

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT AGUS MUIR

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND THE MARINE

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*Dé Máirt, 2 Márta 2021*

*Tuesday, 2 March 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 4 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Martin Browne,	Victor Boyhan,
Matt Carthy,	Paul Daly.
Michael Collins,	
Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Joe Flaherty,	
Brian Leddin,	
Michael Ring.	

I láthair/In attendance: Deputies Johnny Guirke and Carol Nolan.

Teachta/Deputy Jackie Cahill sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

## **Rewetting of Peatland and its Impact on Farmers: Discussion**

**Chairman:** I apologise for the delay starting the meeting. We had trouble getting one of the witnesses onto the call. Apologies have been received from Senator Lombard.

I remind members that, due to the Covid-19 restrictions, only the Chairman and staff are present in the committee room and all members must join the meeting remotely from elsewhere in the parliamentary precinct. The secretariat can issue invitations to join the meeting on Microsoft Teams. Members may not participate in the meeting from outside the parliamentary precincts. Members should mute their microphones when they are not making contributions and use the raise hand function to indicate. Speaking slots will be prioritised for members of the committee.

This meeting is on the rewetting of peatland and its impact on farmers. It will be divided into three sessions, the first of which will involve representatives of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, ICMSA, and the National Association of Regional Game Councils, NARGC. The second session, which will be from 5 p.m. until 5.15 p.m., will involve a briefing by Dr. David Wilson, a research scientist. The third session will be an engagement with officials from Bord na Móna.

I welcome the representatives from the IFA, ICMSA and NARGC. From the IFA, we have Mr. Tim Cullinan, president, and Mr. Brian Rushe, deputy president. From the ICMSA, we have Mr. Pat McCormack, president, and Mr. Pat O'Brien, a national council member from Offaly. From the NARGC, we have Mr. Dan Curley, chairman, and Mr. John Butler, a national executive member. All witnesses are appearing remotely. We have received their opening statements, which have already been circulated to members. Since we are limited in our time due to the Covid-19 safety restrictions, the committee has agreed that the opening statements will be taken as read so that we can use the full session for questions and answers.

I will outline an important notice regarding parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Participants in the meeting from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within the parliamentary precincts do not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or the extent to which, their participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

I now invite questions from the members. Can they hear me? Did anyone hear my opening remarks?

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** No.

**Chairman:** Will I have to repeat them?

**Senator Paul Daly:** The Chairman was on the missing list. None of us heard anything.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** Or saw.

**Chairman:** Some people might be happy if I went on the missing list. I must read the note on privilege again. I will also introduce the witnesses again. I apologise, as we had a technical glitch.

From the IFA, I welcome Mr. Tim Cullinan, president, and Mr. Brian Rushe, deputy president. From the ICMSA, I welcome Mr. Pat McCormack, president, and Mr. Pat O'Brien, a national council member from Offaly. From the NARGC, I welcome Mr. Dan Curley, chairman, and Mr. John Butler, national executive member. We have received their opening statements, which have already been circulated to members. Since we are limited in our time due to the Covid-19 safety restrictions, the committee has agreed that the opening statements will be taken as read so that we can use the full session for questions and answers.

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The subject matter of this meeting is an important issue for people adjacent to Bord na Móna bogs and the committee decided that it merited a full meeting. I now invite members to ask questions of the three organisations, which are in attendance to represent farmers in the areas.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I will not delay because I am conscious of the time constraints. I thank everyone for these submissions, which are comprehensive. The issue is best summarised in the IFA's submission. I encourage more people to get involved. This is a challenging project. The rewetting of bogs has implications for the hydrology of that land and neighbouring lands. The value of lands will be impacted, as will the future use of neighbouring farms. The IFA submission refers to consultation and meaningful engagement. I note from the end of its submission that it has started having good consultation with Bord na Móna.

I will not ask questions because I am conscious that many members are trying to contribute. This is an important and challenging issue. Alternatives must be found for these boglands. I am mindful not only of the impact on the land itself and biodiversity in the wider area, but also of the economic impact on the people and communities living there.

**Chairman:** I thank the Senator and call Deputy Fitzmaurice.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I do not know what is wrong. I am in my office in Dublin but there is nothing on my screen. There is some technical issue.

**Chairman:** We can hear the Deputy anyway.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** Loud and clear.

**Chairman:** We have Deputy Fitzmaurice's pretty face in front of us now.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I do not have the Chairman's pretty face in front me, whatever problem is occurring. I welcome the witnesses. I had a Zoom meeting with Bord na Móna one week ago. There are concerns around the country about drains that have been deepened and pumps are operating, boundary or mairning drains between farmers and drains that go through land to a river. There are places near Ballinasloe where this is happening. The meeting was constructive but constructive is one thing and having something down the road is another.

Bord na Móna said it would consult and liaise with farmers and do all the usual that everyone says they will do. I have no reason to doubt it but I proposed the farming organisations meet Bord na Móna. It needs to be done, even if we get an independent chairperson. It needs to be put down on paper because, as we are all aware, there have been too many times when verbal agreements were gone back on ten years later.

Once the rewetting is done, it will not be coming right up to a mairning. I have talked to an ecologist about it. There is rewetting done in areas near me and I understand how it operates. However, we need a written agreement between the parties to make sure there is no ambiguity or doubt in ten or 15 years' time. Once a bog is rewetted, people will not go back to look around except perhaps for some pairing. A commitment is needed to maintain the mairning or boundary drains between farmers and to keep pumps in place, where required. Those are the two biggest dangers.

There is a large amount of marginal land in counties Roscommon, Longford and Galway and the midlands counties that farmers are trying to make a living off. They would not be able to farm it if the drains were not cleaned. Milled peat has blocked some of the main rivers such the Little Brosna, which I travelled in the time of the Shannon. These issues need to be rectified in black and white. While everyone can smile at each other at a Zoom meeting, at the end of the day, farmers will suffer the consequences in five, ten or 15 years' time when we are no longer in politics.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I welcome the witnesses. The report by the IFA referred to the threat of flooding to adjacent land and the water table at local level. It stated these would present a risk to health and safety and farm machinery and asked the working group to keep local farmers informed. Lack of communication with the stakeholders is a thread that seems to run through every committee meeting with the Department. It comes across in the three earlier reports. What is the level of engagement between the witnesses, Bord na Móna and the stakeholders regarding turbary rights? Will the witnesses outline their concerns about future ownership and their concerns, similar to the NARGC about using the land to offset carbon emissions with storage of carbon in bogs?

The ICMSA report stated that peatland rehabilitation guidelines should be published and its impact on local roads addressed. Is enough thought being given to alternative ways of rehabilitating these bogs? Is the prospect of rewetting near farmlands having an impact on farmers' ability to sell their land and the price of their land?

On the NARGC report, we are all aware that a one-dimensional, one-size-fits-all approach does not work and will not work in this case. Different bogs will need different rehabilitation measures. Has the work carried out at the bogs over the decades changed the local water table or the capacity of the bogs to hold water? If so, is enough attention being paid to this? Under the current plans, could some areas go from lake to desert and back again with flooding? What would be the result of that in these areas?

**Mr. Tim Cullinan:** I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to appear today to deal with the Bord na Móna issue. I thank Senator Boyhan for his comments on our submission.

Deputy Fitzmaurice is right. This is a major challenge for all of us. It is a substantial change with up to 33,000 ha or up to 80 sites being rewetted by Bord na Móna. It is obviously a massive challenge. We have had considerable engagement with Bord na Móna. We are coming out of the year we had last year and are still in the pandemic. We need engagement with farmers and the only we can do that is on a Zoom call. Bord na Móna's first mistake was taking on this major operation in the middle of a pandemic. It is a major change but so be it.

I share Deputy Fitzmaurice's concerns around drains and how drainage will be maintained. It is one thing getting this operation up and running but we must ensure that proper maintenance will be ongoing in this area. On the proposal we have from Bord na Móna, our engagement goes back to that of our deputy president, Mr. Brian Rush, who is on the line. He engaged with farmers as far back as last summer, on the sites, in the Offaly area in particular. We had a meeting with the CEO of Bord na Móna and his staff late last year and we formed a working group out of that. Our people are participating in it with Bord na Móna staff.

Drainage is a major concern. Bord na Móna has proposed an external drain around the perimeter of the bog, which will drain into the rivers in the area. As our submission states, we want a hydrological assessment to be done of lands in that area. If lands are impacted, farmers will have to be compensated in those areas. Deputy Browne made a point on the threat of flooding. Of course there is a threat. If this work is done, there will have to be ongoing remedial work done.

Deputy Browne also asked about turbary rights. We have already raised that issue with Bord na Móna. Farmers who have been harvesting turf in the area for years have to be protected as well.

I make a final point on carbon storage. Bord na Móna has stated that anything up to 100 million tonnes of carbon can be sequestered in these bogs. That is important for the country. We are all part of a climate debate and we, as farmers, are part of that. We are the only sector that can be part of the solution. By that I mean in particular farmers' lands that adjoin Bord na Móna lands. Bord na Móna is now setting up equipment to measure the carbon being sequestered in its bogs. It would be important also to look at the carbon that is being sequestered in farmers' lands in those regions. It could help the community and it would be another income farmers in that area could derive. The working group is looking at that with Bord na Móna.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Will the farming organisations be pushing for a written agreement for the future? Will they be working together to try to achieve this? At my meeting with them, while they were very co-operative, they were not jumping out through the fence to provide a written agreement. This needs to be a red line issue for the farming community.

**Mr. Pat McCormack:** I agree 100% with the Deputy. Everyone assumes that this land will always be Bord na Móna's. Not only do we need a written agreement, but it needs to specify that any commitments given in writing are honoured in a potential sale of the land. The movement to the stewardship of somebody else is critical. The Deputy is perfectly right. Time and again we have seen agreements and everybody smiles, shakes hands and walks away, but we need to have this in writing for the generations of farm families to come who potentially will be affected.

In response to Deputy Martin Browne, obviously we need to establish a scientific basis for the rewetting. We need a scientific and independent judgment on adjoining farms pre rewetting and potentially post rewetting. Those of us who are from rural areas and involved in farming understand the significant difference between having a flow and not having a flow. That is talking very much in layman's terms. There can be major consequences associated with rewetting, which can potentially be seen from miles around in extreme circumstances.

It is important to get a commitment in writing. Equally it is important to get a commitment on regular maintenance. There is no point in saying that these outside drains will be maintained at different intervals; we need to get that commitment in writing. That will be critical for the knock-on effect for the adjoining holdings.

**Chairman:** I call Mr. Butler. As his microphone is on mute, we cannot hear him.

**Mr. Dan Curley:** My name is Dan Curley from the National Association of Regional Game Councils. I am with John Butler. Perhaps I could come in if that is okay.

**Chairman:** Okay.

**Mr. Dan Curley:** I thank the Chairman and the members of the committee for inviting us. We made a lengthy submission to the committee. Our concern is that the bogs need to go back to the way that they were or as close to the way they were as possible. We had a meeting with Bord na Móna about three weeks ago. We do not envisage it happening with the plans it has. It is focusing on rewetting, which basically will not cut the mustard with this because these bogs have no seed base and they need to be replanted. We sent the committee a report by someone in the UK who did some of this kind of work.

We believe the bogs need to be gradually re-wetted. In tandem with that they must be re-colonised with the right bog plants. By the right bog plants, I mean the small bog plants, heather, grasses, lichens and sphagnum moss. We do not want them to turn into birch plantations or lakes. To store and take in carbon needs plants on the bog. That is where we are coming from. We are concerned about what is going on because a bog needs to have very little variation in its water level throughout the year. With rewetting unfortunately, the level could go down to about 3 ft or 4 ft, which will not cut the mustard for plants because those plants need to be in water for the whole year.

We envisage a lot of problems. There was a lack of engagement on this, as we also pointed out in our submission. We hope that will change and they will look at it all. Simply going in and rewetting bogs will not work and could cause serious problems, as outlined by the farming people. I will not take up any more of the committee's time because I am sure other people want to come in. That is where we are coming from.

The proper plants need to get back on the bogs for the purposes of carbon and for pollination. Heather is the best pollinator plant in the country. A third reason is that the preferred habitat for many of the vulnerable species, such as the curlew, the red grouse and practically all the ground nesting birds, is open moor and bog. Unfortunately, not much of that is left. Many birch plantations are left but not good open moorland and it needs to go back to that as much as possible. We appreciate that it might not be possible to do that in every bog but the aim should be at least to try to go back to that.

**Senator Paul Daly:** I will be very brief because we have many contributors and time is limited. I have attended meetings and discussed this issue with neighbours. Where I live is

right on the verge of certain areas that will be badly affected. I ask the representatives to update us on where they are. Has anything in their communications with Bord na Móna changed since they made their submissions? We will be meeting representatives of the board later and I will emphasise this. I am reasonably familiar with the pros and cons of this and I am looking forward to the interaction with Bord na Móna.

In the deliberations with the board, has it been mentioned, for example, that someone with a small portion of land, maybe a bit of lowland, nearing a bog could be compensated and allow it to be included in the rewetting project? If the price was right, for want of a better phrase, he might be prepared to walk away from that, rather than having to go to the cost of putting in a drain for him or whatever. Was it ever mentioned that they might incorporate some farmland and provide ample compensation? Did that ever come up in the witnesses' deliberations?

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** I thank our guests for appearing before the committee today and for preparing their statements, which are very interesting. In particular, Mr. Cullinan made some very wise and positive remarks on the role of farmers in the challenge we have. We all know that rewetting of bogs and peatlands is part of the solution to the great climate challenge we have. However, we will have no solution unless the farmers are part of it. He raised a very good point about how we can compensate and pay farmers in the future. That requires significant work because this is the way it is going. Farmers' livelihoods need to be protected. They are the custodians of much of this land that is at risk.

I was very impressed with Mr. Curley's comments and his depth of knowledge on what we need to do with these lands to bring them back to a certain standard. I thank him for those comments. I do not have any questions. We support the witnesses in their efforts because this is a major challenge, and they are part of, perhaps the most important part of, the solution.

**Chairman:** Mr. Rushe indicated he wanted to speak.

**Mr. Brian Rushe:** I want to come in on a number of points which were raised earlier by the Deputies. In reference to the IFA's engagement, as the president said, I travelled to west Offaly last summer to meet farmers on the ground. I live in north-west Kildare on the Offaly border and I am sandwiched between two bogs that have been marked for rewetting. I have land that could be damaged by this so I understand the issue and farmers' concerns. We had an online meeting a few weeks ago with 200 farmers and landowners, and we put together 50 questions, which we have since put to Bord na Móna. We are expecting an answer to those questions at the end of this month. I agree with the point that the pumps need to continue to run. This issue formed part of our questions as well as issues regarding maintenance of outflows and of drains going through Bord na Móna land that neighbouring land is reliant on for drainage. It is critical that this remains in place.

I want to emphasise another point on the issue of ownership. On the rewetting project, Bord na Móna will store and sequester thousands of tonnes of carbon. That carbon will have a value and will continue to have a value in the future. There is a concern that if this becomes a massive carbon sink then that carbon could be traded. It is our view, and the view of farmers, that if there is value stored in the carbon on Bord na Móna land and surrounding land, it must benefit the local communities in which it is situated. That is an absolute red line issue. No one objects to the project Bord na Móna is working on but we are concerned as to the speed and pace it expects to complete it by, and its level of engagement. If there is value in the carbon sequestered in bogs in the future, it has to benefit the local community.

There is a concern that if Bord na Móna leaves these bogs in the future, they could come under the remit of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, and this could result in designations. All of us on this committee know what has happened to farmers' land that has been designated. There is a severe economic impact on their land. We do not want this issue to become a back door to land designations. We have been clear on this point. Another of the key points, which we were very clear about to Bord na Móna, is that it is its responsibility to communicate this project to the local communities. We have pushed them hard on that. We had a number of locally elected officials at our online meeting and they made this point as well. We will continue to make this point to Bord na Móna. When members speak to the company's representatives, one of the key issues they need to be pushed on is that they must engage fully and completely with local communities.

In response to Senator Daly's question about the answers we have received so far, we have submitted questions and we expect to have another meeting of our working group between the end of this month and the beginning of the next. We expect to receive those answers at that time. As the president stated, we met with Bord na Móna officials in person before Christmas and that was a good initial meeting where we got to raise our concerns. Obviously, the stakes are higher now and we will push them for more answers.

We are very careful on the issue of compensation. As was mentioned earlier, we need to make sure Bord na Móna remains in these areas to maintain and look after drains. There is a worry that if farmers look for compensation at this stage, this would provide Bord na Móna with the opportunity to exit the affected areas. Speaking honestly, when the issue of compensation comes up during the online meetings, it is not entertained. The ideal scenario is that Bord na Móna remains in the communities and that liaison officers are there to maintain and make sure outflows continue.

**Mr. John Butler:** I would like to comment on stakeholder engagement which has been spoken about. Our organisation put forward the suggestion, which I want the committee to take on board, that each bog due to be rehabilitated should have a local committee with all stakeholders involved because there is no better place to start and to gain knowledge than at local level. With the greatest respect to ecologists, scientist and all the reports about rehabilitation from Bord na Móna, which I have read most of, we are concerned on a number of front, one of which is local engagement. We want to see good local engagement set up, not just a couple of phone calls or Zoom meetings. We want to see a local committee that recognises and feeds in to a committee such as this one or a national oversight body. Each bog that is taken out of production and is rehabilitated should have a local committee, which includes all stakeholders.

The second issue that concerns us is the long-term plan. I have read a number of the proposed draft plans and I accept that they are very good and much work and scientific research has gone into them. The long-term plan seems to be for the duration of the integrated pollution control, IPC, licence. As soon as the licence is surrendered, what happens after that and who looks after it? These bogs will need oversight and people to look after them, and they will need work done on them. Especially when the rehabilitation starts, hopefully we will see new forms of wildlife coming back to the bog. We need to have a proper management structure in place.

What worries me a small bit is that over the past few years we have had a number of different committees, surveys and bodies and funding coming from different places towards the bogs. Do not get me wrong, that is all very good. I like money being directed towards the bogs but is there joined-up thinking on this? Do we know exactly what is happening to all the bogs around the country? Are there too many Indians here and maybe not one chief? Who is doing

the oversight on the rehabilitation work done to date? We know there have been test sites done. We know there have been test places taken. I have seen one or two instances where drains have been blocked.

The lack of an overall plan worries me slightly. We do not want to see a situation like that involving the person Mr. Curley alluded to earlier. This person has done tremendous work on bog rehabilitation in England. His suggestion, which we have included in our submission, is that 90% of the money should be spent on the ground and 10% spent on administration and paperwork. Is there already information there, do we have access to it, and how best should the work be done or would we prefer to spend money looking for something we have already? We would like to see a co-ordinated strategy that goes back to when we started on this road in 2015 or 2016. We need to bring everyone into a room so we know exactly where we are, what has been done to date, what is proposed to be done in the future so that we can all be a part of that at local and national level.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank our guests for attending. They were described by one of the previous speakers as the most important voice in the debate and it is in that vein that I ask the three organisations to give an evaluation on the consultation that has taken place to date, including in respect of Bord na Móna's engagement with Mr. Butler's organisation and the adjoining landowners, and the departmental and ministerial engagement. In its opening statement, the ICMSA referenced the fact that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, announced €108 million of taxpayer funding for a rewetting and restoration project. He met workers and Bord na Móna, but did not meet adjoining landowners. I wonder whether that has been corrected and whether there has been any engagement with relevant State bodies, as well as with Bord na Móna, and where improvements can be made.

Mr. Cullinan mentioned issues regarding flooding, which were outlined in some detail by the IFA and ICMSA in their opening statements. We will meet representatives of Bord na Móna later. In his opening statement, Dr. David Wilson cited a definition of "rewetting", stating that "Clearly, in this regard rewetting does not equate to flooding". It would be useful if the organisations present could outline the basis of their concerns regarding the flooding of lands currently in productive use and what needs to be put in place to deal with that.

The issue of turbary rights has been mentioned by those who have been cutting turf on Bord na Móna land for their private use. If there have been discussions on how those rights could be upheld on alternative land or arrangements have been put in place which the witnesses are aware of, I would like to hear about that.

I was interested in Mr. Curley's submission and his remarks on an alternative view to the strategy in place. He said rewetting is not suitable for all bogs. Could he go into a little more detail as to the alternatives? Are there any signs from the Department or Bord na Móna that they are willing to consider alternative uses of land for carbon sequestration through alternative mechanisms?

This project will be significant in respect of our climate obligations. Taxpayers will invest substantial funding. In the most recent round, €108 million of taxpayers' money was allocated to the restoration project. Bord na Móna, a semi-State company, is putting in another €18 million. By any account, that will likely be followed with further investment. That is a lot of money on behalf of the taxpayer. There needs to be full accountability and transparency on how decisions are made and full engagement with people who are affected by these decisions.

As this committee examines that issue, we need to be definitive in regard to ownership. The land and the projects that benefit from funding need to remain the responsibility of the State. Bord na Móna cannot decide at any point in the medium to long term that it is going to walk away and pass this on to other agencies or put it into the hands of some international conglomerate or something of that nature. We need to be very clear in our messaging. If, as a people, we are going to invest this level of funding the stakeholders involved need to be engaged with and the public needs to have assurances that this is being done in the public good, as opposed to there being any interior motive.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I thank the farming organisations for coming before us and giving us their detailed presentations. I come from County Offaly, which is very much the focus of this work. It appears that the process is being rushed and pushed, which causes some concern.

I have been contacted by a number of concerned farmers who feel that the consultation with Bord na Móna was not good from the start. It needs to be more forthcoming in its communications, which need to be lot better. This is a serious issue. Areas in Offaly, in particular west Offaly, are badly affected by flooding as we speak. We do not want more flooding unnecessarily if the process is not carried out properly.

Regarding the risk of flooding to farmland and possible damage to houses and infrastructure nearby, which will cost us money, why is the emphasis being put on bogs to sequester carbon when grassland can also do that? I refer to our forestry crisis. We are not meeting climate change targets. We should plant 8,000 ha per year, as per the programme for Government commitment, but that is not happening. We should not focus on bogs alone, but also on forestry, if we can get the crisis in the sector sorted out quickly. We also need to focus on grassland.

I am concerned about turbary rights. County Offaly depends heavily on turf. As one presentation stated, 38% of its population depends on it. Has any agreement on that issue been reached with Bord na Móna? What progress has been made? It is important that private turf cutters are protected and that a written agreement is also drawn up to protect their rights.

I fully support what all of the groups here are trying to achieve, as outlined in their submissions. I made a submission on this issue because I am concerned about flooding, farmers' rights being trodden on and people being affected. I was glad that the submission date was extended. We need more engagement from Bord na Móna. The process cannot be rushed.

**Mr. Pat McCormack:** I will deal with Deputy Carthy's comments. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, has not engaged significantly with local landowners and the people to whom Deputy Nolan referred.

Deputy Carthy asked about consultation to date. There has been a lot of discussion. We will have a meeting with Bord na Móna tomorrow for further discussions. There have been local meetings with affected people and a list of questions have been put to its representatives. It is to be hoped we will make significant progress on those answers at the meeting tomorrow.

To respond to a point made by Deputy Fitzmaurice, we have received nothing in writing at this point in time. Until the ink dries, nothing has been secured, such as the turf cutting rights for locals Deputy Nolan mentioned. It is absolutely critical that such arrangements are in writing. We need to get commitments on a good code of practice in writing.

Equally, I agree with Deputy Nolan's comment that there is major frustration in some farm families, and that farmers want to put land into forestry but are not in a position to do so at this

point in time. There are a significant number of other ways of meeting our climate obligations and targets, including the management of grassland and plantations of forestry. There will be a combined effort as we move forward, but it is not only farmers that will be affected. Rural dwellers can be significantly affected, a point on which Deputy Nolan touched.

Houses may be flooded, something we have seen time and again in the news. There has been flood after flood in various towns and cities. There is potential that will happen in rural parts of the affected areas. I do not know whether Mr. O'Brien wants to address the frustration at a local level at the engagement and the lack of commitment within that engagement.

**Mr. Tim Cullinan:** Some excellent points have been made. As far as consultation is concerned, we have had a lot of it. We can sign off on agreements next week or the week after, but what is more important is the continuation of engagement. That is what I have heard. This is a major project involving farmers and their livelihoods. They have to be protected. We are not going to do this overnight. This is an ongoing process.

Flooding was mentioned. What Bord na Móna is proposing to achieve here is that there must be growth on the bog, where the peat has been taken out now for years. What we have at the moment is that carbon is being emitted; it is coming up out of the bog into the atmosphere. What it is doing is creating a seal and creating growth in order that the carbon will be sequestered in. It becomes an excellent carbon sink. We all acknowledge where we are. Deputy Carthy made the valid point that a lot of taxpayers' money is being invested here. We must ensure that when this work is completed, this project stays within the State and this carbon is used to offset the carbon within our own country. Where this carbon will be going is something we have to look at in the forestry area as well because we, as farmers, are being blamed. Therefore, it is very important, going forward, that we take account of that carbon and obviously the taxpayers' money being spent here.

Deputy Nolan made valid points about the flooding, draw and particularly lands and farm-lands. I was in County Offaly last year and we saw the effects of flooding from the Shannon. Part of that would have been because of some of the processes in Bord na Móna, where there has been silting in the bed of the Shannon as well, and that has created problems in its own right. I see this as an ongoing engagement. We all know that Bord na Móna will be ceasing the production of peat, briquettes and turf completely but it is in the renewable energy business as well. We want to see the renewable energy industry develop further. Perhaps there has not been huge engagement with farmers on wind turbines. In this project we must get more direct engagement with farmers to develop projects around increasing farmers' income. That is where we must go with this. Deputy Nolan also mentioned forestry. I do not think we are going to waste time on it this evening but it is another issue that is in chaos at present. We want to see the Minister coming out. I know a report came out last week but we have looked at report after report and we want to see progress there as well.

**Mr. Dan Curley:** In answer to Deputy Carthy, we thought the consultation was not good. We sought a meeting with the Minister of State as far back as last July, anticipating this was going to happen and she basically refused to meet us all along. We did meet for a while about three weeks ago on a Zoom call but some of the plans had actually been dealt with, though they did extend the time for submissions. The consultation therefore has not been good, to answer that part of the question.

On the second part - and this is key - there is no ambition to get the scheme back on the bogs and the plants back on the bogs. Rewetting simply will not do that. Rewetting also brings an

awful lot of dangers. The committee has heard about the ones for farmers but there are also water quality dangers. If there is bare peat with water on it and there is a bad flood event, some of that peat is going to end up in the local rivers, it is as simple as that. Rewetting and the unnatural holding back of water is a dangerous game, therefore. When it gets to summer time we might then finish up with a dry, cracked desert because the evaporation will take the water out anyway. We are saying there needs to be a little more ambition in this regard. The only ambition the board and Department seem to have is to re-wet the bogs and hope forlornly that it will all come out right. They need to get in there. Bog obviously stores carbon but one gets the carbon to go in by getting the plants back on it.

Second, these are all natural ecosystems, they are wild areas which everyone is crying out for and as I said earlier, they are also great for pollinator plants. A lot of the bog plants are superb pollinator plants. This is, therefore, a real opportunity to get this right. Deputy Carthy is right that a lot of money is being put in here and it deserves to be spent properly. The board and Department need to look a little bit wider than they are doing and engage. It is down to local people. Local people know their bogs, they know the level of water in the bogs. If they engage properly with them they will get this right, if they do not, this could be one ferocious mess and be one for a long time to come.

**Chairman:** Mr. O'Brien, a farmer from County Offaly, wants to make a few points.

**Mr. Pat O'Brien:** I thank the Chairman. Going back to what Deputy Carthy said, there has perhaps been a degree of negligence by the Ministers involved. That money did not come with terms and conditions. We should not have to be meeting Bord na Móna and looking for this written agreement now. There should have been terms and conditions that it would not impact the adjoining lands. When this land is re-wetted now, after a heavy rainfall, all the rain off that 33,000 ha is going to be heading to a few rivers. At the moment those rivers are not able to take the water that is coming. The bogs at the moment are soaking up that and releasing it slowly but when it is flooded, it is flooded. It will all be heading the same way and the farmland is in the first line. Unless those drains are maintained and it is given in writing farmers will not have confidence. There is fear that we simply will be forgotten.

When the bogs were initially taken over by Bord na Móna, promises were made. There are very few left today who remember those promises. There still are a few but nobody from Bord na Móna who gave those promises is still around and in ten or 20 years' time it will be the same case again. It is not just the people who are going to be affected by this in ten years' time, people will be affected for generations. Generations of work has gone into turning those bogs into working farmland, which produces food. That can all be swept aside in a couple of years. It is therefore vital that written assurances are given and that those drains are maintained, going forward. Mr. Michael Newman, a former employee of the Department, had a very interesting letter published in the *Westmeath Examiner* a couple of weeks back. In it, he referred to the same thing and noted that the majority of the silt in the Shannon has come from those bogs. He said that if the Shannon were cleaned, a lot of the flooding that is going on in the country at present would not be taking place. The cart has been put before the horse here in a rush to get the bogs re-wetted apparently within the term of this Government. The drainage works on the Shannon, the Brosna and all the other rivers should have been done before the rewetting takes place so the water has somewhere to go when it is released from these bogs.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** There are a few points I want to come back to there. From the meeting I had with them, a lot of the bogs at issue were raised bogs once but a lot of the peat would be off them now. We have bogs around us, 3,000 ha that were re-wetted by the NPWS

years ago and to be honest, there has not been a problem, provided it is done right. That is the bottom line. The ecologists I spoke to are talking about putting in sphagnum mosses and all the usual stuff. What surprises me is that under the habitats directive, one must be able to regenerate a bog in say, 30 years, and to be honest I do not think we will get active raised bog habitat flying in those bogs in that length of time. I will add a note for the farming organisations based on my own experience as a turf cutter and contractor, which I am proud of. I walked a lot of the bogs right round the country at the time of the debacle and up in the midlands - Mr. Rushe would know what I am on about here and so would the guys from County Offaly - there is what we call white turf. There is probably 8 ft or 10 ft of it around County Offaly and some parts of County Kildare, which gets very heavy. However, on a lot of Bord na Móna's bogs, much of that has been used. It will be hundreds of years before they come back. If an intact bog in the midlands was to be rewetted, one would need to watch out. I would be afraid that the moisture would cause cracking of the bog and there would be bog slippage. The west of Ireland has more of an Atlantic raised bog. There is only a couple of feet of white turf and then there is brown and black turf, which is a totally different ball game.

Another thing I would say to Mr. Cullinan and to Mr. McCormack, which was raised earlier, is that there should be a national agreement with everything included. Local committees were mentioned as probably the best way to feed into that. This agreement needs to be made very clear. In fairness, 10,000 or 15,000 ha have been done so far and there have not been any problems. However, the one thing that needs to be made very clear by the farming organisations, and politicians will stand very solidly beside them, is that before any of this goes ahead, the agreement will be guaranteed in black and white. This agreement is not just for now but for 20, 40 and 60 years' time. If it is not guaranteed, farmers will not co-operate and it will not be done on the bogs. The farmers will stand up in each community. While this cannot be done at the moment, there is no reason it could not be done when Covid is over. I saw it before when people had to stand up and be counted. The farming community needs to say to Bord na Móna that there is an agreement, it has to be signed up to and farmers have to be protected. They are just a few things to watch out for, based on my experience of rewetting bogs ten or 15 years ago.

**Chairman:** We are near our time limit. Deputies Carthy and Browne have indicated. I ask them to be brief as Mr. Rushe wishes to reply.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Perhaps Mr. Rushe, Mr. Cullinane or some of the representatives from the ICMSA might be able to answer. This committee discussed the issue of horticultural peat, access to it and, in the context of the working group, the potential challenges if the cultivation of horticultural peat ceases in the next number of years. Have the farming organisation representatives assessed the implications of such a move, were it to happen, for their own members or for other farmers? Peat is used for many things, including bedding, and it has central role in sectors such as the mushroom sector, with which I am familiar. Have the farming organisations carried out assessments on the effect the ban on the cultivation of horticultural peat would have on their members? Do they consider it a sensible proposition to cease cultivating peat in Ireland in order to import it from elsewhere in the world?

**Deputy Martin Browne:** Deputy Carthy raised one of my issues. I raised another issue earlier but I do not think it was answered. Have Bord na Móna or the Department given any indication that they will set up local working groups? It seems from this meeting and from all the reports that everybody is in agreement that setting up local working groups is the way to take this forward. Have Bord na Móna or the Department at any stage given an indication they will do that to keep local farmers involved? This will ensure that we are not back in six or 12

months' time saying that there is no communication with the Department.

**Mr. Brian Rushe:** As mentioned, the long-term vision has to be that Bord na Móna will remain in these communities. We will continue to engage, liaise, act and speak on farmers' behalf around this piece. However, one of the key pillars of this is that Bord na Móna remains. We are in it for the long term and it should be in it for the long term. I agree with the earlier point about the money, work, effort and time that farmers put in over generations to manage, maintain and make unworkable land into fertile farmland. We are dealing with the best of productive land and that has to be protected.

We also need to keep an open mind. If Bord na Móna proves the levels of carbon that can be sequestered on peatlands, is there an opportunity for farmers in those areas to do some of that themselves? I am not talking about using all their land, but portions of it if there is potential. We have to keep an open mind, particularly in the vulnerable sectors, about alternative income streams. That is something farmers have made very clear to us.

On Deputy Carthy's question about horticultural peat, it is absolute madness what could happen. I live beside Timahoe bog, which is due to be rewetted. There are many nurseries there that use horticultural peat, which was available following a ten-minute drive up the road. Those nurseries are now pricing container loads of horticultural peat from Lithuania. That is what we are looking at and it makes no sense. It will have huge implications for a sector that we all agree we would like to see grow. It is a solid, profitable sector.

On the working groups, there is a liaison officer on the ground. Covid is not an excuse not to actively and continuously engage with farmers on the ground. We have proved that we can use Zoom and Team. This is an opportunity for Bord na Móna and it is important it takes it up.

**Mr. Pat McCormack:** I will be brief. Deputy Fitzmaurice talked about a national agreement with local committees. I always dread the term "local committee". I would like to see a local steering group. There are liaison officers and field officers out there but they are no substitute for stakeholders having the opportunity to express their views around the table. Covid will not last forever and organisations and groups at local level can get in and steer it from a local level. As my colleague, Mr. O'Brien, put it, farm families have worked very hard improving land and all that good work could be cleared in a very short space of time.

As regards Deputy Carthy's question on horticultural peat, it has been a serious alternative to straw for animal bedding. It is compliant, to the highest standards, from an animal welfare point of view. The decline in the tillage area farmed in this country is of huge concern, as is the effect on local nurseries mentioned by Mr. Rushe. Ultimately, different stakeholders will be there for the long term. Some farm families were in the affected areas pre-Bord na Móna and they will, hopefully, be there after Bord na Móna. What happens regarding land wetting will have a critical impact on whether they will or will not be there.

Senator Daly asked a question earlier on incorporating farmland. Those farmers have no desire to see their land go into wetting. They want to farm their land, live a simple life and make ends meet for their families. The stakeholders who will be there the longest are the farm families, subject to being respected in the months ahead. We will certainly continue to liaise with anyone who wishes to do so, whether it is the landowners, a significant proportion of whom are our members, or the various local representatives. Any Minister who wants to chat to us is more than welcome to sit down with us, as is Bord na Móna. As Deputy Fitzmaurice said, the ink needs to dry. We need to get commitments for the years and generations ahead.

**Chairman:** The last comment will be from Mr. Cullinan.

**Mr. Tim Cullinan:** I will clarify an issue on horticulture raised by Deputy Carthy. We liaise daily with people in that sector and in the mushroom sector. We have looked at it. It is important to say there is a group of people that can harvest up to 30 ha of peat without having to get a licence. It is very important that the message goes back to the Government that those people should be allowed to continue doing what they are doing. They can provide enough peat for both the mushroom and horse sectors. We do not want a situation in which they end up in a quagmire, as we have seen in the licensing of forestry. That is very important.

Deputy Martin Browne mentioned local working groups. Our deputy president has been engaging for over a year. We have a working group with Bord na Móna. There is no point in coming out of this with a negative mindset. If this is done properly, we have a huge opportunity with CO2. I cannot stress that enough. If Bord na Móna is sequestering in the bog; the farmers in the local area are more than willing and able to do similar. It is about another farm income. We have to look out for farmers and ensure land is not damaged or flooded but whatever is happening in this process, we have to see if we can get an income for farmers out of this. There were an awful lot of farmers in that region who would have been working in Bord na Móna as well and they are losing their jobs. We all have to strive to get an extra income for those farmers as well.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** Horticultural peat was not on the agenda for today. We discussed it in previous meetings but seen as it has been brought up, I want to say we are all supportive of the horticultural sector. Nobody wants to be importing peat from Lithuania. The reason it is not being harvested is because of a court case in 2019 that put an end to it and a working group has been set up by the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Noonan, to resolve the issue in short order. I understand that group will report back at the end of April or thereabouts. It is important to put that on the record.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I want to straighten out one matter for the record. Deputy Carthy was behind me last Thursday when the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications stated that we would be importing horticultural peat rather than harvesting it. Am I right Deputy Carthy? We need clarification from the Green Party one way or the other on what will be done.

**Chairman:** We are not going to get into a political debate. We are here to talk about the rewetting of bogs. On behalf of the committee I thank the representatives from the IFA, the ICMSA and the National Association of Regional Game Councils for engaging with us on this important issue today. This is important for the farmers adjoining Bord na Móna bogs. The committee will suspend for two minutes to allow time for other witnesses to join us.

*Sitting suspended at 5.23 p.m. and resumed at 5.25 p.m.*

**Chairman:** I would like to welcome Dr. David Wilson of Earthly Matters environmental consultants, who is appearing remotely. In organising this meeting, the committee agreed to invite an expert on the rewetting of peatlands to give the environmental perspective on the topic. Unfortunately, our time is limited due to Covid-19 restrictions so there is not enough time for a full question and answer session but Dr. Wilson's briefing will inform the committee's engagement with Bord na Móna officials in the next session.

Before we begin, I will outline an important notice regarding parliamentary privilege. Wit-

nesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Participants in the meeting from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within the parliamentary precincts do not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or the extent to which, their participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

**Dr. David Wilson:** I thank the Chairman for the invitation. Will I read out my submission statement?

**Chairman:** We would like Dr. Wilson to give us a briefing on the environmental benefits he sees in the rewetting of bogs so I invite him to do so in whatever way he sees as being most beneficial.

**Dr. David Wilson:** In Ireland, peat soils cover approximately 1.46 million ha or 21% of the land surface and store approximately 2.3 billion tonnes of carbon. Undrained peatlands are net carbon sinks, as the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> sequestered from the atmosphere by the peatland is greater than the amount of methane emitted by the peatland, and the amount of carbon released into streams and rivers. However, the vast majority of peatlands in Ireland have been drained, either for turf cutting, energy production, horticulture, agriculture or forestry. In each case, the fundamental goal of drainage is to lower the water level within the soil to facilitate the movement of machinery across the peat, for the grazing of livestock, and the growth of plant species, such as agricultural grasses and trees, which do not thrive under water-saturated conditions. Drainage results in considerable changes in many aspects of the peatland. For carbon dynamics, the lowering of the water level increases the oxygen content of the peat, which stimulates microbial decomposition of the organic matter and the release of the carbon contained therein. Studies in Ireland and abroad have shown that drained peatlands are a net CO<sub>2</sub> source, emit less methane than undrained sites and release more carbon to adjacent water bodies than undrained sites.

In Ireland's national inventory report, NIR, 2020, greenhouse gas emissions from the estimated 330,000 ha of drained grassland on organic peat soils under the land use, land use change and forestry, LULUCF, sector are reported at 8.3 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent. Recent work by Teagasc, however, indicates that the area of grassland on drained peat soils could be 450,000 ha, which would suggest that emissions from this land-use category may be currently underestimated by 3 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent.

Industrial peat extraction areas are a persistent source of CO<sub>2</sub> for as long as the drains or water pumping, or both, remain in operation. Work in Ireland and the UK indicates that drained, cutaway and cutover sites emit approximately 6 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per hectare every year. Moreover, while methane emissions may decrease from the main peat extraction areas, carbon loading on adjacent water bodies is significantly increased. In NIR 2020, emissions from peat extraction areas are reported at 1.15 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent. However, this is likely to be a gross underestimation as the areas impacted by domestic turf cutting are nominally estimated in the report at only 400 ha, due to the absence of high-resolution land use data. In NIR 2020, forestry on organic soils under LULUCF is reported as a sink of 1.88 million tonnes on 450,000 ha. Recent data, however, suggest that the default soil emission factor used in the

models may be unrealistic and that soil emissions from the forest stand may be much higher, in which case forestry on peat could switch from acting as a net CO<sub>2</sub> sink to a net CO<sub>2</sub> source.

In addition to having a deleterious impact on climate forcing, peatland drainage also results in the release of aquatic organic carbon, nitrates, ammonium, loss of flood control and water storage capacity, and an increased risk of fires. Recent research has also highlighted the presence of trihalomethanes, potential carcinogens, in the waters located in peat catchments.

Rewetting of peat soils has been suggested as an important climate change mitigation tool to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, create suitable conditions for carbon sequestration, stimulate biodiversity and improve water quality. How do we define rewetting? The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's wetlands supplement describes it as "the deliberate action of raising the water table on drained soils to re-establish water saturated conditions, for example, by blocking drainage ditches or disabling pumping facilities, and managing the water table so that it remains close to the surface".

Clearly, in this regard, rewetting does not equate to flooding. Rewetting is achieved through a suite of management actions that are tailored to the site in question. The principal method is to block the drains, which involves stopping or slowing the flow of water along the drain. Alternative dam materials include plastic sheets and wood, while coconut fibre logs have been used on some peatland sites to reduce the overground lateral flow of the water. On some sites, a berm is installed at the edge of the site to prevent water from leaving, while on others a compartmental approach is employed to hold rainfall on the site.

Peatland rewetting can have several objectives, such as restoration, which aims to establish a functioning peatland ecosystem, although rewetting can also allow other management practices, such as paludiculture, or wet agriculture, to take place on the saturated peat soils. In Ireland, peatland rewetting has focused mainly on cutaway and cutover sites, with a smaller quantity of former forest lands also rewetted under various EU-funded projects. From a carbon and climate point of view, the aim is to establish a water level where greenhouse gas emissions are reduced, CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration resumes and methane emissions are minimised.

Studies have shown the optimal water level to be between 10 cm and 15 cm below the soil surface, although it must be maintained at that level as much as possible throughout the year, and particularly during the growing season, to minimise soil emissions. On sites where greenhouse gases have been monitored, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are significantly reduced following rewetting, and in many instances the rewetted site can quickly become a CO<sub>2</sub> sink once more, in tandem with the re-establishment of suitable plant communities. However, a wide range of greenhouse gas values have been reported for rewetted peatlands, largely driven by differences between climate zones and peatland nutrient status.

My experience of working on Bord na Móna rewetted cutaway bogs over the past 20 years has been that for the majority of these sites, the flooding of adjacent lands has not been an issue, an experience in agreement with the community living around Abbeyleix bog, for example. Issues might exist, however, for those areas around the River Shannon where industrial extraction was previously facilitated by the active pumping of drainage water and where flooding, as opposed to rewetting, may be a problem when the pumps are switched off. For cutover sites, rewetting of drained special area of conservation, SAC, sites has been carried out mainly by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, which has rewetted, or is in the process of rewetting, 50,000 ha of raised bogs.

The NPWS places considerable emphasis on developing site-specific drainage management plans that utilise aerial imagery, ground surveys and hydrological modelling and monitoring. It actively engages with landowners and farmers and provides compensation when required. To ensure that the water remains on the target area on all rewetted raised bog sites, the marginal drain is generally retained, although it can be blocked if the adjacent landowner is in agreement. Technical implementations include the construction of berms or bunds to hold back water, while on some sites the installation of outfalls and weirs even permit a degree of control of the water level.

The momentum for peatland rewetting is clearly increasing. The peatlands climate action scheme, launched in November 2020, initially targets 33,000 ha for rewetting on more than 80 Bord na Móna bogs. Under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Ag Climatise roadmap, released in December 2020, at least 40,000 ha of drained grassland on peat soils has been targeted for rewetting. Rewetting of these soils is interesting as it has not been widely implemented in this country, although it has been carried out in other jurisdictions. In contrast to cutover and cutaway sites, where there is an emphasis on restoration to a functioning peatland ecosystem, with a desire to bring back characteristic peatland flora and fauna, rewetting of drained grassland sites offers the opportunity to target solely a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. To date, only one study in Ireland has evaluated the potential for greenhouse gas emission reductions in this land use category and showed that carbon dioxide sequestration and minimal methane emissions could be achieved even at water levels down to 25 cm in depth.

The Ag Climatise roadmap also identifies the requirement to identify the drainage status of this land use category to reduce carbon losses through water table management. This is critical to determine accurately the area of drained soils; the differentiation between deep drained and shallow drained soils; nutrient status, as greenhouse gas emissions from drained nutrient-rich fen peats are considerably higher than emissions from drained nutrient-poor peats; and the area of rewetted soils, to ensure that Ireland can avail of greenhouse gas emission reductions in future national inventory reporting.

A new Teagasc project will address some of the uncertainties associated with the rewetting of grasslands and enable Ireland to benefit from the 2018 EU effort sharing regulation. The experience of farmers, landowners and organisations such as the community wetlands forum that will participate in the new European innovation partnerships announced by the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, on 12 February 2021, will be highly informative and build on the outstanding work carried out by ongoing farmer-orientated projects, such as the Burren Life, pearl mussel and hen harrier projects. These will provide an important platform to evaluate the potential of transitioning from current conventional practices to new carbon farming models.

**Chairman:** That was a very knowledgeable briefing for the committee on the benefits of rewetting. I thank Dr. Wilson.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** I thank Dr. Wilson for his briefing, which was very interesting. We are all more knowledgeable as a result. I wish to ask about forestry and peat. Will Dr. Wilson talk a bit more about the potential effect of net CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from forestry on peat soils? He might address whether work is being done on clarifying the soil emission factors used.

**Dr. David Wilson:** Forestry on organic and peat soils has long been contentious. In our NIR reporting, we report it at a tier 3 level, the highest level possible, which means it is based on country-specific data and is at a high level of accuracy. There has long been a thought that the soil emission pool in that model has been unrealistic. It is cited at 0.59 tonnes, whereas

relevant data from nearby sites suggest it should be at least 1 tonne, if not 2 tonnes, higher than that. If that is factored into the model, it would flip the forestry sector on organic soils from being a net CO<sub>2</sub> sink to being a net CO<sub>2</sub> source. A large proportion of the new data are based on work from the University of Limerick, where soil CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were quantified from eight forestry sites. A new emission factor was developed and has been submitted for review in a peer review journal. It confirmed what many of us had acknowledged and noted over the past ten or 20 years, namely, that emissions from drained peat are higher than the initial emission factor of 0.59 tonnes that was used in the model. This is, of course, problematic for the Bord na Móna sites that are coming into availability. If they cannot be rewetted, what can we do with them? Should we plant trees? Now the data would suggest that they will continue to remain a CO<sub>2</sub> sink even if they are forested. That will have to be addressed with further study.

**Chairman:** A number of members have indicated they wish to ask Dr. Wilson questions. I ask them to be mindful that Bord na Móna officials are also due to appear. I am in the hands of members but I do not want them screaming at me that they do not have enough time to speak to the Bord na Móna officials.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank Dr. Wilson for his submission. I come from an area where the National Parks and Wildlife Service rewetted a bog. What is the tonnage of carbon sequestered on 1 ha of rewetted bog. Studies conducted by the service show that the active raised bog habitat of this bog grew by 45%, even though turf was cut on the edge of the bog. I want to hear the tonnage so that people will understand the value of the carbon they are sequestering, for which they probably get nothing.

I ask Dr. Wilson to elaborate on his comment that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in December 2020 earmarked 30,000 ha of grassland for rewetting. Let us say that in Listowel there are dairy cows on grass that has been grown on a reclaimed bog. Is Dr. Wilson saying that grass is not sequestering carbon? Is he saying the Department is targeting 30,000 ha of that type of land for rewetting? Perhaps I have misunderstood.

I have worked with Dr. Ray Flynn, with whom I am sure Dr. Wilson is familiar, and Francis Mackin and others in RPS. Works are being done on degraded raised bog around the country under the habitats directive. Dr. Flynn and RPS stated that we had to look at the regeneration of bogs over a 30-year period. Is that what Dr. Wilson is looking at in the Bord na Móna set-up? I think regeneration of Bord na Móna bogs will take longer because the company took the top off the bogs.

I welcome Dr. Wilson's statement, going by the figures he gave, that domestic turf cutters with nominally 400 ha are inconsequential in the whole scenario.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** In recognition of the time limit I will ask just one of my questions and perhaps we could be facilitated with the option of submitting written questions.

Dr. Wilson noted that rewetting of bogs on the scale we are talking about has not been widely implemented in this jurisdiction, although it has been carried out in other jurisdictions. Reviewing his citations, it appears that all of the other sites are exclusively in Germany. Have countries other than Germany attempted a rewetting programme of this type and scale? Can he point us to reports on the outworkings of any such programme?

**Dr. David Wilson:** I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice for his questions. In regard to how much carbon will be taken in, we know that 6 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> is released into drains. Rewet-

ting, if done successfully and maintained over the year, will shut that down. We will, therefore, make avoided losses or saving 6 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. If we can get the right plant communities in and maintain the water, we can flip the system so it becomes a sink. The numbers vary and I am not being vague but it will depend on the sites. If we can get a good site that remains wet, we can certainly look for anything between 0.5 and 1.5 tonnes of carbon - not CO<sub>2</sub> - per hectare per year, which is not nothing, as they say. It is a sizeable amount. If we were moving towards a system where we have recreated the functions of the peatlands that resemble a natural or undrained site, that figure would lower the amount to something like 0.3 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> carbon. Initially, when rewetting starts the system becomes very vigorous whereby a lot of carbon goes in and new plants come in. So one is looking at anything between 0.5 to 1.5 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> carbon, not CO<sub>2</sub>. One must multiply the amount by 3.66 to get the amount of CO<sub>2</sub>. One has made the savings of 6 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> and then one has the addition of the sequestration, provided the site remains wet, particularly during the summer months.

On the second question, the Department has identified at least 40,000 ha of grassland on organic soils. The point is that because it is on organic soils it is not sequestering but releasing carbon. That is reflected in our submissions to the national inventory reporting 8 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. It is not sequestering carbon. If it was mineral soil then, there might be a small amount of carbon sequestered by the mineral soil or grassland.

The Deputy's third question was on whether a 30-year period is used by Bord na Móna. That is a number used to give us a chance to flip the system so we are not expecting results immediately. What we are finding in terms of greenhouse gas emissions is that if rewetting is done successfully and maintained, the system flips back quite quickly. Methane emissions are always an issue in the early years because a lot of organic matter has been created for the microbes to work on, the bog has been rewetted and there is no oxygen in the system and there is, therefore, a flush and spike of methane in the early years. The thinking, and it is only thinking, is that in 30 years that methane spike will have cleared itself and the system will be more akin to a natural site in that it will take in a small amount of CO<sub>2</sub> every year but only releases a small amount of methane. A 30-year period probably reflects that but nobody really knows. We do not have many long-term rewetting sites, certainly not in Ireland, where we can go in and identify what happens in terms of the greenhouse gas dynamics. To me, 30 years sounds reasonable and is not totally short term. If we are looking very long term, we would be looking at hundreds of years. I agree with Dr. Flynn that 30 years is something we could look at and work with.

The Deputy's described turf cutting as inconsequential. It is inconsequential only because the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, does not know what is out there. When the EPA gets a better handle on what is out there and how much it is affected, the 400 ha figure will increase, possibly by a large amount. This will be dependent on better land use mapping and better use of remote sensing data. I am sorry to tell the Deputy that turf cutting is not inconsequential.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I think it is.

**Dr. David Wilson:** Deputy Carthy asked about grassland. Yes, this is new to us. It is something we have not engaged in here. The Germans and Dutch have been working on it but they came at it from a different point. Their sites were extraordinarily high greenhouse gas emitters because of the amount of nutrients and fertilisers that had gone into them before they were rewetted. They were very high emitters so there was an impetus to rewet. The benefits from rewetting in Germany and the Netherlands were very high because the emissions were so high beforehand.

**Chairman:** We have 25 minutes left for Bord na Móna officials. If Senator Daly and Deputy Browne want to ask Dr. Wilson a question, I will permit it but it will eat into Bord na Móna's time. I will leave it up to them. I will let them in first with Bord na Móna. Dr. Wilson has a lot of interesting information. It is up to the members but we will be caught for time with Bord na Móna.

**Senator Paul Daly:** I appreciate the Chairman's position and with the greatest respect to Dr. Wilson, it is important that we get at least 25 minutes with Bord na Móna.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I have two quick questions. I refer to rewetting and the impact on adjacent lands. Dr. Wilson made reference to the community living in Abbeyleix where flooding of lands has not happened, but at the same time he admits that there are issues surrounding the Shannon area where industrial extraction has taken place. Can he offer any solutions to those communities? What engagement has he had with the communities and landowners? What suggestions of theirs has he taken on board?

Second, rewetting is not suitable for every area. We all accept that. What plans are in place to carry out other rehabilitation works? I ask Dr. Wilson to address the issue of methane. Is rewetting is effective enough in its production?

**Dr. David Wilson:** Regarding Abbeyleix versus Shannon, the Abbeyleix project, for want of a better word, seems to be a role model for what can be achieved by working with a community rather than knocking heads against it. There could be much to learn from the experience of the community in Abbeyleix. I cannot offer any solutions on the flooded areas. I can only say that from a greenhouse gas and climate point of view, it is not something we would like to see either. Flooding is not of benefit for greenhouse gas removals because there are no plant communities to pull in CO<sub>2</sub>, and methane and CO<sub>2</sub> are released from the water bodies that are flooded. It is certainly not something we would like to see in terms of climate mitigation. In fact, it would only exacerbate the climate issues.

As regards methane, the Deputy is right about rewetting being site-specific. There are some sites that will never be re-wetted and cannot physically be re-wetted, such as sites that are on slopes. Some of the sites in the midlands may be problematic as, according to projected climate change, the summers are predicted to be drier. There will be less rain and the sites may dry out. For some of the work we have carried out, that would be extremely problematic because the sites that were previously Bord na Móna sites are nutrient rich and are likely to be high CO<sub>2</sub> emitters. If rewetting is not maintained during the summer, they will continue to remain CO<sub>2</sub> emitters even though they have ostensibly been re-wetted. They are problematic and from that point of view the rewetting issue is site-specific.

Methane is something we just have to live with. It is part and parcel of the rewetting package and as I mentioned earlier, the hope is that after the initial years of rewetting the methane spike will decline, in which case the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> taken in by the site will compensate for the loss of methane that occurs immediately after the rewetting.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Wilson. We could have had a prolonged discussion with him. He had a very informative briefing for us. We will suspend for a few minutes to allow other witnesses to join the call.

*Sitting suspended at 5.54 p.m. and resumed at 5.55 p.m.*

**Chairman:** From Bord na Móna, I welcome Mr. Ger Breen, head of land and habitats; Dr.

John MacNamara, regulatory affairs manager, Mr. Mark McCorry, rehab and biodiversity lead; and Ms Doreen King, project manager of the peatlands climate action scheme. All witnesses are appearing remotely. We have received their opening statement which has been circulated to members. We are limited in our time due to Covid-19 safety restrictions and so the committee has agreed that opening statements be taken as read in order that we can make full use of the session for questions and answers.

I have an important note regarding parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Participants in the meeting from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within the parliamentary precincts do not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or the extent to which, their participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

We had stakeholders at this meeting earlier and this is a major project. The view is that it cannot be hurried or rushed. There has to be buy-in from the adjoining landowners and above all, a written agreement that will stand the test of time has to be put in place. All members have individual questions for the witnesses. I will let Senator Daly in first as he accommodated me in the previous session.

**Senator Paul Daly:** I have a few quick-fire questions. I will not get into statements because I am conscious of the time constraints and it is vitally important that we have this interaction. I will accept my questions being answered with other questions. What commitment is Bord na Móna giving to do hydrological assessments in the areas it is proposing to wet in conjunction with neighbouring farmers? What commitments is it giving to maintain the drainage for neighbouring farmers in order that it will not cause them flooding? What commitments is it giving for maintenance going forward, once the bogs are re-wetted? How does it propose to control water levels in bogs? I am from County Westmeath and I am familiar with bogland that is mairning farmland. Once a project is complete and the water is at a certain level within a bog and we get prolonged torrential rain, how does Bord na Móna propose to control the level of the area it intends to flood so it will not end up flooding the entire surrounding areas? We have received much feedback from the stakeholders we have met and I have heard a lot commercially about the lack of engagement and communication Bord na Móna is having with communities. The neighbouring farmers aside, there is the potential here for flooding which would change the biodiversity and the layout and maybe even create safety concerns for parents in broader areas. Bord na Móna does not seem to have had much communication with the broader communities. I ask the witnesses to comment on that.

**Chairman:** I will just let in Deputy Carthy and then I will go back to the Bord na Móna officials.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank our guests. To follow on from Senator Daly's point, I ask for a comprehensive view of the level of engagement Bord na Móna has had with landowners and other affected parties, including the organisations we met before this. A number of questions have been raised by farming organisations about farm safety and other potential outworkings of the rewetting of their land. I would be interested to see if Bord na Móna could give some

form of clarification on the supports that would be in place for farmers who have concerns in that regard.

The focus of a number of submissions and discussions in this area have been on trying to get some form of assurance on flooding. One of the potential problems that arises from flooding, apart from the very obvious one, is that it could affect land use designation. The witnesses will be aware of the land around Lough Funshinagh where the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has issued penalties to single farm payments. It would be a gesture of goodwill for Bord na Móna to give an undertaking to underwrite farm payments in the case of payments being impacted due to permanent damage to farmland as a result of the proposed works. Could the witnesses give such an assurance today?

Given the presence of Bord na Móna, I wish to ask two peripheral questions. I seek an opinion based on the expertise of the witnesses on turf cutting and peat extraction under the current rules.

**Chairman:** We are going to stick to the rewetting of bogs as we are short of time. If we need to bring in Bord na Móna on another subject, we will do that.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** It would only require a very quick response.

**Chairman:** I will let Deputy Carthy ask his question and we might get the response in writing.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has confirmed that people do not need to worry about smaller-scale turf cutting on private bogs. I would like to get the view of Bord na Móna on an issue. Does a bog under 30 ha relate to a single congruent bog or could it be part of another bog 10 km or more away?

**Chairman:** I will go to the officials now to see whoever wants to respond to the questions from Senator Daly and Deputy Carthy.

**Mr. Ger Breen:** I thank the committee for providing the opportunity to Bord na Móna to attend this session of the Oireachtas joint committee. Before I answer the questions, I will address why we are doing rehabilitation. As has been mentioned by many public representatives, Ireland has ambitious carbon emission reduction targets by 2030. Due to the permanent ending of peat production and the rehabilitation of 33,000 ha, we will play a significant part in Ireland's climate action programme in the coming years. We will move from being a carbon source to a carbon store and eventually to becoming a carbon sink.

The peatlands rehabilitation of Bord na Móna lands and other land is a key pillar of Bord na Móna's brown to green strategy, as we eliminate our dependence on fossil fuels and redirect our efforts to investment in renewable energy, recycling operations and low-carbon business operations. On other lands, we work with the NPWS on rehabilitation. We will create employment for approximately 350 employees in Bord na Móna in the coming years.

As Bord na Móna has been managing the peatlands in Ireland for approximately 90 years, we have a lot of experience of peatland management, initially starting with the drainage infrastructure. We have more than 30 years of experience of peatlands rehabilitation, as referred to by previous contributors. We have a lot of experience in this area. We know this is a major project and we have been engaged in significant consultation with a number of parties in recent months. All of the farming communities have acknowledged that we have been engaging with

them. When we talk about rehabilitation, it is important to understand what we mean by the rewetting of peatlands as opposed to the flooding of the peatlands. I will call on my colleague, Ms King, to outline what we mean by the drainage of the peatlands, what part of a bog will be impacted, and how we leave the outer part of the bog, especially the outer drain, open to ensure that we can reduce the risk of flooding on adjoining lands.

**Ms Doreen King:** I thank the committee members. We issued a graphic and if it is available, I will refer members to it to describe our proposals. When Bord na Móna started peat production, it excavated drains. The purpose of the drains was to remove the water off the bog quickly. The production fields between those drains were cambered, so there was a high point, the water flowed into the drains and then was removed from the bog. That was in order that we could produce peat because the water would have impeded that.

What we are doing now is trying to revert to the original state of the bogs. We are trying to hold the water on the bog and to delay the run-off of the water. We are trying to get the water to the surface of the bog. We are not trying to flood the bogs. Dr. McCorry will be able to explain from an ecology point of view the benefits of having the water on the surface. We are putting in a series of peat dams. We block the production drains. If members look on their graphic, they can see the faint lines in the first slide. They are the production drains in the bogs that were excavated by Bord na Móna 40 or 50 years ago. They are the drains that we will be blocking. There will be frequent blocks in the drains. We will be levelling the fields so they are flat and consequently, the rain that falls on the bogs will sit on the fields for longer rather than disappearing off the bogs as quickly as it would have.

Any of the main drains that are around the perimeter of the bog or drains that flow through the bog to provide drainage to land upstream will not be blocked in order that there will not be an impact on adjoining land. In response to a question from Senator Daly, we have appointed hydrologists as external consultants to carry out an assessment on every bog. They are assessing the impact of the rewetting proposals on adjoining land and they are advising mitigation measures to prevent any impact. They will identify if there is land that may be vulnerable. If that is the case, we will provide a boundary drain and if we have to, we will pull back our rehabilitation from that area to ensure that we do not impact on adjoining land. Bord na Móna does not want to cause any impacts to farmers and we do not intend to cause any impacts to farmers. That is why we have the external hydrologists advising us in that regard.

If members look at the graph, they can see the blue line on the second slide. This is a bog in County Tipperary. The red dots are the drain blocks that were installed in all those drains. We are trying to retain the water in the centre of the bog and trying to delay the water leaving the bog. If there is a severe rainfall event, the water will be slower to leave the bog because it will not have a drainage system in the centre of the bog to get rid of it. We are maintaining the drainage system around the edge of the bog, so as the water levels rise in the bog, once they get to the edge that drainage system will still carry the water in the way it always would have. We can see there is fertile land around the bog and it will not be impacted by our plan. I hope that explains the drainage system.

**Mr. Ger Breen:** I will come back to a question asked by Senator Daly on what we mean by rewetting. It is very important for the committee members to understand what we mean by rewetting as opposed to flooding. Given that Ms King outlined the drainage plans, perhaps Dr. McCorry could expand on the definition of rewetting.

**Dr. Mark McCorry:** On the question of rewetting, the Bord na Móna definition is very

much aligned with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's definition outlined by Dr. Wilson. It is really about trying to bring the water levels back to the surface of the peat. Regarding what we are trying to do with rehabilitation, we are trying to stabilise the water levels at the surface of the peat to create soggy peatland conditions. If we can keep those conditions relatively stable during the year, we are going to reduce carbon emissions significantly. Obviously, we are going to rewet the residual peat in the ground and maintain it in the ground. This will also encourage natural colonisation of vegetation. Mr. Curley referred to putting the skin back on the bog. That is very much aligned with what we wish to do in terms of peatland rehabilitation. Our approach is to try to rewet the peat because our 40 years' experience of peatland rehabilitation tells us that rewetting the peat encourages and accelerates natural colonisation such that we get that skin coming back. As an ecologist, I want to see the bog cotton and the bog mosses appearing. In particular, where possible, we do not wish to see indicators of drier conditions in the context of trees and so on.

If we do not carry out this rehabilitation or rewet the peatland, we will have continued carbon emissions from these bogs and will see continued erosion of peat and faster movement of water through the drains. The rewetting is a very important and ambitious project in the context of Ireland's climate action objectives. It will be very significant in that regard. The project is very much about supporting the Government's climate action strategy. It will have other benefits in the context of other ecosystem services. In terms of biodiversity, it will create new habitats for the various species that depend on peatlands. It will be very important for water attenuation and so on.

Another very important point that has been made during this session is that each bog is different. In Bord na Móna, we have a wide range of environmental conditions. On the issue of rewetting, while we would like to restore bog where possible, that will not be possible for many bogs where the majority of the peat has been cut away. In such situations, the best outcomes are to try to develop other habitats. Our objective in that regard is to rewet the peat but look for emerging vegetation. We will see a mosaic of wetlands and bog woodland in those situations, particularly where there are different environmental conditions.

I hope that summarises what rewetting means. I reiterate that Bord na Móna has been doing this for approximately 30 years. I am sure many members are familiar with the Lough Boora Discovery Park, for example. We have carried out a significant of rewetting there with no significant issues for neighbouring landowners.

**Chairman:** We will move to Deputy Fitzmaurice, then Deputy Martin Browne and Deputy Guirke, who has been in attendance since the start of the meeting. We are under pressure for time.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** To clarify, is the Chairman saying we are not to discuss milled peat or turf cutting on Bord na Móna grounds? I know Deputy Guirke wants to speak on that issue. Are members to stay away from those issues today? Can we bring in a representative of Bord na Móna to discuss those issues on another day?

**Chairman:** If we need another meeting with Bord na Móna, we will organise that but we will stay with the issue of rewetting today.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I want to make it clear that we badly need a meeting on that issue to be held rapidly. I thank the representatives of Bord na Móna. I met them a week ago and I spoke to Ms King. Mr. Breen referred to reducing the risk to adjoining farms. It is about

eliminating risk. I understand rewetting. It has been done for 15 years near me and it is okay. I have one simple question. Is Bord na Móna prepared to sit down with the farming organisations and prepare a written agreement to give certainty that when the rewetting and all the other work has been done, the boundary drains or the drains between Bord na Móna property and farmers' land will be protected and maintained by Bord na Móna? Is it prepared to enter a written agreement regarding pumps that are saving land? Those are the only questions I have because they will solve everything fairly quickly.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** My questions are not directly on the issue of rewetting so, if the Chairman does not mind, I will let in Deputy Guirke, who has been waiting to ask questions.

**Chairman:** That is okay. I call Deputy Guirke.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** I thank the Chairman for letting me in. While I am not a member of the committee, I would like to ask a quick question. The witnesses do not have to answer it today. I would appreciate if they could send me an answer in the coming week or whatever. In my area of Delvin we have the Lisclogher bog which covers Ballivor, Delvin, Raharney and surrounding areas. Many people living there have relied solely on turf cutting for many years. There are 300 families that depend on that turf cutting every year. Will the contractor have permission to cut turf on Lisclogher bog in Delvin this year? Can the representatives of Bord na Móna confirm that if this turf cutting is to be phased out, that will be done over a lengthy time span rather than just pulling the rug out from under these families straight away? It is still the cheapest way for many families and individuals to heat their homes. Will the contractor be allowed to cut turf on Lisclogher bog this year? For many years, the contractor has cut turf on that bog and then sold it to these 300 families. I thank the Chairman for letting me in.

**Chairman:** I said that this meeting is solely concerned with the rewetting of bogs. I ask the witnesses to answer Deputy Guirke's question in writing.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** There is another issue to be considered if the committee is going to bring in other representatives of Bord na Móna. Many farmers have been left high and dry in the context of willow at the moment. They do not know where they are going. They got into this in good faith. I ask that we get representatives in to deal with turf cutting, peat and willow because we need answers for farmers around the country and, as Deputy Guirke stated, for turf cutters, of whom there are probably 1,000 or 1,500.

**Chairman:** The committee will have a meeting in private session on Monday during which we can set out a work programme to address those issues. We will stick to the issue of rewetting today. Deputy Nolan is indicating. I ask her to be brief. I will then go back to the officials before we close the meeting.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** There is significant concern among farmers in terms of risk. It is all well and good to say there will be no risk but it cannot be said that that will be the case indefinitely. We know that the River Shannon, for instance, has caused flooding issues in west Offaly as a result of the silt which built up in the river. Bord na Móna was in charge of that. I am looking at maintenance and management. I believe a clear agreement needs to be drawn up into the long term, as Deputy Fitzmaurice suggested. I support his proposal. There is also the issue of what happens if another company takes over from Bord na Móna. There needs to be a legal agreement to cater for that eventuality and to provide cover for farmers in order to get confidence and co-operation. That is what I am hearing on the ground.

On the issue of rehabilitation projects, the witnesses stated the projects will continue for a few years. How many years will the rehabilitation of bogs last? Where will the workers go then? Will they be left high and dry? The Derrinlough workers were told that Bord na Móna has said their jobs will be safe until 2024. The rehabilitation will be over by the time those workers are let go if Bord na Móna stays true to its word to keep the workers in place until 2024. What will the workers do then? The issue of the workers on the rehabilitation project is linked in directly to the issue of rehabilitation.

**Chairman:** From everything we have heard today, an agreement with landowners that will stand the test of time is what is really being looked at here. That point has been made by many committee members and by the stakeholders the committee met earlier. With Covid restrictions, we have to finish the meeting very quickly. If there are issues arising, we may need to reopen the discussion. I ask one of the representatives to comment on the stance of Bord na Móna with regard to ensuring an agreement with landowners is put in place.

**Mr. Ger Breen:** I will come in on that issue. Bord na Móna currently has quite an extensive stakeholder engagement process in place. Several parties have acknowledged that they have been engaging with us. We have outlined what rehabilitation is and what the process is. We have been involved in rehabilitation for more than 30 years and we have a significant amount of experience in the rehabilitation of peatlands. We have eliminated the risk of flooding on third party lands.

In addition to rehabilitation, we have a care and maintenance team. Once we stop peat harvesting, the care and maintenance team will be involved in maintaining the drains. We must adhere to our obligations under our existing integrated pollution control, IPC, licence. We will continue with our care and maintenance programme to ensure that we keep the outer drains properly maintained and avoid the risk of flooding on neighbouring lands.

Bord na Móna has worked on these peatlands for 90 years. We have responsibilities as landowners. We have fulfilled those responsibilities in the past and will fulfil them in the future. We know how important our neighbours are. We are heavily involved in the community and are a part of that community. Some neighbours whose lands adjoin ours are employees of Bord na Móna. They know these lands, just as local farmers know their lands. We know what is involved when we prepare hydrological assessments of these peatlands. We will continue providing a care and maintenance service and fulfilling our obligations as responsible landowners. We will continue engaging with the various farming communities on addressing their concerns and dealing with their queries.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Is Bord na Móna prepared to enter into a written agreement with them? That was the question I asked. With the best will in the world, it is probably the case that no one at this meeting will be in the same job in 15 years' time. Jobs change. Is Bord na Móna prepared to sit down with the farming organisations, sign a written agreement, get that issue out of the way and get progress going?

**Mr. Ger Breen:** Bord na Móna has worked with local communities and made promises that we have always fulfilled. We have always been conscious of our impact on neighbouring lands. It is my opinion that a written agreement is not required in this case. We have a care and maintenance programme in place and have acted, and will continue to act, as responsible landowners.

**Chairman:** A couple of other questions were asked of officials, including by Deputy Nolan.

Unfortunately, I must close the meeting because of the Covid restrictions. The witnesses might respond to those questions in writing.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** Before we go, could the witnesses provide us with an email address to which we could submit questions outside the issue of re-wetting?

**Chairman:** Is that okay? The witnesses might provide us with an email address to which we could send questions that we did not have time to ask.

**Mr. Ger Breen:** We can arrange that.

**Chairman:** I am sorry, but the Covid restrictions are placing major constraints on us. There is a great deal of concern about the subject matter of this meeting and we might return to it in the near future. We thank the witnesses for their engagement with us. I hope that there will be a satisfactory outcome, one that will keep the environmentalists and adjoining landowners happy, meet the challenges of climate change and allow neighbours to continue farming their lands efficiently.

If the witnesses sent us an email address, committee members' others questions could be asked through the secretariat.

**Mr. Ger Breen:** I thank the committee for its invitation.

**Chairman:** I propose to hold a private virtual meeting at 10 a.m. next Monday, 8 March. Is that agreed?

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Could we make it a little later? I have a standing Monday meeting.

**Chairman:** What time would suit?

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Any time after 12 noon, if possible.

**Chairman:** I am okay with that.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I am, too.

**Chairman:** Is that agreed? I will take the other members' silence as agreement. At our next public meeting, we will discuss the issue of tuberculosis. I am sorry for rushing, but I am getting sour looks from the secretariat.

The joint committee adjourned at 6.24 p.m. until 6.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 9 March 2021.