

Connaught Telegraph

By Tim Ryan, Oireachtas Correspondent

Major problem of Japanese knotweed in Co Mayo

There is now a major problem with the invasive plant species, Japanese knotweed, in County Mayo, Fine Gael Senator John O'Mahony told the Dáil. Ballycroy National Park will be overrun by it if there is not an overall strategy in place, he said.

“I appeal to the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Heather Humphreys, who, I understand, is dealing with the problems posed by Japanese knotweed, to which I was alerted in recent times when travelling around County Mayo and elsewhere in the West,” he said. “I saw signs popping up along the roadside asking people not to cut it. When I looked into the matter a little further, I found that Japanese knotweed was a highly invasive plant which had been introduced in Ireland as an ornamental plant in the 19th century. However, it has now become a major problem. It is spreading rapidly throughout the country along watercourses and transport routes and on unmaintained land. It is one of the worst invasive species because its root system and rapid growth can damage concrete foundations and buildings. It can come up through tarmac, roadways and so on.”

Senator O'Mahony said he was aware of a scheme to deal with the problem along some national routes but others areas affected are not being treated. “Overall, money is being spent but there is a need for a strategic plan covering several years to sort out the problem which is expensive to deal with,” he said. “That is an important point, but it would be better to do this in a strategic and planned way with the assistance of various agencies co-operating together rather than having each do its own thing and not knowing what the others are doing.”

In reply, Minister Mary Mitchell O'Connor said the management of invasive alien plant species project, led by TII, is a €5 million project aimed at managing invasive knotweed and other non-native invasive plant species over the next five years on the national road network and its interactions with regional roads. The project involves collaboration with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. In 2015, an invasive alien species national stakeholder group was established, led by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

“The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht will consider options for improved national co-ordination of work on invasive species, including increased co-operation between local and central government. Information on the distribution of invasive species in Ireland, including knotweed, is available on the invasive species section of the National Biodiversity Data Centre's website,” she said. “Incidences of invasive species can be reported via the website. I encourage members of the public to use this facility. Answers to frequently asked questions on Japanese knotweed are also available from the same website.”

More videos of current government than of Coronation Street - Calleary

There are more videos from within Government on Twitter than there are episodes of "Coronation Street" at the moment, Fianna Fail Deputy Dara Calleary told the Dáil.

Speaking during Question Time he said the previous Government made significant investment in film production and that ethos seems to have extended into the Taoiseach's office in recent weeks.

He asked the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform whether the Office of Government Procurement was involved in the process, and how much is being spent by each Department currently on communications and public relations. "God be with the days when the leader of the country could look into his heart and know what the people were thinking," he said.

"Presumably in the establishment of the strategic communications unit, like the establishment of any new Government unit or service, a business case was made," he said. "It would have pointed out that the unit could bring its skills to bear in terms of bringing these efficiencies on Government communications. Presumably in the business case savings were projected or figures were presented to the Minister or the Department for sanction of the appointment of all the various people who are part of the unit."

In reply, Minister Paschal Donohoe said the Office of Government Procurement is currently running six procurement processes on behalf of the Department of An Taoiseach in respect of the strategic communications unit. The first is a request for tenders for the provision of research and insight. "All these procurement processes are currently at evaluation stage and no contracts have yet been awarded," he said. "Expenditure relating to each of these contracts is a matter for the Department of An Taoiseach."

Fairness sought for uses of group water schemes

At a time when Irish Water is actively informing all those who are due refunds, there is little detail available regarding how equality for group water scheme users can be achieved, Sinn Féin Senator Rose Conway Walsh told the Upper House.

She said she was hosting a public meeting in Mayo on the issue which reflects the frustration of those who do not yet know how their access to water will be provided and how it will be funded into the future.

"Even when the Minister, Eoghan Murphy, was introducing the Water Services Bill in the Dáil, he noted that the legislation provides clarity on public water and wastewater services but that there is still some distance to go in achieving clarity for the group water schemes," she said. "The key difference is that group water schemes receive an annual subsidy of €70 per household but it does not cover the full annual cost of accessing the water supply. Those connected to a public water supply, who are currently customers of Irish Water, do not pay an annual charge for accessing that supply and equity would mean that the State would cover the full annual cost of the group water scheme users accessing the water supply."

