

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT AGUS MUIR

JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND THE MARINE

Dé Máirt, 9 Márta 2021

Tuesday, 9 March 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 6.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 6.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

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

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

Eradication of Bovine Tuberculosis: Discussion

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senator Tim Lombard. I remind members that in the context of current Covid-19 restrictions, only the Chairman and staff are present in the committee room and all other members must join remotely from elsewhere in the parliamentary precinct. The secretariat can issue an invitation to join the meeting on Microsoft Teams. Members may not participate in the meeting from outside the parliamentary precinct. I ask members to mute their microphones when not making a contribution and to use the “raise hand” function to indicate. Please note that messages sent to the meeting chat are visible to all participants. Speaking slots will be prioritised for members of the committee.

The topic of today’s meeting is eradication of bovine tuberculosis and comprises two parts. The first is engagement with representatives from the Irish Farmers’ Association, IFA, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, ICMSA, the Irish Cattle & Sheep Farmers’ Association, ICSA, and Macra na Feirme. The second is engagement with officials from the Department of Agriculture and the Marine. The TB forum met today under the chairmanship of Sean Brady. The eradication of tuberculosis has been in the news for the past couple of months and it is imperative the committee listens to the stakeholders and the views on this. Then we can go back to the Minister on how best to move towards the eradication of bovine tuberculosis.

I welcome, from the Irish Farmers’ Association, Mr. Tim Cullinan, president, and Mr. Thomas Burke, animal health executive. From the Irish Creamery Milk Supplies Association, I welcome Mr. Lorcan McCabe, deputy president, and Mr. Paul Smyth, executive secretary of the dairy and farm business committee. From Macra na Feirme, I welcome Mr. Thomas Duffy, president, and Mr. Derrie Dillon, head of policy. From the Irish Cattle & Sheep Farmers’ Association, I welcome Mr. Eddie Punch, general secretary, and Mr. Hugh Farrell, chairman of the animal health and welfare committee. They are all appearing remotely and they are all welcome to this meeting.

We have received the witnesses’ opening statements, which have already been circulated to members. We are limited in our time due to Covid-19 safety restrictions and the committee has agreed the opening statements will be taken as read so we can use the full session for questions and answers. All opening statements are published on the Oireachtas website and are publicly available.

Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they 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 they are 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 a location outside the parliamentary precinct are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating from within the parliamentary precinct do not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on the extent to which participation is covered by the absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

I invite questions from members.

Senator Paul Daly: I welcome the witnesses. I am conscious of the time and will be brief.

This is known as the tuberculosis eradication strategy. We have talked about eradicating tuberculosis for almost 70 years. As a farmer myself, I am beginning to think what we are at is more identification or location. Eradication is not something we seem to be mastering. I would like if the different farm representative bodies would comment. I am aware the implementation group met today and I would like the witnesses' feedback from that. I saw a press release from the Minister. Will the witnesses inform the committee of how they felt that went and whether progress is being made?

I was on the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine during the previous Dáil. We dealt with this in late 2017 or early 2018. We got positive feedback and the numbers were relatively good at that stage, but there has been a decline since 2016. Will the witnesses tell us, in their opinion, what has caused that decline? We seemed to be going in the right direction but it has taken a nosedive since 2016.

As a farmer, this seems to be a firefighting regime. The debate is always about financial compensation and issues post having a breakdown in a herd. Macra na Feirme's submission in particular highlights that. We are good at the follow-up supports. What more can we do for preventive management? How can we get to a situation where we are actually doing what we say we want to do and working towards eradication as opposed to identification?

Mr. Lorcan McCabe: Tuberculosis incidence has increased in the past four to five years. To get to a fundamental aspect of it without getting into the nitty-gritty, over the past five years, farms have got bigger with quotas gone. Herds have got bigger. Farmers have been pushed into increasing sizes to stay viable or into leasing their land. There are substantial amounts of cattle together, though not necessarily dairy. If there are 100 cows, tuberculosis might pass by, but if there are 500 cows in a herd, it adds to the problem. That is the starting point of what is happening. There needs to be something to keep the small farmer, both small dairy farmers and small beef farmers, viable rather than being pushed into larger herds.

The ICMSA fundamentally agrees with the new strategy. There are a few things we would like to tweak but we fundamentally agree. Financial support has to be put in place. Tighter measures will be put in place for farmers regarding testing etc. We need financial measures to back that up. The Department will say it can eradicate tuberculosis by 2030. If so, why not front-load the finance now and target this so that we will not need it in 2028, 2029 and 2030?

The Department is doing a reasonably good job with badgers but I am hearing it needs more staff with better knowledge to track and trace the badgers and to cull or vaccinate them in certain bad areas. There is another problem with wildlife. Our members tell us deer are a significant problem, especially in the Wicklow area, and the Department says they are not. Who does the committee believe? We need a study to state once and for all whether they are a problem. That would be helpful.

With all the measures that are in place, with extra testing on chronic herds etc., the principal issue is we need the finance to be put in place. In the past, we have been told it is a matter of vets against farmers and farmers against the Department, and people say there is an industry there. We are all in this together. I fundamentally believe farmers, the Department and vets want this disease to be eradicated. There is no point in me blaming the Department, the Department blaming vets etc. We have to get on with it with none of this bickering. Another area where farmers need help is if there is a breakdown in extra stock. There needs to be a feedlot system to get calves and such out of the way. I will answer more questions but I believe that covers this for the moment.

Mr. Thomas Duffy: I thank the Chairman. I appreciate the comments in the reference to our submission on this issue because Macra na Feirme feels very strongly that while the focus has been primarily on what to do once herds break down, we have seen that the increase in 2016 has been caused in a major and primary way through the spread to new herds or to new areas. Some of the key areas that we would like to see focused upon are, first, to address TB and to differentiate it. In some areas such as in Cavan, Monaghan and Wicklow there have been ongoing blackspots. Even at the point of 2016, unfortunately, those communities were never fully free of TB. These were localised issues but were never fully addressed. We welcome in the new strategy a more localised approach with increased help and support for those farmers to address the issue.

The challenge in those areas is very often to identify what the source may be. In some cases it may be wildlife. An exclusion of wildlife from feed bunkers and water sources may prove effective. I have visited farms, however, where despite all of the best efforts, which were in very well-contained and controlled farms, there was still, unfortunately, an ongoing issue with TB.

We also have to keep up to date with the modern technology and indeed with the advancements in genetics. This is something that is referred to briefly in the strategy. There has, however, been extensive work by the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation in collaboration with Teagasc to identify genetic resistance to tuberculosis. At the moment those breed lists of AI bulls are available but are not being promoted in those areas. We have to adopt, therefore, a multifaceted strategy in terms of both the prevention on the outskirts of areas which have an ongoing TB issue, but also to take a much more targeted approach within those blackspot areas. In addition to that, as Mr. McCabe has rightly commented upon, we need to support financially some of those areas. We have seen, in particular, over the years with areas that have never been able to become clear of TB that many farmers have lost income as a direct result of farmers being less willing to purchase livestock from those areas. This is on top of the constant pressure of ongoing tests and herd breakdowns, and the emotional and mental stress which this brings on farmers.

These are some of the items on which we have worked with the Department. We have also highlighted, however, that there are specific issues for young farmers in the financial risk. Young farmers are more likely to have taken on additional loans for expenditure on infrastructure but equally they are less likely to have the infrastructure in place in the case of a herd breakdown. We have to be very clear in differentiating that the impact of TB may be very different depending on the enterprise one is operating in. To a dairy farmer, the impact of TB come the month of January, when they will have to hold onto dozens of calves, raises both a welfare issue but equally raises a deep concern in labour, stress and the infrastructure available. Young farmers are more likely to be expanding their herds and increasing their investment which also puts them at a much greater financial risk should those sorts of herd breakdowns occur. These are some of the items that we would raise on this issue.

Chairman: Speaking to our witnesses for a moment as to technology, my screen has only so many slots on it. If some of the witnesses wish to speak up and I do not see them on the screen, by all means speak up. Do any other witnesses wish to make a statement?

Mr. Hugh Farrell: Yes, I would like to speak on behalf of the Irish Cattle & Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA. I will continue by referring back to Senator Daly's question on today's implementation group meeting. It was intense enough for two hours or more. We found that we were at a big disadvantage in one sense because we were limited in where we were. There is a three-way division here with the implementation, finance and the science aspect of it. As far as

we are concerned, the implementation of programme as far as disease has been brought forward more than has the finance. This happened in the last 18 months or so. Until the finance comes up on a par we cannot be pushing forward with new levels of introduction, like the discussion today about the inconclusive areas. Yes, we want to see inconclusives sorted out but the discussion there about taking 2,000 of them out and the locking up of herds to that extent without compensation is not practical. We have to look at a different regime.

Furthermore, there is a derogation where there is change in April which is going to have a big impact on these things that we were not led to believe would happen prior to this at the meetings. I think it has been difficult for the new chairman and he has done a great job to bring this forward. There was a kind of hindrance there. We need more crossflow or interaction between the two to come forward on this issue.

As to moving forward on TB, we want to see the removal of reactors as an urgent matter. The question of having animals left on a farm for anything from two to five weeks is an issue. There has been talk of bio-security and this is surely the worst type of this.

We see farms then, as has been mentioned by previous speakers, where there are both badger and deer and mention of having a roadmap down the country for the badger and for their setts. We need background detail on where these badgers are being snared or caught and we also need to know what the test results are. As we know, they are not being tested or this is happening with a very small number of them.

The same applies to vaccinating. We can see that there is a big programme in Monaghan. Has this led to findings of sick badgers or ones that have turned positive that were not tested prior to vaccination, as one moves in on the Cavan, Meath and Louth border? Are we pushing this further ourselves by not spending more money, doing the testing and carrying out the programme appropriately?

We want to see this dealt with as urgently as we can because of the number of people that are hit and badly affected by this. Furthermore, there is a big issue with the herd test, where there is a variation both in blood, the gamma and the skin test. Farmers are constantly contacting us and are frustrated with this. This is happening where herds are being depopulated where they never had problems and in areas where there are no other problems. These are some of the issues that we wish to see addressed.

To move forward then the issues are that wildlife is at crisis, the removal of reactors needs to be addressed, and there is a need for much more understanding and co-operation with partners instead of this severe approach. We have to start managing this in a completely different way and bringing it forward on a faster note. I thank the committee.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Farrell. Yes, I can hear you, Mr. Smyth, go ahead now, please.

Mr. Paul Smyth: I thank the Chairman and the committee for inviting us to speak. This situation has been going on for years now, for well over 50 years and we are probably no further on now than we were 50 years ago. There is an opportunity now, the Minister has put a group together, and it is important that we move this forward. This has a direct financial impact on farmers as well as an impact on running the business. There is an indirect cost of €55 million to farmers annually in TB testing. Some €27 million is the cost of the actual TB testing, where €7 million is charged in disease levies at factory and processing level. If one includes farmers own labour where a great amount of time is spent in the process of testing, there is a further cost of

€20 million. The total amount then is over €50 million. There were 23,000 reactors last year. That is the highest number of reactors we have had since 2009. Over 4,500 herds have been dealing with restrictions as well. When we look at the cost where we are putting the money in, if we look across the Border in Northern Ireland and the UK, there is no direct cost to farmers. That, in itself, needs to be ironed out. Farmers need to be compensated for both the time and the effort that they are putting in. How do we deal with this in order to move it forward? It is absolutely essential that farmers and farm representative bodies are involved in the design and implementation of the programme that will deal with this. We have had many false dawns. As I said already, we want to get it right this time in recognition of the labour and contribution of farmers to the programme.

A letter was sent out to farmers last year. We need to revisit that herd risk letter in which herds were being categorised. We need to look at that again and, obviously, we will need to look at this idea of bringing in a pre-movement test and what that will do.

One of the key fundamentals, however, is that we need a proper meaningful wildlife programme. If we are not going to tackle the source of the problem then how will we resolve the issue? It is absolutely essential that everybody gets serious around the table and comes up with a proper programme around wildlife.

We also need proper investigation when there is an outbreak in an area, and people from the Department should be out on the ground working in conjunction with farmers to see and identify where the problem is coming from. I will leave it at that for the moment.

Chairman: I will take Deputies Carthy and Kehoe together. I call Deputy Carthy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Chairman and all our guests for being here this evening. This is a timely and important debate. If the definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results then the epitome of madness is the Irish tuberculosis, TB, eradication programme. We are now at a point where having spent €97.3 million directly last year, which was a substantial increase on previous years, we had, as Mr. Cullinan said, 23,000 cattle directly removed as reactors to TB. More than 4,000 farms were affected. If anything, the problem seems to be getting worse. It is crucially important that our committee keeps a close eye on that.

Senator Daly asked the big question. To me, the programme is not working. Do the guests get a sense from the new TB strategy that there will be a fundamental shift in terms of our approach to this issue and our holistic view of how this happens? Do people have a sense of why the numbers have increased as dramatically as they have in recent years, considering the level of investment that has been spent on the matter? I am interested in hearing that.

A number of the opening statements raised concerns, and it was mentioned again, about the TB letters that were sent last year. We all recall the furore and the anxiety and anger it created among many farmers. Can the stakeholders outline what they believe happened there? Why were those letters considered to be appropriate? Is there a better way of communicating with farmers? Have they any views on that?

Scotland has some similarities. I will not say it operates in the same environment because it does not. It has essentially eradicated TB, however. Is there anything our guests feel we can learn from the Scottish experience?

Finally, the farmers' contributions to TB have been mentioned a couple of times. This

will probably become more focused because EU funding will continue to decline. I must say, I can hardly blame the EU. If one examines our figures and is then asking the EU to fund a programme that is clearly not working, one can understand why it will be reluctant to do so. My fear, however, is that the Department will seek to try to recoup some of that over time by increased penalties or contributions coming from farmers. Can our guests see a way in which the money already collected and expended, which, as I mentioned, amounts to upwards of €100 million per year, could be better spent in a more targeted way that will actually deliver tangible results that we have not seen through the existing programmes?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: First, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, ICMSA, Macra na Feirme and the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, representatives are very welcome. I will ask each of the presidents to answer this specific question first. Have the three farming organisations got common ground and a common approach in eradicating TB, specifically around the ongoing negotiations with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine? Have the three farming organisations met together to try to come up with common ground?

We all know the stress and strain this has brought on many farmers over many years. I really feel sorry for younger farmers who have built up a dairy or beef herd over the last while. The hassle they get from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, if they are unlucky enough to be caught out with TB, impacts on the entire holding, the whole farm and herd and so forth.

Mr. Cullinan outlined the TB costs, which I also read in the IFA statement. It was very interesting to read that the Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales - the UK - do not pay for the annual TB test. At the same time, however, they do not get a similar package to what the Irish farmers get in the hardship scheme that is available. The IFA mentioned this in its statement. I am interested in what the ICMSA and Macra na Feirme feel on that issue.

On the management of the control of wildlife, I believe someone from the ICMSA mentioned deer. I come from Enniscorthy, and deer are a particularly serious issue in County Wicklow. I have been contacted and had plenty of correspondence back and forth with the Department in recent years. It started with the deer problem in the Gorey area of north Wexford. Something is seriously wrong when a person comes down to Enniscorthy and sees a deer in front of him or her on the motorway. The only time we ever saw deer in Enniscorthy was hanging up on somebody's wall. Now, however, it is a common practice to see them on some of the landholdings right across the middle of County Wexford. I met with the IFA in Wexford on this issue, in particular. Many farmers have contacted me directly about this. We must get serious about the management of wildlife, that is, deer and badgers, if we are to eradicate TB. I have asked the Department in the past to do some form of research into the deer problem and it repeated what I believe it said to the ICMSA, that is, it feels it is not a problem. It is a problem. The farmers on the ground are saying it is a problem and an issue. I will be raising this at the next session with the Department.

I read in the ICMSA statement about Coillte not fencing off its holdings. That is another problem. Financial investment in science is also definitely needed if we are to eradicate TB. I therefore ask the three presidents of the organisations to answer my original question. Is there common ground between the three farming organisations? If we are to try to eradicate TB, we need to have common ground between the farming organisations.

Chairman: For clarity, four organisations are represented this evening.

Deputy Paul Kehoe: My apologies.

Chairman: It is no bother. I will go in reverse order this time and call Mr Cullinan first.

Mr. Tim Cullinan: I thank the Chairman. Obviously, the farm organisations have common ground on this. It is critical that we are striving together on this. I will come back to Deputy Kehoe first. Last year, we strove for bilateral discussions with the farming organisations on their own because there are many actors in this grouping. It is most important that farmers can negotiate on their own, because they are the people who are dealing with this on a daily basis.

Deputy Kehoe mentioned funding and the hardship scheme. It is hardship. There is much hardship here for farmers. Before this moves forward, we must see the colour of the Department's eyes on this issue. The removal of infected animals as soon as possible is critical, but there must be proper funding for farmers.

Deputy Carthy's point that the definition of madness is doing the same thing repeatedly is a fair one. If one keeps doing the same thing, one will get the same result. That is why there is an opportunity here now. There is a plan to eradicate TB in the next ten years, but everyone must work together to do it. There is an absolute responsibility on the Department to engage properly, as I outlined earlier in our proposals.

The issue of the TB letters was raised earlier, and whether it was appropriate for the Department to send them out. I am certain that it was not appropriate. We had a campaign and actually burnt those letters last summer. The letters essentially categorised farmers. For example, if there is an outbreak of TB on a farm and the farmer goes through the restrictive period, before then resuming operations, he does not want everyone knowing about the situation on his own farm. If he has been restricted, he has been restricted, and that is why.

A good point was made that EU funding is declining. No wonder it is, because this has been going on for 50 years. However, at the end of the day, the Department must work with farmers on this issue. We are not going to accept less funding to address this issue until we are on the road to eradicating TB. As I highlighted at the outset, farmers have already put more than €50 million into this programme. That is more than adequate. Not only are the farmers putting in the funding, but they are also suffering with loss of dairy cows in particular in the spring. That also impacts upon suckler herds.

Mr. Thomas Duffy: I might address the points made by members in reverse.

On Deputy Kehoe's comment on deer density, it has been a long-standing issue. There has been a failure to address the question of the potential movement of TB from deer as a wildlife source. It is quite well established at this point that badgers can act as a reserve, and can spread TB through contaminated material or shared feeding and bodies. Certainly, this has been long stated. We welcome the fact that in the updated strategy there is an awareness of deer density in Wicklow in particular, where deer density would be at its highest, and a more concerted effort to align hunters who are licensed to remove stags and does at certain times of the year to relieve the pressure and the ingress into farmers' land. Overall, there is a bigger question to be addressed on the population of deer and the impact that is having on farmers alongside the effect of TB and, as the Deputy has said, the abnormal behaviour of veering out into roads.

The impact that the disease can have on young farmers was mentioned. The strain that it places on young farmers is astronomical. Without the reserves that are often built up over years of farming, although that is not always the case, it can be a massive negative. I know several

young farmers who aimed to set up their businesses, and when they were hit with TB several times they abandoned them and decided to leave the industry. It is very devastating.

The common approach of all farming organisations is that the farmer must be at the centre of this. It speaks to Deputy Carthy's question about the new strategy. Again, the definition of madness is certainly repeating the same thing. It is very difficult for us to predict the future, but there are elements of the new strategy that we welcome, in respect of putting farmers front and centre.

On the question of wildlife, the mapping of TB and the use of local knowledge, which we addressed in our opening statement, in the investigation ahead of the report being published it was found that unfortunately, TB is essentially viewed by some farmers as simply being something that happens to them and they are passive in the chain. Unfortunately, this has been fostered by a lack of engagement, active management and encouragement by farmers to address these issues directly and the financial supports that are necessary for that.

On Deputy Carthy's reference to Scotland, we were most interested in exploring how a country with an almost identical climate, although at a slightly higher elevation, seems not to have this problem, especially given that the same wildlife factor is present. The answer that we were offered is that there seems to be a difference in Scottish badgers. I am not entirely sure why that might be, but it is established in the scientific literature. Again, unless we are going import some of those TB-resistant Scottish badgers, I am not sure how much more can be learned.

On the question of letters, certainly there was a lack of communication around that entire process. One of the issues that came up from our membership, which is deeply concerning, is that the categorisation was based on the number of years since a TB-free test. If a farm has just been established, a farmer will not have any TB-free years. Therefore, young farmers were being placed under the C1 category, and other low C categories, with only an asterisk to indicate that no TB test has been taken into account. We engaged with the Department on this issue, and sought to make it more plain and clear, potentially working on where the animals might have been tested previously.

I am open to any further questions on the matter. It certainly would be our hope that as long as the strategy follows through on its stated ambition of putting farmers front and centre in this, using their local knowledge and their own intuitive ability to understand their farms better than anyone, the strategy might become successful and overcome the declining trends we have seen.

Mr. Lorcan McCabe: I will start with Deputy Carthy's question. There is a shift in the right direction, and if everyone follows the direction in which we are going, things will change. There are many things on which we have to improve. Fundamentally, finance must be used to tackle farms with chronic problems and herd outbreaks occurring over 300 to 400 days. If that is brought in, those farms are targeted and rigorous testing is done, it will have an impact. I believe there has been a shift in the last five or six years because of the intensity of herds and the larger numbers congregating together. As I said before, the Government should support farmers so that they do not have to expand drastically.

On the issue of the letters, I think they were ill-timed, albeit well-intended to indicate risk to the farmers. However, it did not go down well and was ill-timed. As a member of the TB forum, we did not know that letters were going to be issued. As Mr. Duffy stated, farmers were categorised and it left a bad taste in their mouths. It will be difficult to regain their trust. On the

Department side, far better communication is required all round.

On Deputy Kehoe's question, we have not met individual organisations such as the IFA, the ICMSA and Macra na Feirme. We have not sat down and talked together. However, fundamentally, we are all singing off the same hymn sheet. We have seen today that there is common ground on issues such as inconclusives. We want them removed - end of story. Farmers should be paid at the going rate on the day. Most grounds are common between the organisations, albeit with a bit of tweaking.

On Deputy Kehoe's point on the issue of deer, the Department is claiming that deer density is not a huge problem. Our members are screaming to us that it is a huge problem in specific large forests. In other parts of the country with only 40 or 50 acres, there is not a huge problem. In the specific areas it is incredible. Depending on who we speak about, there are 150,000 to 250,000 badgers in the Wicklow mountains. Farmers are being tortured by this.

There is much more we can do. Deputy Carthy asked a question and more money and staff are required on the wildlife side. The Department told me specifically that it needs more staff to target the badgers. Going back to what was said about the badgers in Scotland, there is not as high a level of badgers in Scotland as here. More money must be put in here. There should be communication with farmers so that where there are badgers, they know to close doors and keep obstacles 3 ft high to keep out those badgers. No one action will solve the problem and it will instead be about 1,000 small actions, including keeping badgers out. That message must be got across in a friendly way. There are far too many legalistic letters arriving on farmers' doorsteps. They contain legal clauses, etc. Communication is crucial.

All these actions should be implemented but the Department must realise they have to be funded. There are other considerations, including reactors hanging around too long. There are proposals that could be sped up so a reactor could go the next day, with a farmer taking the average cost. There are slight problems but we must keep at the financial implementation and science groups. The committee should use whatever influence it has to keep this pushed as hard as we can.

On the question of deer, I thank the Minister, as after our influence he visited a member of ours in Wicklow who has a major problem with deer. I know in his heart the Minister wants this problem solved. The committee should use whatever influence it has on the forum, the implementation group and everything else. I firmly believe we can sort it but upfront finance is crucial. My ambition is for no farmer to need compensation in 2030 because there would be no TB. We must front-load it now.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the different organisations for coming before the committee. I have some quick questions. There was some gobbledegook that went to farmers last year about herds. Are the witnesses saying there was no consultation with the groups and it was done as a solo run by the Department, which would seem like it was done in very bad spirit?

I have seen the zero grazing process around my own part of the country and it is puzzling when TB has shown up in cattle that were not out on grass and there are gates one would imagine a snipe would not get through. Animals have gone down nonetheless. What is the conclusion of the witnesses about that?

The Minister has stated there is a basically a new agreement and the farmer organisations

have bought into that. Is that a fact and have the organisations bought into the new way forward on compensation?

I have seen cases where the Department gives a choice of valuers and they come out. The Department might disagree and another valuer might have to come out. If that valuer provides a higher valuation, the Department will go to the first value and the only other option is arbitration, which is currently non-existent. Have the witnesses found many cases like this?

Many farmers, particularly those in the beef sector, have small farms and they must work elsewhere. There is no point in saying these people would live off the farm. If an animal goes down on such farmers, the income from the job would pay the mortgage and bits and pieces so they would not get a hardship grant. Has any headway been made on this? The figures are there for anybody to look at when it comes to beef farming.

Appeals are not going ahead currently. Are the witnesses concerned by this? With the best will in the world and no more than what we are at this evening, it is better to eyeball somebody than have a Zoom call where he or she cannot be tackled head-on.

Deputy Michael Collins: Much of what I wanted to say has already been mentioned. On my side of the country there are many beef farmers and there has been major difficulties in testing cattle. I am a farmer but I have helped many others through the years. We all do that with our neighbours, including older neighbours in difficulty. They often swore inside a yard what a bloody racket this whole process is. It has never ended. Thirty years ago people would have called it a racket in a yard and 30 years later people are telling me the same thing. It has never been eradicated.

Are farm representative bodies confident we are on the right track to eradicating TB? Deputy Fitzmaurice has mentioned that there are many farmers working off-farm and they experience difficulty, especially if the animals have TB. There is testing and retesting, and cattle are in smaller holdings here and there, with difficulty in bringing them all together. It is a tough time for farmers and the compensation is not the best. I got an earful from a farmer in Castletownbere last week because he did not get what he felt was the value of his cattle. No matter what appeal he made, he still did not get the value of his cattle. He felt that as he had a rare breed, there was a set price. He gave up everything to come home to run the family farm but he now regrets it as the biggest mistake of his life.

The farmers are under much pressure and cannot take all the rules and regulations, with letters telling them this and that. I plead with the farmer organisations to stand up for these farmers. In fairness, I know they are doing this now but the organisations must be strong. The farmers will appreciate it. Testing is a tough racket and it has never eradicated the disease, as it was meant to.

Many questions have been asked that I wanted to ask so there is no need to repeat them.

Mr. Thomas Duffy: I can reply to those comments.

Chairman: You may do so after we hear from Deputy Martin Browne.

Deputy Martin Browne: I start by agreeing with Deputies Kehoe and Carthy. Unless the four organisations work together, this problem will not be resolved and every couple of years we will be coming back to talk about it. The EU will get fed up funding it in the end.

I have some questions for each of the associations. Some have been asked already and if they have, they can just be ignored. In a statement the Department indicates 2020 saw the highest rates of TB in a decade. It set out ten points and indicates that the strategy must continue to evolve. This raises the question of what should come with a redefined roadmap. It is what farmers we contacted are crying out for.

We are told comprehensive measures must be put in place to stop the spread of the disease but the farmers do not see such measures applied to either deer or badgers. Will the Department admit we are still far from getting a comprehensive approach to dealing with such factors? There is no mention of deer in the opening statement but in the TB eradication strategy, in referring to the risk posed by deer, the Department speaks of improved communications. In addition, no real action is being taken to deal with the problem of the danger posed by the deer.

My next questions are for the Department. When the forestry felling licences are being issued, does the Department give advice on the implications this may have on the movement of deer? Having spoken to some of the farmers' groups they suggest that the €35 million contribution the Department says the farmers make falls way short in reality. With testing happening so frequently some of them are subject to gathering herds and housing them. That can cost the farmers days at work and also in terms of the expense of housing the cattle. Farmers do not believe there is this roadmap that people are talking about. Will the Department seek the support of the farmers when it is implementing this roadmap?

I have a couple of questions for the IFA that Mr. Cullinan might answer. In terms of finances, does the meat industry have a potential part to play here given the importance of health and the availability to the sector? In other words, how are they being allowed to get away with not contributing to the TB eradication programme so far? I would like a response also on the increase in cases in Tipperary. There were 1,154 in south Tipperary and 1,390 in north Tipperary in 2020.

My next question is for the ICMSA. The role of the deer in terms of TB is an inescapable problem. Someone said it is just as much of a problem as the badger. That comes back to the failure of Coillte to properly fence land to ensure that deer do not encroach on the adjacent lands. Could the witnesses expand on their concerns about the alignment of compensation with undertaking risk mitigation measures? I will leave it at that as the other questions I had have been answered at this stage.

Mr. Eddie Punch: The first thing to say with regard to the deer is that it is a big problem and we are very concerned that the Department has adopted a bury its head in the sand approach to deer. The limited research it has shows that the positivity rate in deer is equivalent to that in cattle. Obviously, it is a problem in the cattle herd but with the same positivity rate the Department does not see deer as a problem. That is an unsustainable position and it will have to be tackled. Unless that is tackled we will not make progress.

We met Coillte a few years ago about the particular situation that pertains to deer encroaching onto farmland from their properties in Wicklow, in particular. I have to say we were disappointed that it did not seem to have the good neighbour attitude that would be expected of farmers. A company that is making in excess of €100 million in earnings not having the price of being able to fence its lands is just not acceptable.

It is important to state that we have had several strategies in a row now, which are about expansion of the national herd and the expansion of the national herd has led to significant in-

creases in State revenues. It is not possible, therefore, to have the kind of expansion and indeed disruption of herds. Where someone sells a long-established suckler herd and then buys in a dairy herd from multiple different sources, we are going to have problems with a whole array of diseases in terms of immunity in the early stages. In particular, if we have very large herds it is clear-cut that an outbreak of TB will lead to many more reactors. All of these things explain the reason we have had an increase in reactors in the past couple of years.

On the matter of finances, we have been asking repeatedly, and we would urge Members of the Oireachtas to do this also, for a breakdown of the way the Department explains the €35 million it says it is spending on the programme. We have not got it yet. I believe the issue here is what one might call relevant costs. Yes, the Department can link a large number of staff to the TB programme and say that the cost of those staff adds up to €35 million. The real question is if there was no TB would all of that €35 million cost disappear. I do not believe it would. In other words, we would have a big question mark about the way the Department is spending the €35 million. What does that consist of and if there was no TB, would that cost disappear overnight? I think not. It is important to say that farmers are contributing that amount of money also, which is much more than the compensation they get out of it. It is important to note that farmers contribute a lot of free labour to the TB eradication programme by the amount of effort they put in to herd testing on an annual basis.

As an overall comment, there is a question mark in my head anyway about the way in which the focus needs to be on black spots - on deer and on wildlife - but we continue to spend a lot of money testing. We would be aware of members who have not had any TB reactors in 40 years but they are subject to the same cost national focus as black spots. There is a question mark about whether that money is being well allocated.

Overall, it is extraordinary to think that we could have a massive dairy expansion programme, not just expansion but a switch in enterprise, where many farms have had to sell out entire herds and buy in completely new herds to switch to dairying, and then expect that we would have no impact on TB and disease in general.

In terms of some of the questions Deputy Fitzmaurice asked, the letter was certainly a solo run. That was not agreed with the farm organisations.

With regard to the new agreement, it is agreed in the sense that we want to continue to try to find solutions to this problem. We have put in a detailed critique of much of the existing strategy but, overall, we have agreed to continue to work with the process to try to find a resolution.

Deputy Fitzmaurice is 100% right. We have repeatedly raised the issue of how it is unfair that hardship grants are not available to low income beef farmers who are forced to find income from elsewhere. That is one of the issues we want resolved in the finance committee.

Mr. Thomas Burke: I will answer on behalf of the IFA. There are a number of common themes in all the Deputies' questions, which started with Deputy Pa Daly. In terms of whether we have confidence in the new approach, let us bear in mind what that new approach is. There is a strategy set out with a framework for working through the proposals of the TB forum. We have had the implementation working group meeting this morning. We had a finance working group meeting last week but time will tell. There are objectives set out in that strategy. There are commitments given that there will be a farmer-centred approach but time will tell if that is delivered on because for too long we have had the issue of the top-down approach where measures were implemented but there was no cognisance of the direct impact on farmers and their

livelihood or how they managed their farms. Deputy Daly is right. That moved then to a fire fighting action to try to resolve the issues caused on farms by poorly thought out programme proposals. That is what we would hope the implementation group structure will bring to the scientific advice and proposals from the TB forum in terms of how best they can be implemented to minimise the impact, but time will tell. It is a new approach. We have only had one meeting of each of those groups and success will be judged on how those groups perform and whether they function under the remit they were set up to do.

With regard to finances, the EU levels are reducing. Farmers are significant contributors to the programme, as is the State, but it is very interesting to look at the membership of the TB forum. Farmers are a low number of seat holders at the TB forum yet only farmers and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine contribute to the TB programme. In establishing the TB forum, a large number of beneficiaries and interested parties have been identified by the State. It will be interesting to see now are they also identified by the State in terms of funding for the programme going forward. This is the substantive issue that must be addressed before we develop a programme because if we do not have the resources to implement the likes of the effective wildlife programme that is necessary then we are going to fail yet again, and it is back to Deputy Carthy's point that we need resources in place.

It has been asked what caused the deterioration in the levels of TB. We would not accept the fundamental principle that farmers are to blame because of herd expansion. There was clearly a reduction in the activity of the wildlife control programme for the last eight to ten years. There was less than effective wildlife control programmes being implemented throughout the country that allowed the badger population to increase and obviously spread disease in areas. In the last four to six months the Department has agreed to remap the areas. We have found a significant number of setts that were previously unidentified yet part of capture areas. That points to a very ineffective and inefficient wildlife control programme being implemented and has clearly contributed to the deterioration in the levels of TB.

There should be no ambiguity about the role played by deer. The Department has its own study from Wicklow in which we were actively involved and showed a 16% TB prevalence in the deer tested by the Department. Deer are a significant contributor to TB spread and ongoing TB outbreaks where their density is at a particular level. The TB strategy requires two components to deal with deer. One is a programme similar to the wildlife programme for badgers around TB outbreaks where the density of deer is reduced. Significantly, what we need is the re-establishment of the national deer management forum, which was set up a number of years ago to put in place a strategy to manage the density nationally before it became a problem in every other county like it currently is in Wicklow. That group needs to be re-established. The chairperson of that group stood down a number of years ago and the group has not convened since, so its output has been non-existent. As part of the preventive measures, which Senator Paul Daly has identified, this is critical. We cannot allow the deer population to continue to increase in every other county like it has in Wicklow and bring the TB problem with it. For the past ten years we have sent numerous submissions to the Department seeking preventive actions to be taken in advance of major infrastructural works and deforestation for all wildlife because it is clearly evident where the disturbance of wildlife takes place that TB follows shortly afterwards. It stands to reason that populations of wildlife that are susceptible to TB are being stressed and moved on so bring the disease with them. If we are serious about eradicating TB then we must stop new outbreaks and a proactive preventive approach is required in terms of wildlife.

On the compensation schemes, as Mr. McCabe has already said, our objective is that there would be no need for a compensation scheme because no farmer would have TB in his or her herd. Unfortunately, even with the best will in the world, we are going to have TB for a significant period going forward. There are going to be farmers who through no fault of their own, which must be borne in mind, have a TB restriction or breakdown that results in an enormous disturbance on farms for a minimum of six months. That is why the compensation schemes and the support structures must be aligned with the measures on-farm to treat farmers fairly.

Deputy Carthy raised the issue of Scotland and Deputy Kehoe asked about the different levels of support in the UK compared with what we have. It is important to put this in context. On the different levels of compensatory support, we have an additional income supplement depopulation or hardship grant compensation scheme that pays out €4 million a year for the extra €35 million a year we put into the programme compared with what our counterparts in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales contribute to their programmes. So for €35 million in direct funding we get back an additional €4 million. That has been a narrative that has been set continually, and grossly misrepresents the high level of funding that we put into the programme.

On the Scottish experience, and Deputy Carthy rightly raised it, we engaged directly with some senior veterinary practitioners and farm leaders in Scotland a number of years ago. We discussed the actual programmes and measures for cattle in this country obviously to identify what they did and what we could do to replicate eradication. A significant difference between us and Scotland is that TB did not get into the badger population. Therefore, the message that we clearly took from the engagement is that additional testing of cattle and tighter controls on farms will not eradicate TB. The source of TB is primarily in wildlife and until we address it in wildlife we are only imposing extra costs and hardship on farmers with additional tests and controls.

Chairman: I must close this part of the meeting as we have gone over time. On behalf of the committee, I thank the representatives of the IFA, the ICMSA, Macra na Feirme and the ICSA for engaging with us on this important topic. I thank them for highlighting the issues. I propose a short suspension of the meeting until other witnesses can join the call.

Sitting suspended at 7.36 p.m. and resumed at 7.37 p.m.

Chairman: I welcome to the meeting the following officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine: Ms Paula Barry Walsh, deputy chief veterinary officer; Mr. Eoin Ryan, senior superintendent veterinary inspector; and Mr. Colm Forde, principal officer, who are all appearing remotely. We received their opening statement, which has been circulated to members. We are limited in our time due to Covid-19 safety restrictions. The committee has agreed that the opening statement will be taken as read so that we can use the full session for questions and answers as we did with the first half of this meeting. All opening statements are published on the Oireachtas website and are publicly available.

Before we begin, I draw attention to the fact that 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 a person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Participants at the committee 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 invite questions from the members and will begin with one from myself. For the first hour of this meeting we spoke to the stakeholders, that is, representatives of the four farming organisations. Clearly, farmers are worried about the design of the new strategy and that not enough focus will be placed on the part played by wildlife in the incidence of TB in the bovine herd. We have heard figures about the level of TB in the deer population in Wicklow and heard requests for more staff to be provided to vaccinate badgers. Will the new strategy focus on wildlife and the part it plays in the incidence of TB? The deer and badger are the two animals in the spotlight. If the Department could address those issues, we will then go to further questions from members. I invite one of the Department officials to answer that question.

Ms Paula Barry Walsh: I thank the committee for the invitation. The Chair has already introduced me. I am accompanied by Mr. Eoin Ryan, senior superintending veterinary inspector, and Mr. Colm Forde, both of whom deal with the policy and implementation around TB. We welcome this opportunity to talk to the committee.

I will say a few words of a broad nature first. It is worth-----

Chairman: Excuse me. This is a questions and answers session. I asked a specific question about wildlife and further questions will be asked by members. I ask Ms Barry Walsh to address the question.

Ms Paula Barry Walsh: On wildlife, the Department is taking it very seriously. The strategy lays out how the pathway forward will be charted. In regard to badgers, the wildlife programme, in particular, is very active. We also have actions on deer and there are studies ongoing. I will pass over to my colleague, Mr. Eoin Ryan, for some details on them.

Mr. Eoin Ryan: I thank the committee for the invitation to attend. I am a senior superintending veterinary inspector in charge of TB policy in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I work with Mr. Colm Forde and Ms Paula Barry Walsh.

Regarding the Chairman's specific question on what is the focus on wildlife in the strategy, he is right that wildlife is a key part of the solution to reduce TB. There is a major focus on badger mediated TB. Badgers have been shown to be a source of TB in cattle for many years. Much research has been carried out in the field in Ireland which has shown that. For that reason, a programme was instituted in the early 2000s of culling badgers when there was a link between those badgers and outbreaks of TB in cattle. That culling programme is one reason TB levels decreased very significantly from the levels they were 20 years ago to the levels attained in the last decade.

However, culling badgers is not in itself sustainable, either ecologically or in disease terms. Considerable research was carried out by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, University College Dublin, UCD, and many other institutions in Ireland, which showed that vaccinating badgers is as effective as culling once one gets those severe TB outbreaks under control. Since 2018, vaccinating badgers has been part of our strategy and it is, in fact, a key element of the programme for Government relating to TB. It is a programme for Government commitment to increase badger vaccination. We have a major focus on vaccinating badgers to prevent spillover into cattle and, where necessary, we will continue to cull badgers where a

serious outbreak has occurred in cattle which is linked to the local badger population. This is a much more sustainable approach.

Regarding the resources issue, the wildlife activity is very resource driven. There are additional resources being put into it. I will quote a few figures. For instance, in 2018 we vaccinated about 1,000 badgers and in 2019, we vaccinated more than 1,600, while we continued to carry out culling where necessary. It is not just a job for the Department but a joint partnership with farmers. The committee is aware that we have put major effort into communicating how farmers can co-operate with the Department but also protect themselves. For instance, we sent out a short message service, SMS, text with a link to a video entitled, How You Can Reduce Your Risk to Wildlife, to all farmers last year and again a few months ago. We got a tremendous response to that. Many farmers notified us where setts were and there was much positive co-operation at local level enabling us to be more jointly effective.

There are also things farmers can do themselves, such as securing feed stores. In fact, we have leaflets and videos on that. We get thousands of hits on our YouTube videos about making sure feed stores are badger proof and preventing badgers getting into the main silage and feed bins. This is an important thing that farmers can do. I agree with the Chairman that closing off that risk of transmission from badgers to cattle is critical. It is something the Department puts many resources into and is committed to more. It is also something in which farmers themselves can play a role. Our important job is to communicate the practical steps each farmer can take that are practical and reasonable on the ground. I am happy to go into more detail on badgers if the Chairman wants. I will move on to deer but am happy to come back to badgers if anybody wants.

On deer, the Chairman is right. We have heard the contributions from the farm organisations. There is no doubt at all that there is much concern about deer. Deer are part of the strategy, which is based on discussions with the farm organisations and other stakeholders at the TB forum. Those discussions informed what is in the strategy agreed with stakeholders. There was a TB forum meeting only a few weeks ago, again re-emphasising how we move forward with stakeholders.

As far as deer is concerned, where there are local concerns the Department is happy to test those deer for free and we do so. To cite a few figures, in 2019 we tested 233 deer submitted to our regional veterinary laboratories. These are not random deer, but ones specifically shot in an area where farmers are concerned those deer are transmitting TB to cattle. Of the 233 deer, only two tested positive. In 2020, 87 deer were submitted, fewer than previously, possibly due to Covid-19. Again, these were deer submitted specifically from areas where there were concerns they could be transmitting TB and only three were positive. In 2020, 40 deer were submitted from Offaly alone. There was quite a bit of concern that, in the Birr Castle area, deer could be responsible for TB outbreaks. Some 40 deer were submitted and none had TB. We are happy to continue with that because, there is no doubt about it, deer can and do get infected with bovine TB and infected deer can infect cattle.

As referred to earlier, a study carried out in Wicklow by the Department and UCD, with the co-operation of local stakeholders and the local IFA, found that 8.3% of deer on farmland, or ten out of 121, tested positive for TB. Zero deer out of 32 shot in the national parks had TB. However, the isolates from those deer were compared to isolates from cattle and badgers and they were essentially the same strains. I am summarising a very in-depth paper in the public domain which people can look into, but the same strain of TB was circulating in cattle, deer and badgers in this particular area of Wicklow. Many studies over the years have consistently

shown a level of TB that is usually around 10% to 12%.

In areas outside Wicklow, we do not find that level of TB in deer. That is certainly not to say, of course, that it never happens. However, we know what causes bovine TB to spread and the principal factors responsible for it. The most important are cattle-to-cattle spread of TB, badger mediated TB and indirect transmission through contamination and so on. If, for instance, there is an area where people are concerned that deer are spreading TB to their cattle, the Department will continue to test those deer for free and communicate those results to local farmers. Where there are concerns, farmers can have those deer culled by applying for a section 42 licence from the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

That is what we are doing on deer. When we say communication is a critical part of it, that means working locally with farmers where there is a concern and saying how we will go about testing, how we will give them the results back and how we will work together on that. That works so, for instance, in Kerry in 2019, 120 deer were tested for TB and none was positive. Of course, who is to say in a few months' time whether there will be some other area of concern and there will be positives. Where that happens, we can make sure that information is spread back.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Ryan for that very comprehensive answer, but we will move to some other members who have questions.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have a couple of questions for the Department official. TB testing was meant to eradicate TB and we have been testing for decades now. It has failed, and failed miserably. This has caused frustration and difficulties for farmers, especially those on their own or older farmers trying to test cattle. Can the Department officials explain why it has failed? Many farmers believe, and I said it to the leaders of the farming organisations, that it is a money-making racket. We know it is costing €35 million. Where is the €35 million being spent? Can anyone give an explanation or answer those questions?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the departmental officials for coming before the committee. Mr. Ryan has said TB goes from cattle to cattle. Has the Department done any test whereby it puts five cattle with TB into a shed with 45 clean animals? Has it done scientific analysis and does it have proof that cattle spread it in this situation? When an animal is put down, the farmer goes to the factory. Is a scientific sample taken from each animal? Does it go to England or somewhere? Does it come back showing the animal did or did not have TB even if the animal was put down? If no TB is found, what steps are taken? Is the farmer clear?

The farm organisations expressed their dismay at the letter that went out earlier this year. They said it was a solo run. Is it in the spirit of partnership to go on a solo run in the way that was done earlier this year?

When an animal goes down, there is the option of three valuers. I have seen many instances lately where the Department refused the first figure, and when the second person priced the animal higher, the Department went back to the first figure. Why is the Department judge and executioner of the whole situation? Why are the appeals so slow?

Obviously the Department understands that small beef farmers and suckler farmers are struggling. They have off-farm jobs to keep a mortgage paid and to keep the family going. For whatever reason, when an animal goes down, they are not entitled to the hardship fund. Why is this? A small farm does not get a monstrous payment.

Mr. Ryan might have looked at this next point. I have seen herds go down where there was zero grazing and the gates would not let in badgers. Is it that manure from the badger is on the fresh grass? Is there a concern about this? Has the Department done analysis on this?

Ms Paula Barry Walsh: I will respond to the first point raised on the success or failure of the TB programme. We should remember what the TB programme set out to do back in 1956. Fundamentally, the purpose of the programme was to have the necessary national herd health status to allow us to trade so we could start to export and continue to export. In this sense, the TB programme plays an important role. Clearly, it has failed to eradicate it but the strategy drawn up through discussion and consultation sets a path forward or a roadmap whereby we can drive towards eradication over the next ten years. This will require extra actions.

As has been mentioned already with regard to where we are going, doing the same things will not necessarily get there. What we do need to do is look at what other countries have achieved. We know the policy frameworks they had. They are available to us. What we need to do now, and when I say “we” I mean all the stakeholders, including the farmers and the Department together with the farm organisations, is to look at the extent and bandwidth of the toolkit and policies that are out there. We need to be able to apply them as appropriate to drive us towards eradication. This is really the way forward for the scheme. I will hand over to my colleague to respond to the questions on the samples from reactors in factories and the various other issues.

Mr. Eoin Ryan: I will preface my remarks by saying there are many technical questions about TB and they come up very frequently. Well before Covid 19, we had a lot of public meetings and meetings with farm organisations. We were in village halls and spoke to co-ops and local authorities. We speak to anybody who seeks a meeting and we try to provide as much information as we can. We have a range of leaflets which, of course, we do not physically give out now due to the pandemic but they are on the website. We have videos on the Department’s channel on YouTube. We have a list of frequently asked questions. Many of these questions come up again and again and we try to provide information because it is confusing for farmers when suddenly they are hit with all of this stuff coming from all sides.

To answer the specific questions, cattle to cattle spread of TB has been conclusively shown. It has been shown many times over the years.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Is there scientific proof of a situation where 50 cattle were put in a shed and 45 of them were clear and five were reactors. Has a simple test like this been done? If so, where is it available?

Mr. Eoin Ryan: I have not put 45 cattle in a shed with five others but many transmission experiments have been done over the past 100 years. This was established in the first part of the 20th century and it has been shown in recent years through whole genome sequencing, which we are now all familiar with from Covid-19. There is no doubt at all about it. I would be happy to have my team supply with Deputy Fitzmaurice with a scientific review of this. I believe Professor Simon More from UCD appeared before the committee last year or in 2019 and outlined much of this.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank Mr. Ryan.

Mr. Eoin Ryan: His paper summarises some of this. We will be happy to go into as much detail and provide further detail if the Deputy would like. In any case, there is no doubt that

cattle to cattle spread of TB happens.

With regard to samples when animals go to a factory, when animals that are not thought to have TB go to a factory and a suspect lesion is discovered, that lesion is sent to our central veterinary research laboratory in Backweston, which is the national reference laboratory for TB. It is tested to see whether it is something else or TB. Where it is TB, the herd is restricted, and where it is not TB, it is derestricted.

Approximately one third of reactors have lesions. This is a continuing issue on which we need to communicate better. It is something we try to communicate better on. Collectively, the veterinary profession has done a poor job in the past 100 years of conveying to farmers that just because they cannot see the bacteria does not mean they are not there. We all know there are bacteria on our hands but we cannot see them. Cattle can be infected with TB without it being visible. With one third of them the disease has progressed to the stage where we can see the rotten tubercular flesh, such as we can see in pictures of people back in the day when TB was tragically too common. One of the problems we have is that when we say an animal had lesions, people infer that animals that do not have lesions do not have TB, but actually they do. It is just that in most cases, because we do annual testing, we catch the animal before the flesh has started putrefying and rotting. Back in the old days, in the 1940s or 1950s when 27% of cows were TB positive, it was very common to have visible lesions. We regularly get comments on this.

On the zero grazing issue, there are a number of reasons a farm that does zero grazing can get infected. The Deputy touched on several of them and I agree with him. For instance, even if the herd and the yard is badger proofed, if the silage is collected and there is contamination by badger latrines in the field from which the grass is taken, and if those badgers have TB - not all badgers have TB but if it is an area where the badgers do - it can bring it in. Sometimes also a dead badger might be caught in a feeder wagon. There can also be residual infection. If an animal in the herd was infected with TB six or seven years ago in a previous herd and since then was sold into this herd, or if the herd last had a breakdown five or six years ago, unfortunately, one of the failings of the skin test, because it relies on a functioning immune system, is that an animal can be infected and some of them will not test positive. In fact, the skin test misses on average approximately 20% of infected cattle. This is one of the reasons we have this residual population.

It is the same as some people getting infected with TB as children and then years later they developed the disease. Some cattle can become infected at a younger stage in their lives and then, two, three, four, five or six years later, the disease recrudesces and they spread it to their comrades. It is only then that it is discovered. It could be residual infection. It could also be bought in. In Ireland there are 2.8 million cattle movements a year and there is no doubt a small proportion of these are likely to include infected cattle, particularly those coming from herds with a history of TB for the reason I have just outlined. Having two clear tests means the herd is free to trade but it is not a guarantee that none of those animals has TB because, unfortunately, the test is not perfect.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What is the story with the letter, the pricing of cattle, the appeals and the solo run?

Mr. Eoin Ryan: I will deal with the letter and hand over to my colleague, Mr. Ford, to talk about valuation. The letter was based on a recommendation of the TB forum. I will read out a sentence to demonstrate that this was recommended in the TB forum report. Page 6 of the report states, "Provision of biosecurity advice to farmers ... should include detailed biosecurity

advice to assist farmers in reducing the potential risk posed by introduced cattle ...” It also states we should “develop revised risk categories which are simple, clear, and convey sufficient information”, which should be printed on bTB related correspondence to farmers and would “include a summary of their bTB history and of inward movements into their herd in the previous five years.” The letter is based on a clear recommendation of the TB forum. One of the things we are doing is taking on board the feedback from the farming organisations. There is a clear commitment in the new strategy that communications like this, which would enable farmers to reduce their own risk and protect their own herd, will be agreed with the TB forum.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Just to be clear, Mr. Ryan is saying that farmers knew about this.

Mr. Eoin Ryan: It is in the TB forum report, from which I have quoted. I just-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I ask Mr. Ryan to touch on the other issues because other people want to talk. Why do the people working not get compensation? What has gone wrong with the pricing of cattle? The Department is basically judge, jury and executor of every farmer.

Mr. Eoin Ryan: I will hand over to my colleague, Mr. Forde, to discuss that matter.

Mr. Colm Forde: I will elaborate a little on Mr. Ryan’s point. One of the key fundamentals of a national farmed animal health strategy is that prevention is better than a cure. Senator Paul Daly asked how we can help more farmers prevent TB instances in their herds. It has been a constant criticism of the programme over many decades. Providing additional information to herd owners to help them inform their own risk is a fundamental part of the programme. We have also commissioned the ESRI to do a behavioural study on how we can influence farmers to help them make positive behaviour changes to reduce risk. We have all seen with Covid the different changes we are asked to make to try to limit disease transmission. The concepts are quite similar.

To answer Deputy Fitzmaurice’s specific question, the on-farm market valuation system we have in place allows for a live valuation on a farm of a reactor animal, which is carried out by an independent valuer. At that point the herd owner or the Department can appeal the valuation and ask for a second valuation. I do not have the most recent statistics to hand but the last time I looked, 97% of first valuations were accepted by herd owners. By any fair measure that would indicate a broad level of positive acceptance of the scheme by farmers.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What I am asking is why the Department got a second valuation when it did not agree with the first one. I have seen this on a number of occasions, where the Department then did not agree with the second one because it was higher than the first one and it decided to go back to the first one. The farmer cannot do that.

Mr. Colm Forde: He can. Both parties have the ability to reject either the first or second valuation. A farmer can also reject the second valuation and request that it go to arbitration. Out of the 23,000 reactors we had last year, a very small number went to arbitration. We are talking about a very small number of cases. The Deputy said earlier that those arbitration hearings are not happening. I can confirm that they are occurring virtually so they have gone ahead.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: They are not person to person.

Mr. Colm Forde: In the current environment I do not think that could be facilitated. One of the things that came out of the TB stakeholder forum was that farm bodies had some concerns

with the on-farm market valuation system. With their input we agreed terms of reference for an independent review of the system. That was carried out by Grant Thornton and was the subject of discussion at last week's finance group meeting with the forum members. We have a number of recommendations that we can work through. Grant Thornton's overall review basically said that the on-farm market valuation system, as it currently stands, is broadly a good model and that its recommendations are relative tweaks to it. One of the points a number of the farm bodies touched on earlier was the level of frustration about getting reactor cattle off the farm as quickly as possible. That is something we are very keen to work on. When Grant Thornton looked at this scheme it said that the cause of the significant delay is the fact that we have a live valuation. Someone physically goes out onto a farm, the farmer has a number of days to accept the recommendation and there is post over and back. If we really want to make progress on that, it would be through an automated valuation. We will talk through that with the farm organisations.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the witnesses for being here. I have a number of questions which I will try to condense as much as possible. I thank the witnesses for the information relating to deer and badgers because that answers my first two questions. I ask Mr. Ryan to circulate in writing the figures he gave on testing, particularly of deer. That would be very useful to the committee.

Was there a bit of complacency within the Department? I was reading through previous meetings this committee had with the Department when numbers were reducing and I got a sense that there was a level of optimism about the figures that, in hindsight, was not warranted. I do not know whether the witnesses heard Mr. Lorcan McCabe's contribution from the previous session. He spelled out what the elephant in the room is. We are asking ourselves what the differences are between Ireland and Scotland as regards the intensification that has taken place, particularly since the abolition of quotas and if there is a particular issue with intensification. Does Mr. Ryan's section within the Department collaborate with other sections in order to come up with the responses to that? Clearly, any intensification that takes place occurs because farmers need to intensify in order to deliver better prices and margins on their farms, or at least feel that they need to do so. Is there collaboration or discussions around pricing, how CAP support is distributed through supports for diversification on farms and whether diversification could play a role?

We touched on EU funding earlier. I note that the Department's opening statement essentially says that EU funding is reducing because of other animal health pressures. Is the truth not that the European Union has come to the opinion that the money is not being well spent because the Irish programme is not actually delivering a reduction? Have there been discussions at an EU level to try to secure additional funding for the new strategy moving forward, with increased funding if we deliver a better outcomes with our own programme? I would be interested in that.

I note that there are subcommittees within the steering group and that one of them is a financial working group. Is there a timeframe for that group to report and if so, what is it? What framework is it operating within and will it be charged with carrying out a cost-benefit analysis of the TB programme? As we mentioned earlier, we are talking about substantial amounts of money being spent annually. We are touching €100 million, a large part of which is being paid directly by farmers with the rest coming increasingly from the Exchequer. We all have an obligation to make sure that money is being well spent. Will a cost-benefit analysis form part of that group's work? If so, I ask that this committee be provided with that analysis at the same

time it is provided to the forum.

I understand that the other two working groups relate to science and implementation. I ask for a brief synopsis of the specific role the Department sees those working groups carrying out. In what timeframe will they be expected to bring forward any recommendations or proposals?

Deputy Paul Kehoe: I welcome the witnesses. I have three brief questions. Something I come across quite regularly, and which the farming organisations have brought up, is the financial burden on younger farmers. Younger farmers have left the agricultural industry because of being locked up with TB and the consequences of same.

I am from County Wexford and one of the main issues I bring to witnesses attention this evening is the deer issue in County Wicklow. There is estimated to be in excess of 150,000 deer in the Wicklow Mountains and across the county. They stray into other counties and it is now a big issue in County Wexford. I brought this to the attention of Department several years ago when it started off in the Gorey area of north County Wexford. In recent years deer have come right down into the Enniscorthy area. It causes a huge amount of hardship for farmers. There is no doubt there is a TB issue around deer carrying the disease as well. It annoys me that the Department has people on the ground but they are not from the locality. They do not know the locality or the geography of the area. Why does the Department not employ additional staff who know the area, the ground and where the deer are coming in and the problems are?

I know the witnesses have been asked by farming organisations to carry out specific research. Mr. Ryan mentioned he has carried out research previously in County Wicklow. That is not sufficient given the research that is required because the deer issue is a serious one. This is coming from the farmers as to the extent of the disease. Can the witnesses comment on the management of wildlife control of badgers and specifically deer?

Mr. Eoin Ryan: I thank the members for their questions. I will cover several of the them and then I will hand over to my colleague, Mr. Forde, for the others. Deputy Carthy requested that the deer figures be circulated. That is fine. Members should note that those figures were presented to the TB forum at a recent meeting and they will be in the minutes on the website. We publish all of this in our annual reports on our website but it can be difficult to find as it is not the easiest thing to navigate. Members should note that all of this is in the public domain and that the minutes of the TB forum meetings are published but we will certainly circulate these figures through the clerk.

As far as the question about Lorcan McCabe is concerned, I missed some of what he was doing. I was tied up with a few domestic arrangements prior to this meeting. On the point of Scotland and intensification, we have very good relationships with our colleagues in Northern Ireland, Wales, England and Scotland. We discuss this a lot because the Northern Irish, Welsh and English have similar challenges to us. The Scots do not, of course, because they eradicated TB. We had a meeting with them a few months ago and asked them whether they could tell us specifically what their programme involves. For instance, it involves things like every farmer in Scotland getting a letter which informs them of their risk status, categorises them and gives them advice on how to reduce their TB risk. They provide farmers with information to enable them to make decisions. Farmers get a frequency of testing, based on their TB history. They have risk-based trading and, as has been discussed, they have no wildlife programme for whatever reason. I caught somebody saying Scottish badgers are different. We have no particular indication of that but for whatever reason, whether it be density or something else, TB is not an issue with badgers in Scotland.

As far as the intensification issue is concerned, we think there is evidence that the increase in TB is linked to increased intensification. We have carried out scientific research on this, most recently a series of studies in 2020. The most important factor in increasing TB risk is the increase in herd size. Dairy herds, for instance, are at a higher risk of TB. It has always been disproportionate that a higher number of dairy herds are restricted at any given time compared to suckler or beef herds. The figure of 55% of all reactors in 2020 came from dairy herds. Our analysis indicates that while there are factors, such as the number of contiguous herds, the number of farm fragments and intensity, overall it is herd size. This is combined with the fact that there are 2.8 million cattle movements each year, so that plays a role. That is not to criticise intensification but it is just an observation.

There was a question on whether we link in with other parts of the Department. Yes, we have much horizontal interaction where we work with and communicate regularly with other sections of the Department to discuss these issues.

On EU funding reduction, there are other animal diseases that it has been allocated to. The countries that get TB co-funding are Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Italy and France because they have certain areas that have TB, although not nearly as serious as us. Until recently, the UK got co-funding but, of course, it is out of the EU now. African swine fever, which I am sure everyone on this committee is aware of, avian influenza and an eastern European rabies are considered to be more important for Europe generally than TB is. A decision has been made to phase out TB funding. We have had specific meetings. Mr. Forde and I have been to Brussels several times trying to secure additional funding and trying to delay the winding down of it. There have been discussions at EU level. It is not specifically due to Irish factors, although I will let Mr. Forde comment on the figures because we have had funding penalties imposed. I will let Mr. Forde talk about the financial working group as that is his area.

We would be happy to give a synopsis on the other working groups - the scientific working group and the implementation group. It is outlined in the TB strategy. To put it simply, the strategy states what we, the farm organisations, ourselves, and other stakeholders, have collectively agreed to do. There are no easy decisions left to make. We know there is a hard road ahead but what are the things that we have agreed collectively to do? The implementation group is asking how will we do those things. We have agreed to take actions on certain things. How will this work at farm level? It is a way for farm organisations and stakeholders to ask how this will work in practice and to nuance that because it is an important point.

The scientific working group is a group of experts on TB who have very generously agreed to provide their time. They are under the chairmanship of Dr. John Griffin and provide scientific input into some of these questions. TB is a changing disease in which the risks change, the context changes and there are new developments. It is critical that what we do is based on science, that our policy is based on science and that the advice we give to farmers is based on science. Under all of this, there has to be a basis of evidence. That is the purpose of the scientific working group.

To give members a snapshot, the implementation group might discuss how a policy would be implemented on the group, how a farmer is told about something and how something will work. The scientific working group is asking whether our policies are based on science and whether there are changes we need to be aware of that are being developed. For instance, are there new tests or new risks that need to be closed off? It will make recommendations, for example, on what advice we should give farmers on how to reduce their risk of TB. Farmers deserve to have robust scientific advice. How can a farmer protect himself or herself? Deputy

Kehoe made the point that many young farmers, in particular, are taking out loans, building up their herds and buying in stock. What can they do to reduce that risk because it is devastating? We have to make sure the advice we give them is based on evidence.

There is no doubt that the deer issue in Wicklow is a significant one. Consistently, studies have shown that approximately 10% to 12% of deer, when studied in Wicklow, have TB. I will include those figures in the summary of those studies in the note, which I will circulate.

As far as employing local staff is concerned, we use local contractors for our wildlife work and it is very successful. It is one of the reasons we work closely with local farmers and our contractors are locally based. There are often personal relationships there that go back many years. That is one of the reasons farmers feel comfortable talking to fellas they know locally.

The Deputy made points on research with which I agree. We are supporting research on the ecological role of wildlife and TB. We are working on a project on that with the UCD school of biology. We continue to carry out whole genome sequencing on isolates from deer when we get them. As I noted earlier, while I completely accept there are areas, north Wexford, for instance, where farmers have very strong concerns about deer and TB, in other areas, such as Offaly, we cannot sequence TB from deer because they are all testing negative. They do not have any TB to sequence.

On the issue of management of wildlife control, we put much effort into actively managing our wildlife programme. We make sure we find badgers, vaccinate them and check how things are working. Where necessary, we cull them in the wake of an outbreak. We prevent TB in cattle by vaccinating badgers in advance. I am happy to give more details, if necessary. I am conscious of time so I will ask my colleague, Mr. Colm Forde, to take some of the financial questions that were raised, if that is okay.

Chairman: If he would not mind, perhaps Mr. Forde would give a written answer to the questions raised by Deputy Carthy as there are three more Oireachtas Members who will want to ask questions. Will Mr. Forde please give a written reply to Deputy Carthy on the working groups?

Mr. Colm Forde: Yes, I am okay with that if Deputy Carthy is.

Chairman: Okay. That response can be circulated to all committee members.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is fine.

Chairman: The next speakers are Deputies Ring and Martin Browne, and Senator Paul Daly.

Deputy Michael Ring: I will be very brief and will just ask two questions. The National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, is in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Is there good co-operation between the service and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine? I do not expect the officials to answer this but I will put the question anyway: should that service really be under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine? There is major conflict between the two Departments. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine wants to do one thing and the NPWS wants to do something else. I have had experience of the NPWS, as have other Members, in relation to the way it operates. The NPWS has a different agenda from that of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. As a few people have said here this evening, €25 million is a lot of taxpayers' money. It is taxpayers'

money because Ireland is now a net contributor to the EU so there is no funding coming from the European Union. It is the Irish taxpayer who pays for this, along with the farmers. It is the taxpayer at the end of the day who is paying for it.

I am a long time in this Oireachtas and for 25 years we have talked about TB. We have had Covid now for one year and there is already a vaccination for it. Why can we not do something with TB? Why is there not something there that can get rid of it? Is there a vested interest? There are so many groups that get money out of TB, why would they ever want it to be gone?

Senator Paul Daly: I had some technical issues here between the two meetings so I missed the start. If I am repeating any point perhaps the Chairman will inform me that a topic was already dealt with.

I heard Deputy Fitzmaurice's contribution, including his question on a person having an off-farm job that might affect hardship payments. I did not hear an answer on that and I would like to hear such an answer. I believe it is very unfair and I want to know what the Department's position on it is. What drives the Department's strategy there?

The EU animal health regulations that will come in during April will impose pre-movement testing on herds that have not been tested in a previous six-month period. What was Ireland's position on the formation of that EU law? How does the Department see a draconian rule such as this helping the situation we have? We are trying to minimise the cost to the maximum effect. With blanket testing and including the lowest risk herds, if an historically clear herd is just going to be tested for the sake of testing or because one wants to sell some cattle, this will be an additional cost. I believe it is certainly not going to improve our chances of eradicating the disease. Based on Mr. Ryan's comments on the expansion of the dairy herd and the increase in herd size, which I would question but he did say it, there is a total contradiction in bringing in pre-movement tests from smaller suckler herds that may have their herd test in January or February if they want to sell off their weanling calves in October or November. That is more than a six-month gap so they are going to have to test a second time, with an additional cost. These are low-risk herds. It is nonsensical. Where were the Department and Ireland's veterinary representatives in Brussels on the formation of that new EU law that is coming in next month?

Deputy Martin Browne: Deputy Ring raised one of the points I was going to talk about. We have the Covid situation and there is a mad rush on all of these vaccines coming in. We are told that comprehensive measures are being put in place to stop the spread of TB. Farmers, however, do not see that method being applied to deal with badgers. Since we started this evening the consensus is that deer are part of the overall problem, but it is interesting that in the Department's opening statement there was no mention of deer at all. I believe it was Mr. Ryan who referred to farmers cutting down the risk to their own herd. Surely the likes of Coillte should be pulled up when they do not properly fence around their lands to ensure deer do not encroach onto neighbouring farmland. What can be done with Coillte to force this? When a farmer is being asked to take all the measures to cut down the risk on his or her farm, surely agencies or State bodies such as Coillte should be made to do the same thing.

Chairman: I want to add another question before we go back to the officials. It was said earlier that 20% of reactors are left behind with the skin test. I was surprised with that figure but I am not doubting its accuracy. Do the officials have the figures for how many false positives are taken out with the skin test and how many false positives are taken out with the blood test? Where there is a severe breakout the Department comes in with a blood test. A farmer was on to me lately who lost 61 animals in the skin test. The Department came in then with

the blood tests. He very much feared that. It was spring and his cows were calving down. It was a huge financial loss to him to go through the blood test process. The view of farmers out there on the ground is that the blood test is taking more false positives than the skin test. Has the Department figures for how many false positives are taken on the skin tests and how many false positives are taken on the blood tests?

Mr. Eoin Ryan: I will proceed with some of these issues and then hand over to my colleagues for some of the other points. On Deputy Ring's question about the NPWS, I will not express an opinion on what Department it should be in but I can say that we have good co-operation. The NPWS licenses our badger activities. It is the branch of the State with responsibility for protecting wildlife and all of our activities must comply with the EU wildlife convention as it pertains to the Burren. Of course, badgers are a native Irish species and nobody wants to eradicate the badger population. We report to the NPWS, which licenses us. We provide the service with a lot of information. That is the relationship. The NPWS is the regulator and we comply with the licence conditions and provide details to it. This is one of the things that has enabled us to vaccinate badgers sustainably and prevent cattle from getting TB and, unfortunately, where necessary to cull badgers in response to an outbreak.

The Deputy made a great point on the vaccination for TB, which comes up all of the time. There is, of course, a vaccine for TB that we all got when we were kids, the BCG vaccine, which has been used since the early 1920s. This is the vaccine that is used in badgers. Just like its use on people, it is not a perfect vaccine in badgers, but it is good enough. It provides sufficient protection to prevent the spread through the badger population just as it does with people. The reason it is not used in cattle is because if we vaccinate bovines with BCG they may test positive to the skin test. One then has the problem of not knowing if they were positive due to vaccination or because they became infected. If the vaccine is not perfect, unfortunately a proportion of vaccinated cattle could still get infected. There is good news on that front. Our colleagues in the UK are putting a significant amount of funding into researching this and we are co-operating with them on it. They have developed a possible way of differentiating between vaccinated and infected cattle. We have co-operated on them with this. A scientific paper was published recently that was co-authored with UK colleagues and Department officials. If these things work out, in five to ten years it may be possible to vaccinate high-risk cattle and to differentiate those from infected cattle. We are working closely with UK colleagues and supporting them on that.

On the question about EU animal health regulations and the Irish position, the EU animal health law covers a whole range of diseases. Like all of these things, there are 26 member states trying to discuss it with us. There is the Commission's opinion, there are the MEPs' opinions and it is difficult to get everything we want. I believe we negotiated very hard. We spent a lot of time over there and our representation in Brussels also does a great job, as members will be aware. It is true that we did not get everything we wanted. It is also true that the research we carried out in the mid-2000s showed that while across the board pre-movement testing does not deliver that much, targeted pre-movement testing at high-risk herds would deliver something. One of the difficulties is that all the other countries with TB carry out pre-movement or post-movement testing as standard. It is the norm. The Scots, French, Portuguese, Italian and Spanish do it and we argue that in an Irish context we prefer risk-based testing and to look at herds or animals that are higher risk. All these things come out as a compromise and representations are made by a range of political representatives on this.

On dairy, doubts were expressed about the role of the sector where there was TB. We had

just over 4,700 herds restricted in 2020, of which 1,491 were dairy. The number of dairy herds restricted is disproportionate and 55% of all reactors last year were in dairy herds. We have to base what we do on evidence and science and we have to be blunt and say let us address and tackle the risk. That is one of the things we are doing.

Deputy Browne commented that the measures are not applied to deer or badgers. Measures certainly are applied to badgers. We have put a huge effort into the wildlife programme for the past 20 years and continue to put additional resources into it. It is having an effect. We are culling badgers where necessary and vaccinating badgers to prevent outbreaks. That is part of the programme for Government and most sectors welcome the sustainable benefit we can deliver protecting farmers and cattle while also protecting badger populations.

The point about Coillte was well-made. Coillte is a member of the TB forum for the reasons Deputy Browne outlined. The farm organisations suggested Coillte be invited to take part in the forum. Coillte joined, is a member and attends the forum. It co-operates with the Department and University College Dublin on research into the ecological-epidemiological issues around where forestry is.

Deputy Cahill commented about the earlier question on the tests. These are specific questions that we have videos, leaflets and all sorts on. They are frequently asked questions. I will circulate those to the committee. The figure can be higher or lower but the skin test, on average, will pull out eight out of ten infected cattle. The two that are missed cause the problem. There are false positives with every test but they are not our problem; false negatives are our problem. We are all more aware of this with Covid. This is in our eradication programme. False positives are unfortunate but false negatives are really the issue. False negatives in the skin test are approximately one in 5,000. That is not zero but it is pretty low. People say they had a reactor and ask if it could have been a false positive. Of course it could, but the chance is one in 5,000. There are 4,999 chances that it is not a false positive. It is like the chance of winning the lotto in the GAA club on a Saturday night. Somebody wins but it is probably not you.

The gamma test is more sensitive and detects infection earlier, which is why we use it in infected populations, such as in the case of the constituent Deputy Cahill mentioned with the unfortunate breakdown. When we know TB is present, we need to find the infected cattle and get them out of there earlier so they cannot spread infection. If it is spread by badgers, we need to address that and other issues. We use the gamma test for that but the Deputy is right that the specificity of the gamma interferon blood test is lower, at 97%. On average, approximately three out of 100 gamma interferon positives are not infected. Given that we use it in infected cattle, that is not the biggest problem. The problem is the infected cattle we miss, not the uninfected cattle which rarely get taken out. I sympathise with and understand the Deputy's constituent's concerns and it is something I hear regularly. I agree we have a big job of communication to do there. If we were doing our communications job the way we want to do it, the big concern for farmers would be, when the reactors have been taken out, what the chances are that there are other infected cattle in the herd that did not react to the test and will cause more trouble. It is our job to communicate that better and we are trying to do more on that with leaflets, videos and so on, as well as talking to people and doing public and local meetings to explain this. The gamma test takes out infected cattle who are not yet long enough in the infection process to respond to the skin test. If someone loses ten cattle to the blood test, one may be a false positive but the other nine will spread infection if they are left. We are about removing infected cattle, getting the herd back trading, derestricting the farmer and getting him or her back in business in a safe way without spreading the disease to neighbours or trading partners.

I hope that answers the questions and I will include that other information in the information we circulate on deer. I will hand over to my colleague, Mr. Forde, for some of the financial questions, if that is okay.

Mr. Colm Forde: It is important to contextualise the overall spend of the programme. Deputies Carthy and Ring have referred to the fact we are spending a large amount. Last year, we had 440 animals taken off farms every week. We spent more than €2 million per week and 90 herds per week were restricted. Those numbers are a deep regret but we have a significant responsibility on behalf of farmers, taxpayers and everyone who funds the programme to spend the money as prudently as possible to help drive down TB rates. Those sort of recommendations have been made for decades and were a fundamental part of the Committee of Public Accounts report in 1994.

On eligibility for the hardship grant, the policy rationale for that grant is to support farmers who do not have much means to help them maintain cattle over winter months that they otherwise did not plan on maintaining. That is why off-farm income is taken into account. I just wanted to explain the policy rationale behind the eligibility for the hardship grant. I think those were the questions on the financial side in that group.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: That is not a rationale. Regarding small farmers with no choice but to work off-farm to keep the farm going, what is the rationale for not giving them the hardship grant? It is the cattle that will suffer. Why is this discrimination taking place?

Deputy Pa Daly: I agree with Deputy Fitzmaurice

Chairman: The witnesses see the dissatisfaction with the answer and it is something we will return to. The formation of the TB strategy is something we as a committee will keep focused on. The question about hardship for people with off-farm income is one that comes across all our desks frequently.

I have to close the meeting as we are over time. On behalf of the committee, I thank the officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for engaging with us comprehensively on this issue. We are putting a strategy together and this committee will keep a clear focus on that. Before the strategy is formalised, I would say we will have another sessions with the officials.

Deputy Martin Browne: Before we close, I wish to raise one issue. The Chair has raised the issue before of Michael Dowling, chair of the beef task force coming before us. Is there any update on that?

Chairman: Have we had any communication back from Mr. Dowling?

Clerk to the Committee: No.

Chairman: My understanding is the forum met today so we will renew the request.

Deputy Martin Browne: The next day could we write again and ask him to appear?

Chairman: We will renew that request to Mr. Dowling.

The joint committee adjourned at 8.38 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Monday, 22 March 2021.