a significant consideration in the context of trade and certification requirements.

A Cost Benefit Analysis Report of the TB Programme carried out by Grant Thornton in 2021 estimated that in economic terms 78% of the benefits of the bovine TB Eradication Programme relate to private goods while 22% accrues to public goods. This further emphasises the importance of the bovine TB programme to our ability to trade internationally in dairy and beef products which in 2022 amounted to €6.8 billion worth of dairy products, as well as over €3 billion worth of beef exports.

It is important to stress that in recent years we are at an historically low level of TB prevalence, notwithstanding an increase in the last seven years. The focus of everyone engaged in dealing with TB is to reduce these levels even further and to move towards eradication of the disease.

However, there are several challenges.



## **Challenges of the disease**

Bovine tuberculosis (TB) is a challenging disease to control and eradicate due to several factors. The relative contribution of each of these factors vary from farm to farm.

- movement of cattle with undetected infection
- residual infection in cattle previously exposed to TB,
- inherent limitations of the tests,
- a reservoir of disease in a protected species – the badger, and
- inadequate biosecurity practises.

It is therefore critically important that farmers are empowered and supported 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, their own cattle and neighbouring risks so that they themselves can make any management changes which may be necessary if they wish to avoid the costs and stress of a TB breakdown. This involves making informed decisions about the purchase of cattle and maintaining good overall herd health. The advice on how to reduce TB risk in a herd has remained generally consistent over many years and we continue to encourage farmers to act on it utilising a broader range of communication tools. Stakeholder endorsement, through the TB Forum, of this advice is hugely important in encouraging farmers to take active steps to reduce their TB risk.

We are providing information and advice on the practical steps farmers can take to reduce the risk from badgers 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 badger 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. Vaccinating badgers reduces the transmission of TB within the badger population and thereby reduces transmission to cattle. This protects cattle and reduces losses to farmers while safeguarding a native protected Irish wild species.

## **Bovine TB Stakeholder Forum**

Previous EU audits and research related to the Irish TB Programme have highlighted a lack of stakeholder involvement as a key impediment in achieving eradication. To help address this and in response to the developing disease situation, the Minister for Agriculture, Food, and the



Marine established the Bovine TB Stakeholders Forum, in May 2018, in line with international best practice on the governance of animal health programmes. Its mandate is to develop evidence-informed policies that can eradicate TB while respecting the principles that were outlined in the National Farmed Animal Health Strategy. These include

1. Working in Partnership.
2. Acknowledging Roles and Responsibilities.
3. Reflecting Costs and Benefits and
4. Prevention is Better than Cure.

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

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 TB levels.
- Aligning with changes in the EU Animal Health Law TB regulations.
- Reducing the risk posed by badgers.
- Reducing the risk posed by deer in certain areas.
- Tailored, simplified communications between the Department and herdowners.
- Clearer messaging of the risks of TB transmission and how to address these.
- Biosecurity advice delivered to farmers, with a focus on practical, clear and effective actions to reduce risk and incentivise risk-lowering behaviour.

### **Disease situation**

Almost 5,000 herds have suffered a TB breakdown in the last twelve months in comparison to less than 4,400 in the previous 12 month period. Epidemiological data analysis suggests the reasons underpinning current levels of TB incidence are the expansion of the dairy herd, the resulting increased levels of intensive cattle farming and the increased movement of cattle. We have also seen a substantial increase in the number of reactors with 27,800 being disclosed in the last twelve months in comparison to 22,837 in the previous twelve months, an increase of 4,963.

### **Working in Partnership**



In driving strategic change in the Bovine TB Programme in Ireland, Minister McConalogue has consistently highlighted the critical role of stakeholder collaboration. Reflecting this, implementation of the TB Strategy is being facilitated by a governance structure designed to ensure all perspectives are considered. The TB Stakeholder Forum is 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.

### **Finances of the Programme**

Delivering the TB Programme in any given year represents a massive logistical operation achieved through the cooperation of farmers, private vets and Department Officials right across the country. In 2022, over 9.5 million individual animal TB tests were completed in over 100,000 herds.

The overall cost to the Exchequer of the TB Programme, excluding staff costs, has increased from €52 million in 2021 to €57m million in 2022 and currently stands at €65m year to date. In that time, the primary drivers of increased costs have been compensation payments to farmers and veterinary fees for testing.

For many years, Ireland's TB Programme has been financially supported by the EU. However, EU support for the TB Programme has now ceased primarily because of funding pressures for other emerging diseases throughout the EU. EU support was €9 million in 2018 and in 2023 we received €1.6 million in respect of 2022, the last year for which we will receive funding. 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.

### **Next steps**

The TB strategy sets out how the Department and stakeholders will continue to engage on the issues impacting on TB levels in Ireland, 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.

To make further progress towards eradication, it will be necessary to take further measures that impact of the factors that are the source and which maintain infection in herds. These will mean a need for greater controls on certain aspects of the programme which will challenge stakeholders to engage with some difficult choices. If appropriate additional measures to reduce TB are not supported by stakeholders, this will likely have an adverse impact on future TB trends and the drive towards eradication.

Most actions set out under the current TB strategy have either been implemented or are advancing well towards implementation. To make substantial further progress on TB in the



2023-2025 period, additional steps to build on the current strategy will be needed. Options were presented by the Department to the TB Forum and discussed with farming organisations for consideration at TB Forum Meetings in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

The options presented were:

- Voluntary or mandatory informed purchasing, which would allow farmers better inform their management decisions in respect of their herd risk management when they are purchasing cattle.
- Voluntary or mandatory risk-based trading.
- Incentivising risk lowering behaviours, disincentivising risk elevating behaviours.
- Reducing spread between areas using contract rearing risk mitigation and restrictions on movements from high to low TB areas.
- Dynamic risk estimation at herd and animal level.
- Supporting quality TB testing using gamma interferon blood testing and spatial tools to identify each group of cattle.
- Reducing spread from high-risk herds: restrict older breeding cattle, confine TB exposed cattle to controlled finishing units.
- Regionalised approach to eradication/control

Based on these stakeholder discussions, the scope of what the farm organisations are prepared to accept as next steps from 2023-2025 became clear. While more progressive measures, such as informed purchasing, risk based trading and increased restrictions on high-risk herds/animals, would be expected to lead to a sharper reduction in TB, these do not currently have stakeholder support.

## **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 able to outline a positive picture of reducing TB incidence and a trajectory towards eradication. I welcome any questions from members of the committee for my colleagues and me.