

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT, BIA AGUS MUIR

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

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*Dé Máirt, 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2019*

*Tuesday, 1 October 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 2 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Jackie Cahill,	Paul Daly.
Charlie McConalogue,	
Brian Stanley.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Michael Fitzmaurice and Denis Naughten.

Teachta / Deputy Pat Deering sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** We have a quorum and are now in public session. Apologies have been received from Deputy Penrose and Senator Mulherin. I remind members to ensure mobile phones are switched off. I propose we now go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters.

*The joint committee went into private session at 2.17 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2.40 p.m.*

## **Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals**

**Chairman:** Under schedule B, it is proposed that the proposals COM (2019) 267, COM (2019) 268, COM (2019) 284, COM (2019) 286, COM (2019) 296, COM (2019) 297, COM (2019) 326, COM (2019) 344, COM (2019) 327, COM (2019) 338, COM (2019) 344, COM (2019) 375, COM (2019) 376, COM (2019) 377 and COM (2019) 380 warrant no further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

## **TB Eradication Programme: Discussion**

**Chairman:** We are here today to discuss the TB eradication programme. I welcome the president of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, Mr. Joe Healy; Mr. Pat Farrell, IFA animal health committee; and Mr. Tomás Bourke, animal health committee. From the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA, I welcome Mr. Eddie Punch, ICSA general secretary; Mr. Hugh Farrell, chair of the animal health and welfare committee; and Ms Nessa Fitzgibbon, press and communications officer.

Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee 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 the proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

**Mr. Joe Healy:** The IFA provides for direct engagement and support services to farmers who experience difficulties on their farms, including issues associated with the current TB programme. The TB eradication programme implemented in Ireland remains the single largest animal health cost for Irish farmers each year. Since the implementation of the wildlife control programme in the early 2000s, significant progress has been achieved. Unfortunately, the ever-increasing burden of additional controls imposed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on farmers has contributed to increased costs and losses for those experiencing breakdowns or contiguous to breakdowns.

For the current programmes the total direct costs provided by the Department are just over

€90 million per annum. This costing does not include the enormous labour cost associated with the TB programme for farmers, which the IFA estimates at a further €20 million annually. Irish farmers contribute a total of €55 million each year to the TB programme - €27 million in annual TB testing costs, in excess of €7 million in disease levies, and €20 million in labour - when facilitating the testing of more than 9 million animal tests a year and implementing the disinfection protocols following a disease outbreak. In contrast, for the €55 million investment, farmers receive only just over €18 million in compensation for animal and production loss and maintenance costs. Between 2012 and 2018, the level of farmers' direct contribution to the programme increased by 15%, from €30.641 million to more than €35 million annually, while over the same period, the level of contribution from the national Exchequer has reduced from €45.825 million to €45.536 million and the contribution from the EU has reduced from €11.085 million to €9.748 million.

Farmers in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales do not pay for annual TB tests or contribute to disease levies. They receive similar compensation to Irish farmers with the exception of €3.5 million in consequential loss and hardship grant scheme payments, which are unique to the Irish programme. Eradication of the disease within the shortest feasible time-frame must be the objective. With this in mind, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine, Deputy Creed, established the TB forum involving all stakeholders to develop a strategy to achieve eradication by 2030.

The IFA agreed to participate in the forum on the basis it provided the platform to have the key issues and shortcomings of the current programme addressed for farmers. These issues were identified and outlined to the Minister in advance of the forum being established and have been raised directly at the forum meetings by the IFA. They are addressing the shortcomings in the compensation schemes; and reviewing the effectiveness of existing controls.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in written communication to the forum, stated it would not support increased compensation for farmers in the TB programme. This clearly shows a lack of understanding from the Minister and his officials of the impact the TB programme continues to have on the livelihoods of farmers and their families, which arises through no fault of their own.

The forum's report to the Minister proposes additional controls and costs on farms with no proposal to reduce the enormous cost burden of the programme for farmers.

**Chairman:** I apologise for cutting across Mr. Healy. We will need to suspend the meeting for a few minutes as a vote has been called in the Dáil Chamber. We were not expecting this vote.

**Mr. Joe Healy:** If the vote is to increase compensation for farmers, then-----

**Chairman:** We will suspend for ten or 15 minutes.

*Sitting suspended at 2.47 p.m. and resumed at 3.07 p.m.*

**Chairman:** I ask Mr. Healy to resume.

**Mr. Joe Healy:** It is clearly recognised and long established that farmers' support for and participation in the disease eradication and control programmes are vital to the success of the programme. A critical component in achieving and maintaining this support is the provision of fair and appropriate support measures to the farmers most impacted by the programme require-

ments. The current TB programme fails to recognise the importance of fair levels of compensation and the investment and compliance of farmers with the programme who, through no fault of their own, experience a TB episode.

Farmers who have taken all reasonable precautions to protect their animals from TB must be fully compensated for all costs and losses associated with the TB programme. In this regard, changes to the TB compensation schemes are required to ensure that the cost burden imposed on farmers is fairly and appropriately addressed, and the full investment of farmers to the TB eradication programme, both directly and indirectly, is recognised in the programme.

Irish farmers contribute €35 million annually directly to the TB eradication programme through annual herd test costs and disease levies. In addition, the labour cost associated with herd testing for farmers and the income loss from the removal of animals must also be recognised as a farmer contribution. This contribution is credited to the farmer in the TB programmes implemented in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales and is the only farmer contribution to these programmes.

In return for the additional €35 million contribution made by Irish farmers towards the programme, which is not provided by farmers in the countries I mentioned, Irish farmers receive approximately €3.5 million in supplementary schemes. This leaves a surplus of €31.5 million in farmer contributions which must be used to address the issues I will outline.

There are four compensation support schemes available under the TB eradication programme: the live valuation scheme, the income supplement scheme, the depopulation grant scheme, and the hardship grant scheme. All four schemes are fundamental components of the TB eradication programme in seeking to compensate farmers for the enormous burden of TB outbreaks. All four schemes have significant shortcomings, however, that must be addressed in the TB programme.

To provide all farmers who experience a TB breakdown with the opportunity to have their animals assessed and valued independently, a number of changes to the current live valuation scheme are required. The IFA agreed an independent live valuation scheme with the Government in the early 2000s to provide all farmers with the opportunity to have their animals assessed independently to determine the price they would be expected to attain if offered for sale on the open market. Through the subsequent inclusion of administrative controls by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine such as penalty points for valuers, bureaucratic non-market reflective guidelines for categorisation of animals and the compilation of guideline prices by departmental personnel from inappropriate data sets, the independence of the scheme has been eroded by the Department.

In order to re-establish the independence of the scheme, the IFA is calling for the independent valuers to be allowed to independently value the animals in the scheme without interference from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The summary of market prices must be compiled from an agreed appropriate data set independently of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The income supplement scheme and depopulation grant scheme must be amended to better reflect the actual income loss incurred by farms experiencing TB breakdowns where animals are removed and cannot be replaced until the restriction is lifted by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. These losses are particularly acute on dairy farms where cows are in full production and on suckler farms where cows rearing calves are removed. The IFA has carried out a detailed analysis of the impact of these events on income, based on information from the Teagasc national farm survey over a three-year period

from 2015 to 2017. The respective losses over a 12-month period are €1,320 for dairy cows, €672 for suckler cows and €432 for other animals.

The current payments in these schemes are not reflective of the actual losses incurred by farmers, do not pay for all animals removed and only pay from the date the animals leave the farm.

The IFA proposes that the income supplement and depopulation grant scheme rates have to reflect the full extent of income loss experienced by farmers. These rates must apply from the date animals are identified as TB reactors on the farm, must be paid on all animals removed from the farm and must be paid for the entire period of restriction under both schemes.

The current hardship grant scheme provides for a payment of €38 per month for each suckler cow and €25 per month for each dairy cow or other bovine animal retained on the farm, subject to a maximum payment of €250 per month. Payments are for a maximum of four months and are only available within the period from 1 November to 30 April. Farmers with an off-farm income are not eligible for these payments. The IFA proposes amending the hardship grant scheme to reflect the full extent of costs incurred by farmers due to the forced maintenance of additional animals.

Dairy farmers must be supported in dealing with the restriction on the sale of newborn dairy calves through the provision of financial assistance with rearing the calves or the grant-aided removal of the calves from the farm under the hardship grant scheme. The TB forum has failed farmers by refusing to recognise and deal with the impact of the TB programme on farmers and their families. This refusal by the Minister and his Department is jeopardising the ongoing support of farmers for the TB programme, hindering progress on important enhancements to the programme and ultimately delaying eradication of the disease. Clearly, protecting the 97% of herds that are free from TB each year must be the priority. However, attempting to achieve this by ignoring and further compounding the impact on the 3% of farmers who, through no fault of their own, experience TB breakdowns is a flawed and unacceptable policy position.

I will now hand over to the IFA's animal health chairman, Mr. Pat Farrell, who is a suckler farmer himself, to outline the IFA's proposals for additional policy measures and reaction to key points in the TB forum interim report.

**Mr. Pat Farrell:** As a member of the TB forum, I would like to say it has been extremely frustrating and difficult to make any progress in having the issues that impact directly on farmers addressed in the forum and to make any real progress in tackling the disease. We have provided the committee with a detailed submission of the proposals made by the IFA to the TB forum. I now wish to give you a summary of the key points in the IFA submission.

The effective management and control of wildlife susceptible to TB is vital in eradicating the disease from the country. This must continue to be the key policy in the enhanced TB programme. The existing wildlife control programme must be appropriately resourced to ensure timely and effective captures take place surrounding all TB outbreaks where wildlife is associated with the breakdown. The programme must be extended to reduce densities of wildlife proactively, including deer, in advance of major infrastructural works and deforestation commencing to protect cattle from TB outbreaks that have been all too common as a result of wildlife disturbance throughout the country. Badger density reduction must continue to be the primary focus of the wildlife unit, with no further expansion to vaccination areas until concerns raised as to its effectiveness have been appropriately addressed. A national deer management

strategy must be developed and resourced to reduce deer density throughout the country to the levels that are sustainable within their natural habitat and at which they are not a disease threat to farm animals. The Department must provide the supports and oversight to implement a deer population reduction programme surrounding TB outbreaks.

All controls imposed on farmers in the TB programme must have a sound scientific basis, contribute directly to the eradication of the disease, and be fully compensated for where they impact on the normal functioning of the farm. TB breakdowns do not recognise county or regional office boundaries or veterinary inspector district electoral divisions, DEDs. The Department's management of TB breakdowns should be based on a breakdown area under single management to ensure consistency of approach and immediate access to all relevant information associated with the outbreak.

A detailed and thorough investigation of all TB breakdowns involving more than one animal must be carried out to identify and remove all sources of the disease in the herd. The Department must target resources and controls at the cases deemed to be the highest risk to remove the disease from the farm. These farms must then be allowed unhindered access to the open competitive market for their animals. These farmers must be fully compensated for all costs and losses incurred during the restriction.

Included in addressing the TB problem on these farms must be earlier consideration, if agreeable, with the herdowner of depopulation to return the farm to normal functioning in the shortest feasible timeframe. Farmers must be supported in removing high-risk animals from their farms if the Department data identify these animals as being at a higher risk of infection or likely to contribute to further TB breakdowns. All herds, once derestricted by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine and following intensive investigation, testing and disinfection, must be allowed free unhindered access to the marketplace.

The most suitable tests and testing approach for Irish conditions and disease levels based on solid scientific data must be used, including determining the feasibility and value of environmental screening for TB. The Department must ensure it has the oversight and effective monitoring systems in place to ensure all TB testing is carried out accurately and correctly.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine should issue detailed biosecurity advice to assist farmers in reducing the contact between cattle and potentially TB-infected wildlife. Where infrastructural on-farm changes are necessary, the Department should provide financial supports to farmers to implement these changes.

The Department has identified a number of factors that contribute to TB breakdowns. In response to these risks, and in particular the findings that herds that experience breakdowns remain at higher risk for prolonged periods, the Department has proposed herd categorisation as a tool to address the risk and expedite eradication. The IFA has strongly rejected all three proposals by the Department on herd categorisation to address this risk. The IFA does not dispute the Department's findings on this risk factor. The objection is to the proposed approach in addressing this risk.

The Department's herd categorisation will only serve to increase the enormous financial burden of the controls on farmers, benefit opportunistic buyers in the marketplace having devalued animals from these herds, and fail to address the substantive issue of the ongoing disease risk left on farms or in the environment.



The IFA supports additional measures in higher risk TB breakdown herds that are scientifically based, practical and feasible to implement and that expedite eradication of the disease. These herds must be fully compensated for the losses and costs imposed by current and any additional measures in the TB programme. The Department has identified that herds with previous TB history are at a higher risk of future breakdowns with TB. This is clearly the result of Department controls on investigations at the time of the breakdown failing to identify and remove all sources of TB from the farm during that episode. The Department proposal to address this issue by categorising these herds and only allowing trade with herds of a similar or lower status is not acceptable to farmers. It is also not feasible to implement for a number of reasons, including severe disruption to the market for live animals. This would potentially include serious implications for the vital live export trade for dairy farmers and suckler farmers and have devastating consequences for those farmers.

All farmers purchasing cattle must have confidence that the cattle allowed for sale by the Department, having met the requirements of the EU trade directives, are at an accepted low risk of being infected with TB. It is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ensure all measures necessary to remove the disease from a farm have been implemented before the farm is allowed to trade. The effect on farmers during this process must be fully compensated for the impact of controls on their farm.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in detailing the costs of the TB eradication programme, fails to recognise the full extent of the costs incurred by farmers. To advance the discussion of the costs and benefits of the TB eradication programme in a fair and accurate manner, the Department must first recognise the full contribution of farmers to the programme. The key and substantial contribution by farmers to the programme, not being recognised by the Department, is the cost of labour incurred by farmers in assembling cattle for TB testing, the associated production loss and disinfection requirements prior to derestriction. It is notable that the only contributions made by farmers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England and Wales to their TB programme are the contributions outlined above, which are clearly accepted and recognised by the relevant authorities in those countries. It must also be recognised that Irish farmers are unique, compared to farmers in those countries, in contributing, directly, an additional €35 million annually to the programme in the form of TB testing costs and disease levies.

The labour and other associated costs incurred by farmers in Ireland's TB programme must be fully recognised. TB testing on most farms extends to more than the assumed two days due to larger herd sizes and the dispersal of animals on fragmented holdings on smaller farms. The annual TB test imposes additional labour requirements and, in some cases, time taken off work to facilitate testing. Additional labour and costs are also experienced by herds where breakdowns occur in carrying out the obligatory disinfection. The Department requires farmers to facilitate almost 9 million animal tests each year. This can involve farmers assembling animals on up to ten occasions in a year. All of this requires significant time and labour inputs. The costs of labour alone, assessed conservatively at the minimum wage, provided by farmers the testing and disinfection components of the programme is €20 million.

It is also accepted that convening animals for TB testing impacts on the productivity of the animals and increases levels of animal health issues experienced on farms. In addition, farmers are required to provide and maintain handling facilities to allow their entire herd to be tested in a safe manner. All these incurred costs must be recognised as contributions made by farmers to the current programme. The costs outlined show an additional €20 million contribution made to the TB eradication programme by farmers which has not been recognised in the Department's

published costings. The real cost of the TB programme, therefore, is €110 million annually. Of that total cost, farmers contribute some 55%, the Department 41% and the EU 9%. Farmers' direct contributions have increased since 2012 by €4.513 million or 15%, while the national Exchequer and EU contributions have reduced by €289,000 and €1.337 million respectively. When the benefits of the programme are assessed this level of funding leaves farmers with an unfair and disproportionate share of the costs in the TB programme.

The suggestion that the benefits of export market access and improved productivity are solely farm-based is incorrect. To estimate the value of a programme which supports a sector, it is necessary to look at the impact expenditure has in the sector in its entirety. In addition, the benefits of eradicating TB from the national herd from a human health perspective must be included when identifying the beneficiaries of TB eradication and, by extension, the appropriate funding levels of all stakeholders. The committee is aware of the income crisis on farms, in particular, suckler cow and beef farms. There are a number of factors that are contributing to it that require significant Government intervention. The current TB programme imposed on farmers by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is further compounding the severe income problem on these farms and can be avoided.

In addition to the proposals from the TB forum, proposals contained in EU Regulation No. 2016/429 of the European Parliament and the Council laying down rules for surveillance, eradication programmes and disease freedom from certain listed and emerging diseases have the potential to dramatically increase the cost of the TB eradication programme in Ireland. The draft regulation lays down rules for surveillance, eradication programmes and disease freedom from certain listed and emerging diseases that will impact directly and primarily on farmers and their livelihoods. In the draft regulation the European Union is proposing a 30-day pre-movement and post-movement test for TB for all animals from herds that are over six months tested in order for herds to maintain TB free status. This targets the lowest TB risk herds in the country for additional controls. There is no justifiable scientific basis for this measure in TB eradication. In addition to the absence of a justified scientific basis for this measure to eradicate TB, the measure severely distorts the normal marketing of animals within Ireland and removes vital competition from the marketplace when associated additional costs and management practices are applied.

The Irish cattle herd consists of a large number of small-scale family farm establishments, with an average herd size of 66 animals based on the latest published Central Statistics Office, CSO, data. These establishments are heavily dependent on the vital competition provided by the live trade for their animals. The costs associated with a pre-movement and post-movement test requirement, or both, renders the live trade for the vast majority of these farmers unviable, removing vital competition from the market. Most of these farmers sell less than five animals. A pre-movement test will impose an additional cost of approximately €100 to the sale. For these low income farmers, this is economically unviable. This requirement will impact severely on marts and throughput in mart sales as the additional costs and inconvenience will drive more farmers directly to factories, removing vital competition to the benefit of factories. This proposal is not scientifically based and will be a major impediment to the competitive marketing of animals. It could cost the Irish TB programme up to €20 million a year, putting Irish farmers at a competitive disadvantage in comparison to other farmers throughout the European Union.

Irish farmers already incur a disproportionate cost burden under the TB programme in comparison with all other farmers throughout the European Union and will not accept this additional cost and anti-competitive measure imposed on them that will not contribute to eradication of



the disease. The 30-day TB pre-movement and post-movement test criteria for the movement of animals within member states must be removed and member states must be provided with the flexibility to apply appropriate measures, based on epidemiological risk assessments of the situation within their country, to determine how herds maintain their disease-free status. The regulation must be consistent with the EU policy of simplification and member state autonomy. It has to provide flexibility for individual member states to apply appropriate and practical measures based on the unique circumstances that pertain and the huge variation in production systems in each country. The only beneficiaries of this proposal will be vets and factories at the expense of farmers, marts and the vital live export trade. The proposal must be rejected outright in the interests of Irish farmers and scientifically credible TB control measures. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, his officials and Irish Members of the European Parliament must reject the EU proposal to impose a 30-day pre-movement test for animals leaving farms that are over six months tested.

I will hand back to the president to conclude.

**Mr. Joe Healy:** The IFA is acutely aware of the importance of maintaining the hard won high health status of our national livestock herd, given that Ireland is such a major exporter of agricultural produce. Farmers have supported and continue to support the efforts of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine in eradicating TB from the national herd at an enormous direct and indirect cost. However, continuation of this support should not be taken for granted if the key issues we have outlined are not addressed. The IFA is demanding the eradication of TB from the national herd in the shortest feasible timeframes. However, this cannot be achieved by further increasing the already enormous and disproportionate cost burden imposed on farmers under the programme. The main contributing factors identified by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine to the current stagnation of progress towards eradication can be addressed in a more practical and effective way that takes account of the farming dynamic in Ireland and the critical importance of animal movements and live exports. This will require upfront investment by the Government in the short term in order for all stakeholders and beneficiaries to accrue the long-term benefits of early eradication of the disease from the national herd. Our submission sets out in detail how this can be achieved.

I thank the Chairman and committee members for their attention. We look forward to taking questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Healy and Mr. Pat Farrell. I call Mr. Hugh Farrell from the ICSA to make his opening statement.

**Mr. Hugh Farrell:** I am joined by Mr. Eddie Punch, our general secretary, and Ms Nessa Fitzgibbon. I thank the Chairman and committee members for giving us the opportunity to appear before them.

The ICSA is firmly committed to the goal of TB eradication, as is every other stakeholder at the forum. However, we are adamant that TB policy cannot succeed if the collateral damage caused to farmers unlucky enough to find themselves with a TB outbreak is excessive. We do not disagree with the target of being TB free by 2030, but all farmers are entitled to fair play. More importantly, individual farmers cannot be expected to pay an unfair share of the cost of achieving TB eradication.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine presented a particular view of where the TB programme should go. Some of it is a reflection of the TB experience in Australia. Key

ideas put forward by the Department included the highly contentious proposal to put herd TB history on mart boards.

On the farm representatives' side of the table, the key issues were fair compensation, using the on-farm market valuation system; allowing independent valuers the freedom to do their job; improvements to other elements of the compensation programme such as the hardship grant and the income supplement; a more comprehensive strategy to deal with the role of wildlife, with a particular concern that wild deer were being ignored; improvements in efficiencies in collecting reactors; better communications to farmers on TB outbreaks and also to explain the measures and strategies underpinning the TB programme; and an acknowledgement that the farmers' share of the TB programme cost was much higher than official figures when the labour costs associated with testing and other tasks related to TB were taken into account.

The key principles that must underpin any TB programme are as follows. Compensation must be fair and reflect 100% of the loss sustained. Wildlife factors need to be fully researched and the results acted on accordingly. All farmers must be treated fairly and those who have outbreaks cannot be isolated or expected to carry an unfair burden. Farmers pay a significant portion of the cost of the programme, but the benefits of TB eradication are much wider and benefit processors, livestock exporters and the economy in general. These benefits should be reflected in the allocation of costs.

The information on TB status is sensitive and can devalue a farmer's livestock values. Therefore, any sharing of such information must be approached with caution in an era in which data protection standards are becoming much more stringent.

We greatly appreciated participating in the TB forum. There was considerable difficulty moving forward at times. It felt one-sided at times where it was all pain and no gain for farmers. I respectfully suggest that, while lessons can be learned from Australia, comparisons are limited by the scale of difference in farm and herd size, systems of farming, and climate.

The TB forum met seven times and there were also a number of bilateral meetings. Arising from the process, an interim report was submitted to the Minister. Our concern is that this interim report will be implemented while the outstanding issues on compensation, cost-benefit analysis, wildlife, including deer, and how to handle herd categorisation remain unresolved.

The ICSA is supportive of the elements of the interim report that were agreed, including the provision of biosecurity advice, breakdown communications, black spot action plans, and the importance of the badger programme. However, the association believes that the outstanding issues are critical for farmers.

The first outstanding issue relates to wildlife. While the introduction of culling of infected badgers has been the most significant development in TB policy for many years, the ICSA is still uncomfortable with badger vaccination as a medium-term replacement for culling. The association also believes that higher levels of badger testing are necessary.

Our greatest concern is the Department's approach to deer as a factor in TB. Its mantra is that there is no evidence that deer are a significant factor in the spread of disease. Yet deer are undoubtedly a problem in black spot areas such as Wicklow. The prevalence of TB in deer in Wicklow has been shown to be between 8% and 16%, according to two studies. Outside of Wicklow, only three out of 73 deer tested were positive, which is a rate of 4%.

The ICSA cannot understand the Department's reluctance on this issue. We believe it is ur-

gent to conduct targeted research in this area with a view to developing a programme for more sustained deer culling in badly affected areas. Even in Wicklow, where farmers are adamant that deer is a significant factor and where research shows higher than normal levels, the Department's approach is to leave it to voluntary culling, without any official intervention, which is not good enough. The association believes we need urgent research into the role of deer and an appropriate Department-led programme to cull deer if research results warrant it.

Another issue is compensation and cost benefit. The stakeholders' forum did not resolve outstanding issues on compensation. A proposal on herd information being put up on mart boards was highly controversial. However, the amazing thing is that this proposal came from the Department, which did not seem to realise this meant decimating the value of livestock for farmers who had TB in the past but who are now clear.

No TB strategy will be acceptable or workable unless compensation is seen to be fair. It was unfortunate that any credence was given to the notion that less than 100% compensation was the optimum strategy for TB eradication.

I refer to what the ICSA sees as the main points of disagreement on compensation. There is concern that the Department is putting pressure on the independent valuers and second-guessing their valuations, in addition to the fact that both sides are entitled to appeal. Upper limits on certain categories of breeding stock are unwarranted and lead to unfair outcomes for farmers. The €500,000 spent on sending departmental officials to marts to report on prices was utterly wasteful given that this information is widely available and could be done as a desktop exercise. Limitations on the supplementary payments are a hardship in certain cases. Income supplement should apply regardless of what proportion of the herd is removed, and the payment should apply from the date of restriction. *Pro rata* payments should be made in respect of part months for income supplement in order that each day of restriction is paid for. The income supplement rate for suckler cows of €38 and for all other animals of €25.39 needs to be increased significantly. The hardship grant, which is to help with additional winter feed costs, is not payable to any farmer with off-farm income, which we believe is very unfair. The forum has decided to get an independent report on cost benefit analysis of the TB programme and the on-farm market valuation, OMFV element.

The ICSA has outlined its view that farmers, in addition to their €32 million financial contribution, also contribute a massive amount in terms of unpaid labour. We have assessed the labour costs farmers incurred in testing cattle to be in the order of €12.5 million. If bookwork and other TB-associated tasks are taken into account, the figure is even higher. The association believes that Department costs of €26 million can be reduced. Unfortunately, even though we looked for it, we did not get a breakdown of this substantial sum. The association believes much money could be saved in this regard, through, for example, greater use of technical agricultural officers, TAOs, rather than vets, forcing factories to pay full market value for TB reactors that still end up in the food chain, and elimination of unnecessary duplication in staff deployment.

The next issue is herd categorisation. Fortunately, the forum did not accept the idea of putting TB information up on boards. However, we are concerned that herd categorisation needs to be managed carefully to ensure data rights are not infringed upon and that livestock in TB-free herds is not devalued. It is unacceptable that codes are appearing on letters to farmers that indicate their herd risk status when most farmers have no clue what these codes mean. It was agreed to review this, and a new coding system has been suggested, but we remain wary about what use these codes might be put to at a later stage. The ICSA is also dubious about whether it is appropriate to look back seven years or more at a herd that has not had TB since and to infer

that such a herd is less secure in terms of its TB risk.

The association is not happy that the interim report is now being taken as agreed without the outstanding issues being resolved. We went to the forum on the understanding that everything would be dealt with and that nothing would be agreed until everything was agreed in full. The ICOSA wants the forum reconvened to examine the conclusions of the independent consultants on cost benefit and OMFV. Outstanding issues relating to compensation need to be faced up to by the Minister. Eradication of TB will not be possible unless there is a more robust response to wildlife infection such as the deer problem in Wicklow. I thank members for their time. We are happy to take questions.

**Chairman:** I will ask one question before I call members. There is no doubt that TB has cost farmers and the industry a significant amount over many years. We have previously planned to have TB eradicated by certain dates, and a significant amount has been spent since those dates were put in place. The latest date to be put in place is 2030. Is that date achievable? I ask the representatives of the IFA to respond first, followed by the ICOSA.

**Mr. Pat Farrell:** I have to be careful about what I say.

**Chairman:** I am asking the question.

**Mr. Pat Farrell:** Is it a personal question?

**Chairman:** No. It is a general question. It is an ambitious target, which was not achieved by the dates previously set.

**Mr. Joe Healy:** It cannot be achieved under the current system, wherein the costs to farmers are increasing. The 2030 target is ambitious without the required level playing field. The only people being continuously asked to increase their contributions are farmers, who are getting very little in return.

**Chairman:** That is my point. The programme has cost farmers a significant amount over many years.

**Mr. Joe Healy:** We are the only ones paying for it, and have increased our contribution by 15%.

**Mr. Pat Farrell:** I will give an example of what it has cost farmers. My neighbour has gone down with 110 animals since March in four tests. He had one test in March, a blood test in May, a second test in July and another in September. He is getting there, and currently only two of his animals are gone. He operated a closed herd and never had TB. Following an investigation, the Department thinks badgers are the cause, but we are still not sure. That farmer is down €20,000 a month in his milk cheque, but he only gets €5,000 from the Department. That is just an example of what is going on in everyday farming life. Everyone seems to be paid out of the TB programme, including departmental staff and vets. Farmers do not want to be paid for their labour, but it is not even recognised.

**Chairman:** I asked whether the target was achievable. I understand the staff point.

**Mr. Tomás Bourke:** The target is certainly ambitious. It is achievable if farmers' support for the programme is maintained, but it will require significant buy-in from those who are putting significant resources and finances into the programme. That is why the proposals from the forum have been so disappointing for farmers, because they want to achieve eradication of this

disease more than anyone. It is disappointing that no effort has been made to bring them on this journey and implement the necessary measures to prevent outbreaks, which would require significant proactive investment in wildlife work, and deal at source with the problems on farms when first identified. It is clear from the breakdown map of the country over the past ten or 15 years that outbreaks primarily occur in the same areas, as the Chairman will be well aware from his part of the country. The Department's claim, therefore, that animal movement contributes significantly to the disease does not stack up based on the figures. An environmental issue remains in those areas. If the Department's claim were true, we would have significant problems in the fattening counties, but that is not the case. Instead, we are finding TB in the Burren in Clare, a suckler area from which weanlings are sold, in Wicklow and in other areas with similar demographics. The 2030 goal is achievable if the Department is prepared to invest in putting the necessary structures in place and support farmers on that journey.

**Mr. Eddie Punch:** Partnership is required to hit this target. However, that means equal partnership, where the wisdom and understanding of farmers who have suffered this disease for nearly 60 years is given equal respect. They know what is going on.

I refer to the wildlife question. In the past, we saw a step change and improvement once the badger issue was addressed. There had been a continuous curve on TB, which stepped down significantly when badgers were dealt with. We are now experiencing a similar problem with wild deer. As has been mentioned, the same issues crop up in the same counties. Our members are adamant that deer encroaching on land coincides with many black spots. The Department is burying its head in the sand. The phrase it uses - let us be careful about it - is that there is no evidence, but there is never evidence unless we look for it. The ICSA is stating we should look back at what was done with badgers when important research programmes were undertaken in County Offaly, about which we all know, but, first, we have to establish whether there is a problem and then what would happen if we were to cull and get results. The position is now the same with deer. On testing, only three deer out of 73 were found to be reactors. It is a ridiculously small amount of testing, but it still represent a 4% rate of TB. It is the same as is in the cattle population and we all accept that there is still a problem among the cattle population. The level of TB in deer in County Wicklow is lot higher because of a *laissez-faire* attitude there. A committee has been set up and I hope some culling will take place, but this is not good enough. There has to be a programme. We do not say we should work away and that people can cull badgers if they like. That will not solve the problem. Is it achievable by 2030? There has to be a major change in mindset to move to a partnership model.

These are small details, but they are significant. We continuously come across members who say they cannot eradicate TB and that they need full herd depopulation. Although, in theory, the Department is in favour of this, in practice it seems to be reluctant to grant it. It is very frustrating for a farmer whose herd is breaking down repeatedly. Of course, it is awful to lose an entire herd, but if a herd continuously goes down for a number of years, the farmer knows that it is not working. If his or her view is that full herd depopulation is the solution, we find it strange that the Department is reticent to agree. There should be a partnership. Farmers should not be told what to do.

**Mr. Hugh Farrell:** I have seen various cases recently. It may be for the Department to step up a gear with regard to biosecurity. It is always on to farmers about biosecurity, but it does not move fast enough to deal with big or new breakdowns and lets the problem lie. There can be a break of one or two months after a herd is tested and found to be clear, but the Department does not go back and use the history of the farm to depopulate it. Is this led by cost control



issues, rather than by the need for eradication? We need to be very strong on this issue. If the Department was prepared to spend more initially, instances similar to what happened in counties Monaghan and Cavan and others could be controlled. A herd of 42 may leave a farmer's yard from which perhaps other cattle should also be taken, but the Department is reluctant to take them. That is a question with regard to what is achievable by 2030. Perhaps biosecurity standards might change the programme.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I am conscious that one or two statements have been made that will cause concern to consumers. A huge amount of money has been spent on TB eradication over 70 years. I think back to the eradication of brucellosis which was achieved by taking hard decisions and farmers having to spend a serious amount of money. Thankfully, we did get rid of it. It is fairly certain that if we continue what we are doing in the same way, we will not get rid of TB.

I wish to refer to a number of areas where I see huge difficulties with the scheme, as it stands, and where farmers suffer huge losses. Young stock must be sold to feedlots. We have live valuation of reactors, but I know of a couple of cases in my constituency in which the price offered for young stock is derisory and there is no comeback. Thankfully, fodder is extremely plentiful as we head into winter, but many farmers do not have the infrastructure to carry young stock through it. They do not have slurry storage facilities or a way to carry stock through it physically, even if there was enough food available. If stock must be sold from a farm where there are reactors, there is a need to have a proper evaluation system.

The live valuation system agreed to ten or 12 years ago is not the same as what is being implemented now. There is most definitely too much departmental interference. The live valuation system should be independent. It was introduced to give what the animal would make at the mart on a given day. The categorisation of animals bears similarity to the beef grid. It is a way of reducing the payments made for animals. The live valuation system for reactors must be independent.

Badger vaccination has been mentioned. Approximately 20 years ago there was a pilot project in County Offaly and the results were remarkable. The incidence of TB was greatly reduced. Badger vaccination must be stepped up and increased. If we are serious, we must stop badgers from being a transmitter of the disease.

I have raised the issue of deer culling on numerous occasions and cannot understand the Department's attitude to deer. Yesterday I read in a newspaper that concerns had been raised about the amount of deer culling taking place and the figure of 41,000 was given. I do not know whether it is accurate, but farmers in west Wicklow would have been delighted to see that figure. A substantial number of farmers in west Wicklow have stopped keeping bovine animals because they could never be clear of the disease. There are no longer statistics for the system because they do not have cattle to test. The only conclusion on the Department to which I can come is that it is putting its head in the sand because of the cost of deer culling.

We will have a debate later on the amount of forestry we need because of climate change. Forestry brings its own livestock and wildlife challenges and deer are definitely among them. I have been on farms where there have been major breakdowns in the past 18 months and a large number of reactors have been taken out. In all cases deer had grazed on the farms in previous months. To say, therefore, that deer are not an issue is to ignore the reality. The number of post mortems carried out on deer is extremely low. Where they are carried out TB shows up. If the rate is 3% or 4%, it is more than enough to cause the spread of TB throughout the country.



Deer travel over vast distances. They can travel ten or 12 miles without any problem. It is said badgers carry the disease and that deer transmit it, but it does not matter. They are a vehicle for spreading the disease. Therefore, if we are serious about controlling TB, the deer issue must be tackled.

If a herd is classified as being clear of TB, it is clear of it and there should be no second-class status when it comes to selling animals. If there was TB in a herd six or 12 months ago and there have been two clear tests since, no other question marks should be placed over that herd. If the Department is placing a question mark over it, we should look at the Department's door because if it had done its job correctly and the source of the infection had been cleared out, it would not be an issue.

To go back to the eradication of brucellosis, it was the pre-movement test that helped to get rid of it. The pre-movement test got brucellosis out of the country. I see in the submissions of both groups mention that cattle that are six months post testing should be subject to a pre-movement test. I would accept that as long as the Department carries the cost of it. What we have been doing until now has reduced instances of TB to a certain level but no further. There is a 12-month period, after a test, for a person to sell his or her animals. If the Department thinks this initiative can bring about a significant improvement, let it carry the cost. It might be money well spent in the short term. It will actually probably increase the number of reactors in the short term, but if the Department think this is a tool worth having, let it carry the cost of it.

The testing would obviously create an inconvenience for farmers. Brucellosis was dealt with in the past at a serious cost and inconvenience, but we got rid of brucellosis and enjoy brucellosis-free status. Some people said to us in the past that we would never achieve that status, but strenuous and rigorous testing got to it. It cost farmers a fortune to get rid of it but it was successfully got rid of. If the Department feels that cattle, six months after the test, are posing a risk to the health of the national herd, it should carry the cost of the pre-movement test. I would like to see instances of cattle that have been moved into another herd and shown up as reactors, coming from a clean herd. If that is the view of the Department, I would not rule it out completely as long as it carries the cost.

**Senator Paul Daly:** I welcome both deputations here today.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I should also have done that. I thank them for their presentations.

**Senator Paul Daly:** They offered a comprehensive report and Deputy Cahill has covered almost everything. I would like to take the Chairman's question a bit further and ask both groups to elaborate a small bit more on the TB forum and the target of 2030. Has the setting up of the TB forum enhanced the chances of eradication by 2030? I am getting an impression from some of what I am reading here that there is perhaps a sense of "us" and "them" between our guests and the Department. Is that hindering the process to an extent? Is there a bit of a stand-off? Is the forum a worthwhile exercise at all or is it a toothless tiger like previous fora we have had? Is it making any impression on the ultimate aim of eradication? If it is not and if our guests were in the driving seat or had more power in determining its agenda and functions in the future, what changes would they like to see? As I say, from reading the reports of the IFA and the ICSA, the forum seems to be a talking shop where our guests and the Department are on opposite sides of the fence and not much progress is being made.

Compensation and the wildlife issue aside, which both organisations have documented very well here, is there one particular direction our guests would like to see the eradication pro-

gramme going in? What do they think would be the most effective change or direction for it to take? We all know the issues when it comes to compensation and what it is costing the farmer. We all know about the well-documented wildlife issues that seem to be the kernel of the issue in many areas, in particular the deer and the badgers. Is anything else being missed, from our guests' deliberations within the forum, in particular?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank our guests for their presentations. No more than Senator Paul Daly, I want to hear our guests' thoughts about the forum and what they think it has achieved.

Has anything been addressed through the forum in the line of hardship money? I know that people with a small farm might be working and, because they are working, they are out the door, so to speak.

I will address the issue of the badgers and deer. There were eight or nine deer, eight or nine years ago, one of which went down with TB, and they were all got rid of at the time. Let everyone who is watching understand this. We are not saying that we need to get rid of every deer in the country, but if they were allowed to run wild and loose, they would take over a country. Everything in moderation, even moderation itself. We must make sure there is a certain amount of culling every year, especially in the blackspots.

The pygmy deer is a new deer in our country that I think originated from the East. It has landed into places in Ireland and is causing more problems even than TB by frightening the daylight out of people.

What are the views of our guests on forestry? Do they think the two things are running hand in hand?

I would like the thoughts of our guests on the following. I have seen people who have been zero grazing over the past two or three years. The cows would not be going out at all and large parts of their herds have gone down, which is baffling. I do not know if the problem is the fresh grass that is coming in, or whatever. Has any research been done on that?

We keep hearing there is plenty of money for destocking. On the other side of it, I know one farmer who lost 40 cows and then lost 16 more. A person must cut to the chase, sooner or later, and decide if he or she is going to destock. At this time of year, considering the lengths to which a farmer has to go to stay destocked, he or she will be looking at next year, to put it simply. Will he or she be back milking or another type of farming? Farmers seem to be dragging their feet and saying that Dublin has to decide. Dublin is getting the blame for it, that it is not coming up with the money. Are our guests hearing that and facing it? Are clear decisions being made around the country?

I agree with Deputy Cahill about testing. There is a lot of uncertainty. An animal could be sent to a factory, or whatever, and they could be told they had lesions even though they were clear on a test. There could be another animal for which nothing showed up and, a few months later, it is a different story. Many farmers just cannot get their heads around what is happening with the whole TB scenario.

**Mr. Hugh Farrell:** Deputy Cahill asked numerous questions. Selling young stock into feedlots is an issue I brought up because many of them are worth very little. Feedlots are generally buying strong cattle that will finish within 90 or 100 days and do not have risk attaching to them. These ones here are taking the full risk. Compensation, as was being spoken about,

needs to be put in place where they are valued and sold in as if they were going down a reactor into a feedlot status. On the other hand, perhaps compensation should be in place for feeding the remaining cattle on the farm, if they are young, if it is a suckler herd or a calf-to-store system. They do not have the option of selling on. It would preferably be compensation on going to a feedlot status and valuing a cow the same as a reactor would be valued.

The live valuation system was great when it was brought in and I question the changes that have been made in recent years. There was a lot of resistance at the forum, more than there was at bilateral meetings. Some €500,000 might be spent by the Department just gathering information. The valuers are qualified people, doing their jobs, like anyone else who is doing a job. They are able to do the job they are licensed to do and that should be acceptable. We have to accept farmers in a mart who are selling for us or whoever else, so the Department should not be questioning their valuations. They are questioning the capability of those people as a trader or valuer. We should not be tolerating that. It is costing the taxpayer far more than it is gaining money for them.

Badger vaccinations are in certain counties at present. They were perhaps supposed to have contributed a bit to the outbreak in Monaghan. We are not sure of that, but it was mentioned at the time. The vaccine is being given to the badgers that have been snared. A vet then has to try to come out and give them that vaccine, and maybe an anaesthetic as well in case someone gets hurt. All of that needs to be addressed. The vaccine being administered is not freely available within the EU. If it was, then anyone could administer it. A proper cage or the like would save a lot of expense and may be more appropriate. Another issue is that, when badgers receive a vaccination, an anaesthetic is used and they are left to recover, but hypothermia can set in during the winter or cold weather and some may die. Since they have been given a live vaccine, a concern is that the cattle around them will pick it up. We do not know enough about this. Our greatest fear about administering a live vaccine has to do with the fact that the badger itself has never been tested, which means that we do not know whether it is carrying the disease. If it is given the live vaccine on top of the disease, is that only spreading the disease further? I do not know whether live vaccinations are a good idea.

A deer cull was mentioned. We have been pushing hard on this matter for a long time. Some €3.5 million of the TB fund is being given to the wildlife section. That section never sat on the forum at any stage. It never spoke for itself. The Department spoke for it instead. It is us - the ICSEA - who need to take responsibility. First, the wildlife section should control the number of deer in the country regardless of disease. Second, deer are spreading the disease. As we have heard around the table at this meeting, they are seen as contributing to it everywhere - Clare, Tipperary, Cork and even Mayo. This needs to be taken into account. There needs to be a project, just as there was in respect of badgers in Offaly, to identify and deal with the issue. The Department needs to take responsibility for the deer situation.

In terms of the 3% or 4%, if there is a TB breakdown but a farm gets two clear herd tests, then it must automatically wait for six months until the next test. At least, that is what farmers always believed. I know of a man who went clear in November. In January, he got a new letter stating that he would have a test by 3 February, but he had until 3 July. Once 3 February came around, his herd was automatically locked down again even though he did not get a six-month break. His income supplement was cut off because he was classed as having a clear herd. A six-month break following two clear tests was always the wording used to describe a clear herd. The herd has to be identified and the status needs to be removed. Either a herd is clear or it is not. People's incomes are being destroyed. One is told that one has a window of two or three

months in which to sell animals. In his case, it was Christmas time and early January so there were no sales. If he had gone looking to sell, the prices would have been bad. The current timeline is unrealistic and must be reconsidered. We must examine this issue and revert to the previous situation. I do not know from where the law came. It is not on the regular books.

I agree about carrying the cost of pre-movement testing. We will push that matter further.

Senator Daly mentioned the TB forum. I thought it was valuable to a certain extent. It opened different views or doors. Perhaps Mr. Punch will elaborate further. There were groups with different vested interests around the table. As time went on, we found that, where compensation or other real issues were concerned, only a certain element of people were willing to take money out of their own pockets - the farmer, the Department and the EU. Why were veterinary, wildlife, forestry and other bodies, including Bord Bia, around the table when they were putting nothing into the programme? They were able to help determine where the forum went. That needs to be addressed. The forum needs to be tightened up so that more people can have a say on the issue and the forum can continue.

**Mr. Eddie Punch:** The forum was useful, but there were 18 or so groups around the table. It should be reconvened to discuss the cost-benefit analysis, on-farm market valuations and the wildlife issue. To a considerable extent, however, TB eradication is a matter for farm organisations to thrash out with the Department.

I agree on several points raised at this meeting, for example, off-farm income being taken into account in the hardship grant. A limit of €250 is unacceptable. Someone whose herd is locked up for the winter has a substantial additional feed cost. The existence of a small off-farm income is not enough reason to say that a person has not been impacted by a TB breakdown.

The TB forum has been a useful exercise, but how it would arrive at decisions was not properly defined. At many meetings, there was no consensus or the views of people who did not have skin in the game were taken into account in a way that should not have happened. The farmers were paying a substantial part of the bill, so their views should have carried more weight. We would raise questions about the forum. For example, outside expert opinion might be useful to the forum, but it should not be a voting part of the forum.

**Mr. Hugh Farrell:** To follow up on that, the forum was initially established to work on disease eradication. A lot of time was put into it. A professor from UCD attended and different issues were discussed. It was all based on what happened in Australia in terms of catheterisation and the mart boards. Every day it was conveyed, from different angles, that this was the way forward. Too much time was spent at that instead of listening to the farming organisations, which pointed out that such an approach was not suitable for farmers in this country, and moving on. We spent too many days repeating ourselves and a lot of time was lost. We were never going to make up ground using that approach because it was not workable. The numbers were too different - it was ranches against farms. Much of the forum's downfall was the insistence on pushing that approach.

Deputy Fitzmaurice asked about forestry. There is a grant for fencing forestry. Normally, that fencing is only maintained for the first five years or so, especially where there is tree felling, but it should be maintained the whole way through because wildlife moves. The grant even covers cheap fencing to stop small wildlife from moving across farms. It should be compulsory. Many of the farms in question are able to claim farm subsidies and the maintenance of a hard boundary should be scrutinised the same as on any other farm and addressed in terms of

forestry.

Regarding zero grazing, a farm in Offaly lost a lot of cows. The farmer maintained that it was because of the wildlife that was travelling across the farm. A herd has the choice of where to eat in a zero grazing situation, as the grass is cut and brought in. That is the biggest sign.

As Mr. Punch said regarding the hardship grant, €250 is of no value to any farmer in today's world, particularly when off-farm income is included. That income element will have to be removed.

**Mr. Tomás Bourke:** Senator Daly and Deputy Fitzmaurice asked what the IFA's view on the TB forum was. To give some background in advance of the answer, when the Minister announced that he was setting up the forum, the IFA identified the key issues for farmers that it would have to address. Fundamental was addressing the shortcomings in the compensation schemes - the hardship grant, the income supplement scheme and the live valuation scheme. While the objective is to protect the 97% of herds that do not have TB, it cannot impose a higher cost burden on the 3% unfortunate enough to have it. This feeds into the question of how we solve the problem. We solve the problem by looking after the 3% and focusing the energies and the resources on supporting those men, not by stigmatising their animals or their herds, by categorising them and half-opening the gate to allow them trade with some farmers and not with others. The onus is on the Department to rid that farm of the disease, as Deputy Cahill mentioned, and then allowing free trade.

The IFA's view is that the TB forum has failed farmers because it has failed to address the key areas on their behalf. Furthermore, because of that it has failed to put forward reasonable or necessary control changes to attain the ambitious date of 2030. The interim report published by the forum makes only two recommendations referred to as significant policy changes. One is continuing the wildlife programme, which is already in existence.

In response to Senator Daly's question about what we would see as the most effective changes, there has been a lack of focus on proactively preventing outbreaks caused by wildlife. That includes deer and badger that are being disturbed and stressed throughout the country by road developments, wind farms, afforestation and deforestation. They cause outbreaks downstream in the places they move to. As a result, farms throughout the country have new outbreaks every year. If we are serious about eradicating TB, we have to stop new outbreaks occurring. The Department must focus proactively in these areas and reduce the density of wildlife that is susceptible to TB and is infecting our farms.

The second point is heavily dependent on the Department investing in what it believes to be the solution. The Department has put forward proposals that it says will achieve eradication by 2030. If it is as confident in its proposals as we are, why does it not invest in the short term in supporting the farmers its proposals will affect? Everybody would accrue a benefit in the long term if these proposals are to be so successful. They need to go further. If there are problems and difficulties on farms and in areas that have a poor history, these farms need to be fully supported and helped to farm their way through this. They do not need to be stigmatised in the marketplace or derestricted, which reduces their eligibility for support payments, and restricted again three months later, which means the slate is wiped clean and the State has a significant saving in compensation.

It is the same for depopulation. There are continuing outbreaks among farmers who are restricted for significant periods, derestricted, and restricted again, and there is a continual refusal



to depopulate these farms. Let these men clean out, disinfect and get back to normal farm practice. Unfortunately, the decision seems to be based on finance rather than the veterinary view. Nobody could say the Department is successfully addressing a TB outbreak that has continued for two or three years with maybe a two or three-month window of derestriction in that time. TB is not being addressed on that farm. That farmer is being held to ransom by the failure of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. That is not acceptable. If that disease is in those animals, they all need to be taken out and the man let restock to kick off again.

As for zero grazing, I am aware of the herd owner who has been depopulated in Deputy Fitzmaurice's area. It may or may not be a contributory factor. The ultimate issue is that regardless of whether the herd owner was zero grazing, there was obviously TB in the vicinity, whether it was brought in or the wildlife got access to where the animals were being fed. Zero grazing almost replicates what happens for six months every winter-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** To be clear, I am saying that there are instances in areas.

**Mr. Tomás Bourke:** There are.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I am not picking on one particular person.

**Mr. Tomás Bourke:** I understand the Deputy, but my point is that zero grazing effectively replicates six months of the winter feeding for 12 months, but it all comes back to the fact that there is obviously infected wildlife in the area and that may make the outbreak worse because the animals are in a confined space for a longer period. It comes down to addressing the issue in wildlife, reducing the density to reduce the interaction with the cattle and the risk of a breakdown.

I will respond to a few points that Deputy Cahill made because I agree with several of them. The sale of young stock to feedlots has two effects on farms in a TB outbreak. One is the restriction, which results in additional animals being maintained which adds enormous cost and difficulty. The second is where significant numbers of animals have been removed and there is a significant income loss. In the first instance, the IFA proposal is that the hardship grant scheme would recognise the additional costs associated with that and support the farmers through it, allowing them then to choose whether to sell the animals at a significantly reduced rate to the feedlots, which is their only option, or invest the support in managing and maintaining them.

The IFA position on badger vaccination is reserved, considering the experience in Monaghan. The reduction in the numbers of badgers throughout the country has been very effective and has significantly contributed to the health status of the badger since the early 2000s. It is hoped that vaccination will be the next phase. We are concerned, however, because of the experience in Monaghan, which has continued for the past 18 months to two years with little indication of a significant improvement. We have asked for a detailed analysis of the situation and for a detailed investigation to identify what has contributed to it, because unfortunately that area is consistent with the vaccination area in that county or the most difficult part of it.

The pre-movement test is an EU proposal for the clearest herds in the country. A farmer in a problem is in a four-month test cycle. This proposal precludes any of those herds from having to do that. The highest risk areas in the country are not required under this proposal to do a pre-movement test. In the areas with the lowest incidence, where there is only one test a year, no TB breakdowns, and the farmers are not contiguous, they are exposed to a pre-movement test obligation. The Department's figures show that only 7.5% of breakdowns in the country



annually are related to animal movements. We are concerned about the return on investment of potentially up to €20 million on a pre-movement test when we are looking for significantly less to address the compensatory deficiencies that will allow us to put in place meaningful measures in the problem areas to address this in the ten-year window set out.

**Mr. Pat Farrell:** There is no doubt that the TB programme has cost farmers and the State an enormous sum. We came from a high of 110,000 reactors in 1965 to 40,000 a year in 2001, when the wildlife programme was implemented, and we are now down to 15,000. The Department representatives on the TB forum seem reluctant to deal with some of our problems. All the farm bodies asked if the money could be front-loaded, because if the objective is to get rid of TB by 2030, it would surely cost less between 2025 and 2030 and that money could be front-loaded in the programme. The Department was reluctant to do that even though the costs and benefits would decide who would pay what into the programme. We found that incredible, and because our issues have not been addressed, we have not given our blessing to the interim report, but the TB forum seems to have gone ahead.

The Department was told that if the inconclusives were such a problem, it should take them out and compensate the farmer. The Department was totally reluctant to do that. If it is leaving the inconclusives behind, it is not serious about getting rid of the disease, because if there are problems in them, they will only resurface later. There were six pilot areas for badger vaccination, Monaghan being one. This was the area in which the incidence of TB exploded. It was interesting to note that, after a while, it cleared more quickly in areas outside the vaccination area than inside it. For that reason, we would be reluctant to give our blessing to the vaccination programme because there is something going on. If badgers are being vaccinated in an area and the area beside it that it is equally as badly affected by TB seems to be cleared of the disease more quickly, that has to be explained, but it has not been.

**Chairman:** I am conscious that Deputy Stanley has just arrived. Does he have questions to put to the delegations?

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I apologise for arriving late. Unfortunately, I had another meeting that I had organised with Bord na Móna prior to the organisation of this meeting. My only question relates to the deer issue. No farmer has the right to cull deer. Is this presenting a major problem?

**Chairman:** Let me add a related question. There is a lot of talk about forestry and the advantages it may have from a climate change point of view. Is there a possibility it may inhibit the reaching of the particular climate change target set by 2030?

**Mr. Tomás Bourke:** I omitted to refer to that issue which was brought up by previous speakers.

The IFA has made detailed proposals in respect of two issues related to deer. The first deals the substantive issue of TB as it affects the national deer population. A national deer management forum was established with an independent chairperson. It held a number of meetings up until about 18 months ago. Unfortunately, it has not convened since. Its purpose was to establish, as suggested in the title, a national deer management programme to sustain deer numbers at levels that could be maintained within their natural habitat and to avoid increased interaction with cattle and increased disease risks. The first component that must happen at the higher level, effectively outside the TB component and ERAD, to some extent, is the management of deer. We must re-establish the national deer management forum and have some meaningful

output from it.

The second proposal, in respect of which there has been some activity stemming from the forum before it ceased, was for targeted pilot areas. Clearly, where deer are associated with a TB outbreak, the same approach applied to badgers has to be applied to deer, involving a density reduction surrounding the breakdown area. It has to be co-ordinated by State agencies that have access to all of the information required. Unfortunately, as referenced, deer cover a huge hinterland. Therefore, there is no point in trying to manage deer on one or two farms specific to the TB outbreak. One has to take in a far broader area if it is to have a meaningful impact. That has to be done before we work on the national strategy because these instances are happening and have huge health implications on farms. This second component needs to be addressed because we are aware of five to eight regions where the density of deer is at an unacceptable level because they are encroaching onto farmland. If we fail to address the national deer population, when we sit here year next year, we will have double the population. Ten years ago deer were specific to County Wicklow and one or two other regions. Now there are very few counties which do not have some area in which there is an issue with deer encroaching onto farmland, causing huge damage to crops, trees and fences and increasing the risk of disease.

**Mr. Eddie Punch:** Not all forestry is owned by private landowners. Coillte also owns land and has indicated that it is unhappy with deer encroaching onto its forestry plantations. There is an interesting question about who is responsible for the fencing of land. Traditionally, if his or her stock encroached onto someone else's farm, a farmer would have said it was his or her responsibility to maintain or repair the fence. Coillte does not feel it has any responsibility to fence its forests to stop deer coming through its plantation and going onto farmland. We take a different view. We believe Coillte must take responsibility. It is a very profitable company. Coillte says it does not own the deer so therefore it is not responsible for fencing them in. The issue must be looked at. It is a bit of a cop-out.

**Chairman:** Did that arise in the forum?

**Mr. Eddie Punch:** No, it came up with meetings we had with Coillte, in particular regarding Wicklow. We made the strong representation that Coillte could not just wash its hands of it and allow its fences to fall down. It speaks to the fact that if there is to be more afforestation the burden of fencing around forestry must be designed in the expectation that deer will be a problem.

**Mr. Hugh Farrell:** I will follow on from that point. Many forests tender out the culling of deer to various groups. In the course of being hunted the deer are racing and they break down many boundary fences. That is a big complaint coming from many farmers.

In response to what Deputy Stanley said on deer, our proposal was that the Department with responsibility for wildlife, through the TB programme, must take responsibility for the national deer herd and stop the expansion of the deer herd which is spreading the disease to farms. We addressed the issue earlier. This issue continues to arise because nobody wants to take responsibility. It is not the responsibility of farmers. If it were any other bovine we would all be responsible for them but wildlife is classed in a different way. Someone has to take it on, whether that is the National Parks and Wildlife Service or the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. Pressure should be applied in that regard.

**Mr. Joe Healy:** The IFA is fully supportive of the eradication programme. We have played along with it and supported it in every way we could. That support from farmers cannot be

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taken for granted. The cost to farmers currently is disproportionate. It is up to the Department and the Minister to act. If there had been an adequate response from the Department in time to bovine viral diarrhoea, BVD, we would have addressed it at this stage but there was not. We can at least learn from that. It is up to the Minister and the Department to do something. We have outlined what needs to be done in our submission. Farmers will not be found wanting if the support and infrastructure are put in place by the Department.

**Chairman:** I thank those who contributed. The committee began the conversation on TB last February. The farm organisations, including those present, requested that they would come before the committee. We decided at the time that we would wait until the interim report issued. Following the wait, we now see exactly whether progress has been made. The departmental officials were in earlier. We will bring them in again as soon as we can to see if we can get more answers from them on issues that remain unanswered today. We have a clearer picture of the questions that need to be answered and how to progress to the next stage. I hope we can hold such a meeting in the coming weeks to progress matters. I thank the witnesses very much for their attendance today. It is very much appreciated.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.40 p.m. until 3 p.m. on Tuesday, 15 October 2019.