

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT, BIA AGUS MUIR

JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

Déardaoin, 27 Bealtaine 2021

Thursday, 27 May 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

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

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

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

Forestry Issues: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Kehoe.

Before we begin, I remind members that, in the context of the current Covid-19 restrictions, only the Chairman and staff are present in the committee room. All other members must join remotely from elsewhere in the parliamentary precincts. The secretariat can issue invitations to join the meeting on Microsoft Teams. Members may not participate in the meeting from outside of the parliamentary precincts. I ask members to mute their microphone when not making a contribution, to use the raise hand function to indicate and to note that messages sent to the meeting chat are visible to all participants. Members of the committee will be prioritised for speaking slots.

The agenda for today is the ongoing issues in the forestry sector with officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I welcome Mr. Colm Hayes, assistant secretary; Mr. Seamus Dunne, senior inspector, and Mr. Eamon O'Doherty, project manager. They have all joined remotely. We have received the opening statement and briefing material, which have already been circulated to members. We are limited in our time due to Covid-19 safety restrictions and so the committee has agreed to take the opening statement as read. I am going to give the officials, when I finish talking, five minutes to give an overview of how the Department will address the licensing issues.

Before we begin, I must read an important notice on parliamentary privilege. Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give 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. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. They are asked to respect 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 joining the committee meeting from a location outside of parliamentary precincts are asked to note that the constitutional protections afforded to those participating within parliamentary precincts does not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on whether, or the extent to which, participation is covered by absolute privilege of a statutory nature.

As Chairman, I will make an opening statement to the witnesses to outline what has got us to where we are today. I am disappointed that the committee had to request the attendance of the officials here today. As a committee, we issued a report in March after extensive consultation with all stakeholders, including the Department. The recommendations in our report addressed the slow output of licences and other forestry issues, including ash dieback, which affect the forestry industry. We had hoped that the situation would improve but, unfortunately, it has not. Farmers considering planting trees have walked away in despair and with a complete lack of confidence in the industry.

I have tabled a number of parliamentary questions that relate to licences, planting, clear-felling for roads and thinning. The standard answer given is “contact us in nine months for an update”, which is completely unacceptable. Some of these licences are in the system for two and three years.

Climate change and the challenges we face are a huge issues for the whole agrifood sector.

Our failure to meet targets cannot continue. Over the last few years we have been 15,000 ha shy of our planting targets. This figure is based on 70% coniferous trees and 30% broadleaf trees, and takes into account the loss of carbon during felling and replanting. In the lifetime of those plantations, in terms of the targets that we have failed to meet, 5.8 million tonnes of carbon would be sequestered. It is criminal that these targets are being missed, which has a compounding effect on the rest of the agrifood industry and rural Ireland.

Today, we are not here to discuss Project Woodland, which definitely has a place in the future. We hope that many of its objectives can be implemented. Today, we are focusing on the low output of licences by the Department. On average, 87 licences were issued in the four-week period prior to the Oireachtas committee meeting in January. In the four weeks up to 18 May, on average, 43 licences were issued. Like other committee members, I have been inundated with calls from stakeholders, including representatives of mills that have had to import timber, forestry contractors who are going bankrupt or farmers who have been unable to get licences.

The forestry sector is hugely important to the economy and must be efficient. Today, we demand an output of 100 licences a week. A greater output would be ideal but 100 licences is the bottom line. At this meeting I would like the officials to tell us how they plan to achieve this target. When the output of licences drops below 100 in any given week, we respectfully request a report that outlines why this has happened and how output will be rectified for the following week. This is a frank statement but time is not on our side. This has long been an issue and I have dealt with it since I was appointed Chair of this committee last summer. The crisis is ongoing for four or five years and is a huge concern to this committee and to the Oireachtas, in general. I want to walk out of this meeting today with this issue resolved but if not then we intend, as a committee, to reconvene in the near future.

I give the officials five minutes to address the licensing issues and then I will open up the debate to questions from members. It is with a heavy heart that we have the officials back in here today but, unfortunately, the concerns of the forestry sector at the moment are paramount to us.

Mr. Colm Hayes: We thank the committee for inviting us here today and welcome the opportunity to update it on developments since our previous appearance on 29 January. The Chairman has asked me to specifically focus on licensing, which I will do because we have submitted a longer and more detailed statement that will go on the record, and will be available for everyone to read.

I acknowledge the work of the committee in producing its report on the issues that impact the sector in Ireland, which of course we have carefully studied. The Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Senator Hackett, has responded to the committee thanking it for its detailed and careful consideration of these issues. She has responded to the observations and recommendations to outline where they are being incorporated into Project Woodland.

The Chairman has asked me to address the licensing issues but I want to update the committee briefly on some important developments that have taken place since my previous appearance. First, the Minister launched Project Woodland on 25 February. It is a major project that aims to resolve the issues facing the sector and is also looking at the wider strategic outlook for forestry in Ireland. The setting up of a high-level project board to oversee Project Woodland is now in place. The board is chaired by Mr. Brendan Gleeson, the Secretary General of the Department. It has three independent members who bring extensive experience and knowledge of project implementation and governance. Below that, there are four working groups seeking

to deliver the identified tasks under Project Woodland. Each working group has an independent external chair and its membership comprises stakeholders from the forestry policy group and a departmental representative. The statement goes into more detail on those individual aspects.

There has also been the appointment of an external project manager, Mr. Eamon O'Doherty, as per the recommendations of the Jo O'Hara report. Mr. O'Doherty attends this meeting today as part of the Department's delegation. He is available to speak and answer questions.

The final piece is the commission of a study to be conducted by Irish Rural Link that will engage with communities to determine attitudes towards forestry in Ireland. The recommendations from the study will feed into the work of Project Woodland on forestry strategy.

In terms of licensing, we fully acknowledge the difficulties that delays have caused for applicants. It has been a difficult time for applicants who have had to wait longer than they should have to receive their licences. We are sparing absolutely no effort to resolve this.

We are not yet where we want to be on licensing but we are seeing some improvements in output, with 1,236 licences issued to date this year. This is a 15% increase on the same period last year and although I know significant further gains are needed, we are moving in the right direction. Of course, licence output is only one measure of performance and the more realistic metric is the volume of material licensed as this is what matters to the sector. In this regard I can indicate that as of last Friday, felling licence volumes are 32% higher than the same period last year and the area licensed for afforestation is 26% higher. Road lengths licensed are 117% higher. Of course, this is not to say licensing issues are resolved - they are not. I am not claiming that to be the case. We are, however, making progress with substantially more work yet to do, and I fully expect this progress to improve further as the year progresses.

As many of the questions raised by the Chairman pertain directly to licensing, I will now address it in more detail. As members know, we have set ourselves an ambitious target of 4,500 licences this year, as outlined in January, which is a major ambition amounting to a 75% increase on the same period last year. By the end of this week, I expect we will have reached just under 30% of this target. We are absolutely committed to achieving this target and I remain confident that we will deliver the number of licences promised. It is a huge task to do this but we are ambitious both for our output and the Irish forestry sector.

As has been stated, to achieve this goal we will likely have to issue over 100 licences per week for the rest of the year. Last week we issued 101 new licences, along with a number of remitted licences, or appeal decisions back from the forestry appeals committee. I expect this week's number to be high and well above the weekly average so far this year. This improvement is largely thanks to some process changes we are making internally, as well as an increase in resources. The number for April was lower than expected but in May we expect to have recovered some significant ground and June will achieve the highest numbers so far this year.

The number of licences now on hand is 6,119. This figure is inflated by the submission by Coillte in March of 1,842 new felling licences to cover production for the next two years. It is important to understand that particular nuance. As we all know, a significant factor in the licensing backlog has been the need for more stringent appropriate assessment procedures, and particularly the number of licences requiring ecology input. As noted, we have invested heavily in ecology resources, training and, more recently, a streamlining of procedures in order to address the backlog. There are currently 1,860 private applications on the ecologist work list for afforestation, road and felling files. On average, the weekly output for licences with ecology

input since June 2020 is 38 licences. Over 1,050 files have come off the private ecology work list, of which 900 have already issued as licences. When combined with the ecologists working on Coillte files, this means 1,745 licences with ecology input have issued.

We continue to focus all efforts on improving the licensing position. The difficulties created for those involved in the sector are clearly understood by us and our foremost objective is to resolve this matter. As already mentioned, two working groups of Project Woodland are fully engaged with the backlog and improving the process.

The question has been raised as to how many licences the Department must issue annually in order to satisfy the needs of the private forestry sector and specifically the quantities to keep the mills running. The targets for output are determined not by the number of licences but by metrics relating to targets set for afforestation and forest roads and, in the case of felling, the forecasted harvest. It is worth looking at our progress to date measured against these three specific targets. The Department has issued 116 km of forest road licences this year, or 92% of the annual target of 125 km set out in the climate action plan. I expect, therefore, that road licences issued this year will well exceed this target. Based on targets, we expect to issue new licences for over 5,000 ha of afforestation this year, with licences for 2,236 ha issued to date. Additionally, 4,300 ha has already been licensed and is shovel-ready or available for use carried into this year. It is, of course, up to landowners to decide whether to plant once they have received approval to do so. It is a matter for all stakeholders to utilise the licences available and I encourage them to do so. Of course, improved turnaround times for licences will play a significant role in this - we acknowledge that - and converting what is licensed into planted area must be everybody's priority. We remain concerned by the continued low conversion rate from approval to planting and I have written to sectoral representatives in the past week to invite them to discuss this in more detail and see how we can be of more assistance.

With felling, we have issued licenses for just over 2.2 million cu. m for the year to date, which is 54% of the COFORD Roundwood forecast. The breakdown so far this year is that Coillte has received 58% of the licensed volume and the private sector has received 42%. We are very confident that last year's output of 5 million cu. m will be exceeded.

I will also update the committee on the question of appeals for forestry licences because it is relevant to output. The position with appeals is progressing extremely well, with only 48 cases remaining to be scheduled. In total, the forestry appeals committee has 130 cases on hand from approximately 1,100 received overall. We are advised that come September the turnaround time for new appeal cases will be in the region of two months. This is a very welcome development and testament to the hard work of the forestry appeals committee, the new committees and departmental staff.

Looking to the future, I will briefly outline our priorities for the rest of 2021 on forestry so they can be well understood by all. In summary, these include the issuing of 4,500 new licences for afforestation, roads and felling; the implementation of Project Woodland and all of its many recommendations; the significant advancement of a new long-term forestry strategy for Ireland; and the development of a strong Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, strategic plan and an ambitious successor to the forestry programme, both of which will deliver for farmers, rural communities and society as a whole. The focus absolutely must be on better integration between both of these policies, as set out in the programme for Government. These are enormous challenges that will require intense focus if they are to be achieved. It will require the co-operation of all stakeholders and we are committed to working together with them in the achievement of these targets.

I thank the committee for its attention and we are very happy to answer any questions.

Chairman: We have broken from tradition in the time allowed for the statement. Having listened to the opening statement, any comparison with 2020 should be avoided, as it was an absolutely disastrous year for the forestry sector. Giving us an improvement percentage using 2020 as a baseline is not acceptable. I would rather get the raw figures for output comparisons. Using 2020 as a parameter will not work because it was such a year of underperformance in the sector. Deputy Flaherty must go to the convention centre so I will allow him to speak first.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank the Chairman for indulging me and I apologise to other members for any inconvenience. I thank Mr. Hayes for the opening statement, which probably went some way to bamboozling us with updated statistics. The reality is we have been well briefed in advance by farmers and farm organisations and there is still significant, if not growing, disquiet in the sector about the failure to move licences along. Departmental officials indicated to the committee on 29 January that we would see north of 4,000 licences issued this year. The current number is 30% of that target with seven months of the year left. We could probably discount two of those months, one around Christmas and one in the summer. Realistically and hand on heart, we could probably say we will not hit that target of 4,000 licences this year unless some really meaningful action is taken. To be honest, emergency action probably needs to be taken at this stage.

I am sure the delegation has seen the input of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, on this matter. The market, including producers and companies dependent on the forestry sector, and the workers in these organisations are exasperated. I am a relatively new Deputy, having spent just over a year here, but it is inconceivable to think how this problem has been rumbling on. As the Chairman rightly said, we should discount 2020 for comparison. We have given this process time. We had a degree of faith that something would happen and there would be some change. I appeal to Mr. Hayes to reflect on the urgency of the situation. What the IFA is asking for is not unreasonable, namely, a commitment that no farmer will have to wait longer than four months for a decision on a forestry licence application. At this stage, that is the only acceptable element we can consider.

Mr. Hayes referred to road licences. Forestry road construction and thinning operations need to be removed from the licensing system and approved under a forest management plan. We need to consider a cost-based planning support grant for the sector. Many of my committee colleagues will go into the IFA's submission in more detail.

I accept Mr. Hayes's opening statement at face value, but from what we are hearing on the ground from farmers, companies and employees, there has been no meaningful improvement. For us just to take what Mr. Hayes is saying at face value and not counter it would be to do our constituents and people involved in Irish farming and Irish forestry a great disservice.

I thank the Chairman for allowing me to contribute.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I concur that it is difficult to take at face value commitments that we receive from the Department about corners being turned. We have turned so many corners as regards forestry that we are back where we started.

I thank the representatives from the Department for participating in this meeting. As we heard from the Minister's contribution in the Dáil last week and from today's opening statement, felling licences have increased by 32% on the same time last year and the area licensed

for afforestation has increased by 26%. Is it not true, however, that these figures reflect an admittedly good January and an improved February but a disastrous March, April and May? In March, the area licensed for felling decreased from 1,462 ha to 1,059 ha. In April, it fell from 1,437 ha to 950 ha. In May, it fell from 1,332 ha to 1,080 ha according to the most recent dashboard figures. Why are the figures for the full months of March and April so bad? Where does the fault lie?

The issue of the appropriate screening area was mentioned. My understanding is that the threshold has increased from 3 km to 15 km. It would be useful if the Department explained the rationale for that and why the appropriate resources and preparations were not put in place before it happened.

The afforestation licence numbers are worrying. The Government has indicated its ambition to deliver 8,000 ha per year. Last year, licences were awarded in respect of 4,342 ha, but the actual area planted only came to 2,488 ha, which is pathetic in light of the ambition-----

(Interruptions).

Chairman: We have lost the Deputy's sound.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Apologies. That only 2,488 ha were planted last year must ring alarm bells. This year, licences were awarded in respect of 2,226 ha, but only 948 ha have been planted so far. Of those, could we be given the breakdown between Coillte and private operators? How much of that area relates to new entrants to afforestation? If the figure is not available now, could it be found? It will set out whether there is any prospect of achieving the ambition of planting 8,000 ha per year over the Government's lifetime or the rest of this decade.

May I ask a question that can be responded to later? It relates to the ash dieback scheme and grant applications.

Chairman: No. We will stick with the licensing issue, if that is okay.

Deputy Matt Carthy: If there is time at the end, the Chairman might allow me to ask that question.

Chairman: We might have to hold a meeting on other issues, but we will stick with the licensing issue now.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Okay. The timber sector is at crisis point. That we are seeing the importation of wood is scandalous. There is no other term for it. Afforestation levels are more worrying. Although there is an immediate crisis that needs to be addressed, we are far behind when it comes to licensing afforestation, which is supposed to be crucial for climate action, diversification and so on. We do not want to hear that the Department is doing its best. We need to hear what concrete measures are in place. Working groups are fine, but what is being done on the ground to deliver more forestry and felling licences in the immediate term?

Mr. Colm Hayes: I might take Deputy Carthy's questions first. The 948 ha planted to date this year are all private, as are all of the afforestation approvals that have been issued. Coillte does not apply to us for new afforestation licences. As such, all of those hectares have been planted by private landowners. The Deputy also asked how many were new applicants. I understand the Deputy's question to be about whether these were new hectares as opposed to

hectares that were being replanted after clear felling.

Deputy Matt Carthy: No. I meant new applicants.

Mr. Colm Hayes: I will have to get the committee a breakdown of that figure. Obviously, they are all new hectares, not hectares that have been replanted after clear felling. In some cases, they are owned by people who planted once upon a time and have come back in with more land. As to whether the hectares are brand new, I will have to check and respond directly to the Deputy, but I assure him that they are all private lands and not Coillte lands.

Regarding April, our headline target remains 4,500 new licences for the year. As we told the committee in January, there will be fluctuations between weeks and months, but we are not resiling from the overall headline target for 4,500 new licences. The amount will not be uniform each week. The Deputy asked why April was a low month. That was for a number of reasons. Primarily, we did not have Coillte licences to issue because Coillte had received all of its 2021 felling licences by the end of January or thereabouts. It is fully licensed for 2021. Our team that works on Coillte licences was doing a great deal of background work on the 1,800 new Coillte licences. The dashboard measures output in terms of licences, but there is also a large piece of work that goes on in the background. We were also making some background IT changes as well as process improvements that will increase output. Those improvements are starting to come through now. They came through last week with 101 new licences. There will be a very high amount this week as well. It will be higher than the average, although I will not know the figure for sure until Friday evening. I expect the situation to be the same next week and the week after into June. We have in some respects retrieved May, but April was a disappointingly low month. We have outlined some of the reasons for that.

I assure Deputy Flaherty that we are not discounting any month of the year. Licences will issue every week this year, as they did last year, including Christmas week. There should be no downturn at any point. We will continue to put our shoulders to the wheel. The target of 4,500 licences requires an output of approximately 100 per week, as the Chairman outlined at the start. We are well aware of the metric and we believe that can be delivered.

Deputy Carthy mentioned, and I agree with him fully, that any applicant who applies for a forestry licence should have some degree of certainty as to how long it will take for that licence to be received. We have fallen down in providing that certainty. There are people who applied for afforestation licences and received them a month later but there will be those who will have to wait significantly longer. Regarding the targets of approximately three months for afforestation licences and four months for felling, we have fallen behind on those. The average length of time for the issuing of those licences is not at those figures, and it absolutely should be. We expect detailed recommendations from the working groups and Project Woodland. This has been highlighted, in particular, by Jo O'Hara in her report. She called on those groups, as did the Minister, to deliver those metrics. We expect recommendations on how those groups believe they should be achieved. We are not at the stage where we can guarantee a turnaround time for those.

We have reached a point in our licensing system where we are issuing more licences to date this year than applications received. This is a good place to be but it does not deal with the licences that are on hand and the backlog. The priority must be to drive down those figures. Reaching a point where we are issuing more licences than applications received is a good indicator of the future. Right now, the output of 100 licences is required to drive down the backlog. Those who have waited longer than they should have, need to hear that and understand that this is where

our effort is going.

There was a question from Deputy Carthy on the 15 km zone of influence in terms of appropriate assessment. I will pass that question, with the Chairman's agreement, to Mr. Seamus Dunne, chief forestry inspector, to provide more information on that.

Mr. Seamus Dunne: In relation to the 3 km and 15 km zones, this comes up quite often. The legislation states that an appropriate assessment is undertaken where screening identifies a likelihood of the project having a significant effect on a European site. This is true throughout the EU and is true regardless of the separation distance between the project and the European site. The legislation does not lay down the distance but it refers to any project that may interfere with any European site. The advice we received nearly two years ago was that it was not defensible to have a distance of 3 km and not consider European sites outside of 3 km. This is the industry norm in ecology companies throughout Ireland. It is the industry norm with regulators as well. There is a logic to that. The logic is that one can have hydrological connections between a project and a special area of conservation, SAC, that has qualifying interests, such as salmon, lamprey, crayfish, and other, that are greater than 3 km. One can have foraging distances outside of special protection areas, SPAs, that are greater than 3 km. They normally range from between 6 km to 15 km. The 3 km was deemed to be not defensible. We took the advice to go to 15 km.

There has been much attention on the 15 km but not on the other changes that led to the sites being screened in for appropriate assessment. It is not because of the 15 km. The licensing crisis has occurred because of the change in the number of files screened in for appropriate assessment in Ireland, we all know that. The most important change which led to a much higher number of files being screened in was compliance with the European Court of Justice and national case law that determined it is not appropriate, at appropriate assessment screening stage, to take account of the measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of the project on a European site. In other words, in deciding whether we can screen in or screen out a site, and whether it would have an effect, we can not take account of a buffer zone between the planting and an aquatic zone. In the past, we could have taken that into account and screened it out. That is the most important area where a change in policy arose two years ago, not the 15 km, which led to more sites being screened in than screened out.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the witnesses. I was late because I took part in Leaders' Questions. I know Mr. Dunne and Mr. Hayes are here. Is there a third person with them?

Chairman: Mr. O'Doherty is present.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the witnesses for coming in. On Project Woodland - either Mr. Hayes or Mr. O'Doherty can answer this - is Mr. O'Doherty a project manager or is he an adviser? What is Mr. Hayes's role in Project Woodland?

Mr. Colm Hayes: The Jo O'Hara report identified correctly that there was a lack of project management expertise in the Department for the delivery of a project on the scale of Project Woodland. We immediately responded to that by recruiting a project manager, Mr. Eamon O'Doherty, who is an expert and has much experience in this space. He can speak for himself on these issues.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Just to clarify, is Mr. O'Doherty a project manager? Is that

it?

Mr. Colm Hayes: He is, for the delivery of Project Woodland.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: So, he is the project manager. What is your role?

Mr. Colm Hayes: I am the assistant secretary in the Department responsible for-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I know that.

Mr. Colm Hayes: -----ecology and forestry.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: But you are not a project manager, or anything like that, on this. Mr. O’Doherty is.

Mr. Eamon O’Doherty: Let me comment from my perspective because there is a small amount of confusion around my role and responsibility. I will summarise the four major responsibilities given to me. It flows from that to be able to understand the different roles that Mr. Hayes plays and the role I play. I was brought in as a full-time adviser to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on Project Woodland. Two of the work groups are extremely significant from my perspective. One is the clearance of the backlog and the other is the renewal of departmental processes. Starting yesterday, we recruited a business systems analyst, who reports to me, whose role is to map out all the processes around licensing and the sub-processes around ecology, archaeology etc. Her plan is in development and I should receive that next week. I will then-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: With all due respect, and I thank Mr. O’Doherty for his answer, what I am trying to find out is this. He mentioned that he is an adviser. Under the headings of Project Woodland, it states that a “project manager” is a position. Who is the project manager? Is it you?

Mr. Eamon O’Doherty: As far as I am concerned, it is.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: That is it. I do not want any more, once I know who it is. That is all I want to know.

The metrics that are based on the increases on last year were coming from a very low base. Would Mr. Hayes agree that if we went back to years before, they would have been minimal? Is it acceptable to be working from bases like that, considering the type of figures we are looking at?

Mr. Colm Hayes: We are in a difficult space in licensing and have been for the past 18 months to two years. I emphasised clearly in my opening remarks that we do not claim to be where we want to be. Absolutely not. It was by way of an indication as to whether there is an improvement in output. I think it is perfectly valid to give an indication with what happened last year. One can make that comparison without saying that all is perfect. I would like to think that this was understood clearly from my opening remarks. We are not claiming that but at the same time, if one takes this as a two-year project, we are showing signs of improvement all the time. Every metric in 2021, when it comes to licensing, will be up on 2020. It absolutely must be.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It should be tripling it because we are in trouble. My next question is on the number of licences in the system. Mr. Hayes has stated in his submission

that the figure is 6,119, of which Coillte have put in 1,842, and I know it has put in some lately, which leaves 4,277. Mr. Hayes will recall we spoke about this last November. He said that there were 1,900 licences backlogged, that there were 2,500 which had no problem, and that I did not word my comments correctly. When that was added up, it came to 4,300 or 4,400. We have made no headway in the backlog of licences whatsoever, when one adds that.

Mr. Colm Hayes: I think we discussed this at a previous meeting of the committee as well. I emphasise that we have issued 1,236 licences since the start of the year-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Hold on now. As regards the previous meeting of the committee, I gave Mr. Hayes the information on the first day and when we brought him in again and I questioned him about it, he said that 1,900 would basically have to go into ecology or whatever as there were difficulties but there were 2,500 with which there was no problem. So far this year, approximately 1,200 licences have been issued. Where are the rest of the 2,500 in respect of which there was no problem? Why were they not issued if there were no problems?

Mr. Colm Hayes: They all have to go through a period of analysis, public consultation, advertising and third party referral to interested bodies. The point we were making on the last occasion was that the figure of 4,500, now 4,200 excluding Coillte licences, as the Deputy stated, is obviously not the same 4,200-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We know that but where are they?

Mr. Colm Hayes: There are licences issued-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes, but we are not getting that figure down.

Mr. Colm Hayes: They are being replaced by new applications every day.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We are not getting the figures down. It is as simple as that. One could add the Coillte licences on top with the new licences but I am taking them out. What I am saying is that there were 2,500 licences in respect of which Mr. Hayes stated there was no problem but only approximately 1,200 have been issued. If there were no problems with the other 1,300, why have they not been issued?

Mr. Colm Hayes: I am sure they are on their way to being issued or they are somewhere in the system-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: At the rate we are going, with 40 licences being issued per week, bar this week when anecdotal evidence indicates there was a push on because Mr. Hayes and his colleagues were to appear before the committee, that will not work. The committee will not take that hook, line and sinker. For several weeks, 40 licences were being issued each week and it ended up that the whole industry is in chaos. I know guys, as does the Chairman, who have been in business for 30 years but the repossession guys are taking their machines. Does Mr. Hayes feel good about the likes of that?

On climate change, we have missed our targets by nearly 50% for three or four years. How many tonnes of carbon sequestration have we missed out on?

Mr. Colm Hayes: When it comes to climate, the average sequestration of new hectares is between 2 tonnes and 9 tonnes per year. Obviously, what we plant now will make very little difference in the context of our 2030 climate targets as a result of the time needed to sequester and the fact that under the accounting rules they really kick in afterwards, but I agree with

the Deputy's overall thesis. The failure to hit the planting targets obviously has an impact on climate policy overall. It is not good. It is in everybody's interest that every hectare that is licensed is planted and we all need to work together in that regard. Obviously, the Department has a key role to play in issuing more licences. Thankfully, the area for afforestation is 26% up on last year. We hope that it will be much higher by the end of the year. This is all part of the project and the output is to get all that back up onto a stable level and to make sure that targets such as 8,000 ha are realisable.

Overall, we are in a very interesting phase because we are at a key stage in the design of the next CAP and, in parallel, we are designing the next forestry programme. It is clear to all that significant tree planting measures should absolutely be considered as part of the next CAP and the agri-environment schemes, that is, the eco-schemes or the agri-environment climate measures, AECM, schemes. There will be several ways to come at future afforestation targets that should absolutely be considered by all and that could really be to the benefit of farmers as well. The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, previously outlined initiatives around planting on riparian margins-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have a few more questions and I do not want to hog the meeting. In his opening statement, Mr. Hayes stated that 2.2 million cu. m of timber is basically licensed this year. We know that thinnings and clear-fell are included in that. Has the Department brought out a system since November to know the difference between those? If there is 2.2 million cu. m available at the moment, why are mills still running out of timber? Why are they going to Scotland and further afield to try to buy timber?

Mr. Colm Hayes: On the 2.2 million cu. m, every time we issue a forestry licence it is advertised in the Department and that clearly identifies whether the licence is for thinning or clear-fell. I am not sure whether I have the exact breakdown in front of me-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is not on the dashboard, is it?

Mr. Colm Hayes: It is not on the dashboard. The two are combined. We do-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Can it be put on the dashboard?

Mr. Colm Hayes: It can be included, yes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank Mr. Hayes. If that could be put in, it would be helpful to us. I ask Mr. Dunne to brief me on the project involving Coillte and Bord na Móna currently planting on degraded bog. Do they get licences or whatever? What is the involvement of the Department in that?

Mr. Colm Hayes: I can take that issue. There is an initiative involving a collaboration between Coillte and Bord na Móna to look at a specific project around restoring native woodland habitats on the cut-over peatlands or industrial peatlands. We have developed a specific pilot project to facilitate that. It is really native woodland regeneration. The pilot project will consist of trials-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: How many hectares are involved in that pilot programme?

Mr. Colm Hayes: It is Coillte and Bord na Móna that are working on it together. We believe there could be between 10,000 ha and 15,000 ha ultimately but in terms of the pilot they are looking at just a few hundred hectares to see where that takes us.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am looking at it for ordinary farmers around the country. Do they have to get a licence for that? Do they have to do the usual environmental stuff?

Mr. Colm Hayes: They have to go further. This will require a full environmental impact assessment and we are expecting an application in that regard soon. We are working with both parties on it. This will have a level of environmental assessment that goes far beyond any private afforestation application. For the information of the Deputy, it will be funded only on the basis of costs incurred. It will not enjoy the premiums that other afforestation schemes enjoy. That is an important point to note. It is an exciting project that can contribute to our national afforestation targets. It can offer alternatives for land that was previously used for other purposes. It can be a major boost to biodiversity and climate if it is done correctly. However, there is a long way to go and, obviously, a detailed environmental assessment is the next step.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I sent in a document to the Department as part of the questions the Chairman told us to submit. It related to a guy who planted his area and got his licence. The guy who planted the land beside his - the same ground in the same area - got a licence six months before him. Why is it that if two people whose land is side by side submit an application at the same time, one of them may get a licence before the other? How quickly can one get a licence now?

Mr. Colm Hayes: Without knowing the specifics of the particular case raised by the Deputy-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It was submitted to the Department as part of the questions, so I do not want to hear Mr. Hayes saying he does not know about it.

Mr. Colm Hayes: I saw the question but I did not see the site-specific-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The whole lot was there.

Mr. Colm Hayes: We need to get site specifics. If the information has been submitted to the Department, we will certainly review it and come back to the Deputy directly. I do not know the answer to his question. I suspect there is probably a specific environmental features on the land of one of the parties that is not on the land of the other party, or perhaps an archaeological feature. We would need to examine the case in more detail before we could-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have seen contractors losing their machines in the past fortnight. I will call it very straight: I lay the full blame at the hands of the Department. I cannot understand how it has not considered something along the lines of the case involving Bord na Móna and An Taisce, in which the High Court ruled there is an exemption up to 30 ha. I cannot understand how the Department has not gone down a road such as that. Have people in the Department considered their positions? Has there been consideration of a reshuffle if things are not working out? I will be blunt about it.

In fairness to the committee, it has watched the developing situation on forestry weekly. I will be in touch with Mr. Hayes regarding the dashboard. If there is a differentiation between the commercial stuff and the thinnings it would be very helpful to all members of the committee. I do not do things lightly. We are going to monitor this for three months. I do not often get time to deal with this issue but when there is nothing changing or moving, we have to make decisions. Unfortunately, for the likes of me, the only way we can try to resolve this or move it on is to bring a motion of no confidence in the Minister at the top. That is the last thing anybody wants to do. I actually pity the Minister because it is aspects within the Department that have

not functioned. I urge Mr. Hayes to address this issue in the next month or two, because we are going to be watching it. It is not acceptable for 100 licences to be issued today and then 40 each week for three or four months. We are watching the situation weekly and daily. We hear the stories from the industry. I am asking Mr. Hayes and his colleagues to address the issue. I know Jo O'Hara, Jerry Grant and a few more people have been brought in. Project Woodland is for the future. In the here and now, the timber industry is in trouble. The contractors are going bust, including people who have done 30 years of the finest of service. We will not take this lightly and I will be very blunt about it. The only option for the likes of me is to take it out on a Minister, which is not right but it is the only option, to put it bluntly. Are personnel in the Department being changed around to try to resolve this issue? Unfortunately, Mr. Hayes was before the committee in November and the job has not changed. He can dilly-dally with figures, and technically he is correct with regard to 10% or 15% but 15% of nothing is still nothing and 15% of a bad result is a bad result.

Where does Mr. Hayes see himself in the next two to three months? Does he see himself getting out 100 licences every week? He speaks about some of the licences on his dashboard with regard to what is planted as against what is issued. The reason is very simple. I am a farmer. If I was waiting for two years, a year and a half or three years for a licence I would not have a notion of waiting for it. I would have moved on to other things so I would not be planting. What is the response of Mr. Hayes to this?

Chairman: Before Mr. Hayes responds, Deputy Fitzmaurice had spoken about the Minister and with respect to the officials I do not expect them to comment on that. Deputy Fitzmaurice has raised questions about how output will be increased and I ask Mr. Hayes to frame his answer around this.

Mr. Colm Hayes: It is exactly as I said at the outset. Over the next three months, which is when Deputy Fitzmaurice is speaking about, we see ourselves delivering the type of licences we spoke about earlier in the year, which in volume terms will deliver 4,500 for this year. This means approximately 100 licences a week. There will be weeks when it is up and a little bit down but if we can average at around this, we will be well on the way to delivering the overall 4,500 target for this year. This is our target and we are absolutely committed to it. I assure the Deputy there is no shortage of effort.

The purpose of the dashboard is to measure output. We are fully transparent on output on a weekly basis. We circulate it to the committee each week. It is there to monitor and measure. We are committed to doing this. We did it last week and we expect to do something broadly similar this week. We are starting to see things come through that indicate to us that June will be the best month of the year. All of this combined will lead us to where we want to be. The Deputy will have the dashboard every week to monitor this and we look forward to engaging with him as it progresses.

Chairman: I thank Mr Hayes. In fairness to the committee it is grand to say the Department hit 100 last week but the previous four weeks averaged 43. Our patience is exhausted, as is the industry. The industry is at exasperation point. As Deputy Fitzmaurice has said, Mr. Hayes has committed to an output and we will be watching extremely closely because the output has to increase consistently and not just for a week or two.

Senator Paul Daly: I thank Mr. Hayes and Mr. O'Doherty for joining us. A famous American baseball catcher, Yogi Berra, is accredited with the quotation "*déjà vu* all over again" and this morning I can see where he was coming from and I am experiencing it. I agree with Deputy

Fitzmaurice. Politically, I would have to oppose his actions if he were to go down that road but I certainly see why he would be driven to where he said he may have to go.

We are legislators and administrators and we are answerable to the public and the people who have skin in the game in the timber and building sectors. They are the people knocking on our doors, ringing our phones and hounding us for meetings. To be quite honest, Mr. Hayes is detached from the real world as far as I can see and totally insulated. The problem we have today sits firmly on his doorstep. He managed us into the crisis we are in today. He managed the applications stockpile. While I acknowledge European law changed and ecology requirements changed, we need a Department that is efficient enough to change with the change and stay ahead of the posse. Mr. Hayes acknowledged an applicant would be entitled to a turnaround of three to four months. It is in the farmers' charter that an applicant will get a licence within four months. It is in the 2014 Act. Mr. Hayes acknowledged we are not meeting it. What is the point of the farmers' charter? We are not abiding by the 2014 Act.

Deputy Fitzmaurice and the Chair mentioned the men who, unfortunately, are going into receivership and out of business and are having their machines repossessed because they do not have timber to harvest. This has gone much further. A 6 ft tree is, on average, €6 more expensive today than it was four months ago because of the actions at the auctions in Scotland. The Scots have cottoned on to the amount of timber leaving Scotland and coming in here and now the prices are being hiked. This drip-feeds down to somebody building a family home. It now affects the entire building sector. Jobs are at stake. People will be paying up to 40% more than they should be paying on mortgages for the next 25 or 30 years. The problem can be traced right back to the forestry section of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Mr. Hayes did not answer Deputy Fitzmaurice's question on whether there will be changes and managerial changes in the Department. The buck stops with Mr. Hayes. The Deputy can have his vote of no confidence in the Minister. Ministers come and go but the forestry section of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has not changed. It has overseen this problem. It has brought us to where we are. I welcome the figures we have been given today but I reserve judgment on them until I see some consistency.

Mr. Hayes admitted in his statement that we have 30% of what we need for the year. If we are speaking about percentages, Monday is 31 May and that is 41.66% of the year gone. We will not speak months or weeks but percentages. The Department is behind on its figures for catching up. I will quote two lines from the submission document that was read out earlier. Mr. Hayes said converting licences into planting area must be everyone's priority and that the Department remains concerned about the continuing low conversion rate. He stated he had written to sectoral representatives to invite them to discuss this in more detail. What Mr. Hayes is saying is that even the licences being granted for afforestation are not being taken up and we are behind the curve. Is this because of what has happened in recent years, and that even people who get licences have lost confidence in the sector and may well not plant those trees? If this is the case, it is because of the management of the Department. It means we will not reach our targets of 8,000 ha. This 8,000 ha target is built into our overall climate approach for achieving carbon neutrality. If we do not reach this target, what will have to change on the other side to balance it? People speak about herd reduction. I am not in favour of this but if we do not reach the sequestration figure we will have to start legislating for areas such as this. Will Mr. Hayes accept responsibility for these consequences and the decisions that legislators and administrators will have to make on the back of his bad management that got us to where we are today?

Mr. Colm Hayes: I thank Senator Daly. On the question as to whether farmers are not

planting now even though they have received a licence, it is clearly the case. The purpose of writing to sectoral representatives is to understand this. I absolutely accept, as I said in the statement, the delay in receiving a licence must be a factor in this. Of course it is. We also see evidence in our figures of people who receive licences within a month or two of applying and still do not proceed to planting. We need to understand this better. We need to see how we can work with farm advisers and Teagasc and make farmers understand the value of what they have received in terms of a licence and the options they have. This would be a good step.

There are a number of factors. We know we received licence applications for land speculation reasons. We know that of course farmers can change their minds when the forestry machinery shows up. A range of factors can lead to this. We need to understand it and see whether we can help in more detail. The Senator is correct that the best help we can deliver is a timely licensing system. This is what all of this and Project Woodland are about. That is the purpose of that particular discussion. It does not happen in felling or roads but if we are to go to all this trouble to process licences, and if companies are to go to all the trouble of submitting them, we need to make sure every licence is valuable and utilised to the maximum possible extent.

On the question of climate policy, I am wary of any direct link between agriculture livestock policy and forestry because it does a disservice, in many respects, to both sectors. The forestry sector and the planting of land is not there to help livestock sectors achieve their output targets. We have to be very careful that all sectors play their part in achieving climate policy goals. I am very wary of drawing a link between one sector underachieving, or overachieving for that matter, relative to the other because forestry is a big sector in its own right. The people who plant lands do so for very valid reasons and should be encouraged to do so. We should treat them on that basis and not necessarily draw links between the underachievement of one leading to knock-on effects in the other.

I will touch briefly on prices because the Senator mentioned them. Of course, timber prices are well up at the moment. There is a commodity boom globally. I read the other day that timber prices in the US are up 350% compared to the same time last year. We see that at the moment from the builders association, for example, in the effects on concrete and timber. These are market issues. I am not clear on the extent undersupply plays in that but it has to be acknowledged, in the overall context, that there is a boom right now in timber prices internationally. As a large exporting nation Ireland will inevitably feel an element of that, as it will with steel, concrete and all these other factors, which as the Senator correctly pointed out are leading to increases in construction costs. I saw something from the Irish Home Builders Association the other day referencing this in addition to the impact of Brexit, Covid and various other factors which contribute to the increased costs at the moment. It is important to acknowledge that as well.

I think I have answered all the Senator's questions. I ask him to tell me if I have left anything out.

Senator Paul Daly: Mr. Hayes did not address my concerns about management issues in the Department. I beg to differ with what he said about the journey of agriculture, as a sector, to carbon neutrality. Forestry is a major influencer on that. It is written into carbon neutrality as a major part of it. If we are not achieving what has been put in there regarding forestry, from a sequestration point of view, there will have to be some cuts in output on the other side. It is a basic balance. Carbon neutrality is a balance and I beg to differ with Mr. Hayes on forestry. From the agriculture sector side, forestry has been written in as 8,000 ha per annum for a reason. This is a number that will reach neutrality.

Chairman: I agree with what the Senator has said about climate change targets. Mr. Hayes has made his points about the management structure. It would not be fair to expect him to identify or criticise his own management at a meeting. The point has been made by the Senator and others on the absolute necessity of delivering targets. They have not been delivered up to now.

Senator Tim Lombard: I thank the representatives from the agricultural side of the house. I would like to acknowledge, and seek clarity on, a very significant statement that was made at the start of the meeting. Comparisons were made to 2020 regarding licences. We stated that 1,130 licences were granted in 2021. By comparison, my figures for 2019 indicate we were at something like 3,600, which means we have reached approximately 30% of where we were in 2019. It was a little unfortunate that the 2020 figures were used. The 2019 figures show we are really only hitting a 30% target, from what I dug up in the last 20 minutes anyway. We need clarity on the licences and the projections. If we are at 30% of 2019, the figures presented to us this morning were somewhat misleading. I ask for clarity regarding that.

The question of whether the 4,500 licences being proposed will realistically meet the needs of the industry is a major issue. I do not think they will. That figure is the bare minimum and we are still on a trajectory where we will be under pressure to reach those targets. That is clear from everyone we talk to. We saw in the auctions today that a 16 ft length of 6 in. x 2 in. timber has gone up by another €2 today alone. That will have a massive impact on our society. The two issues we really talk about in Irish life are health and housing. Housing prices will go through the roof for the lack of a sustainable commodity like timber, which we are growing in significant amounts but cannot harvest. That will be a real issue for us as a community and society. We need clarity on where these licences are going.

In the last few days and weeks, comparisons were made between our licensing approach and that of European countries. I ask for clarity on whether we are in line with what is happening in Europe. We all read in certain publications in the last seven or eight days that our licensing regime for private licences is totally out of sync with what is happening in the European model. Countries like Belgium, Hungary and France have a totally different regime and a totally different interpretation of the 15 km rule. That is a really significant issue. Taking into consideration that we are all part of the European project, how can there be a scenario in which there are totally different rules when it comes to afforestation and planting projects, the way woodlands are managed, woodland management plans and what is required in a 15-year management plan so felling licences are not needed for roadways or thinnings?

There is a lack of joined-up thinking regarding what Ireland Inc. and other European countries are doing. Can I get clarity on why we seem to be a total outlier on this issue? It is possible major publications in this industry have published different material but that is what we have read in them. Real clarity is required here because if we are that out of sync do we really need to start afresh with completely new policy and legislation? That is realistically where this information seems to be pushing us. We seem to be making trouble for ourselves all the way through.

Regarding our ecology service, I ask for clarity on how many people are actually employed by the Department and what their roles are. When I ask that, I mean their roles and functions because the letters I have received, even this week, seem to be asking for work that can be done by the Department. They are indicating that if certain reports are provided, one will come above the line. Given that we have over 20 people working for us, why is the Department still looking for these reports to be provided, for private licences in particular? Affordability is a real issue with some of these reports, which can cost €1,200 or €1,500 a pop. This is a significant

issue if just a small number of hectares is involved. We need clarity on how many people are there, why they are there and what they are doing. Why are we still asking for these reports to be produced by some private landowners?

On the afforestation programme targets, and correct me if I am wrong, we reached 2,500 or 30% in 2020. I have four children at home. Future generations will not thank us for reaching those kinds of targets. We are under exceptional pressure. We all realise there a huge problem here. Figures like that really call into question the big, grand announcement that 8,000 ha will be planted annually. We are at 2,500. We are a lifetime away from that target. There is a responsibility on everyone to ensure we raise the bar and reach those targets. We will not be judged by the electorate in five years' time. We are not worried about that. It is society in 30 years' time that will judge us, when people are looking to cut down trees and do not have the ability to do it. We have a real issue. I am looking for clarity regarding those targets, where they are and how and when we will reach them. I do not see anything at the moment that gives me confidence we will reach them.

Mr. Colm Hayes: I thank the Senator for his questions. I agree with him. The afforestation target is crucial. A discussion is ongoing regarding the design of the future climate action plan and the climate Bill. Afforestation must be a key part of the solution, which might require a lot of landowners to engage in a way they have not engaged up until now. One of the lessons from the current forestry programme is that farmers have disengaged from afforestation to a certain extent. We need to understand that better. We are in a crucial phase because we are starting to design the next forestry programme. We are working on the next forestry strategy as part of Project Woodland. The farming bodies are on that, as are all of the other stakeholders. We need to clearly understand the reasons farmers disengaged. I understand and acknowledge that licensing would have been one of the factors - possibly one of the major ones - but we all need to understand better why that is the case.

When it comes to tree planting, there must be scope and there is a commitment in the programme for Government for better integration between the next CAP and the forestry programme. All these discussions are ongoing and are all crucial because they will all play their part in how we achieve the 8,000 ha target or whatever the figure is in the future. If the licences are in place, we expect north of 5,000 ha this year. If there were 4,000 ha coming into the year available to plant, in theory, those are the 8,000 hectares but we know that does not get carried through into planting. We are having that discussion as well.

In respect of the Senator's original point, I did not quite catch the 30% figure he referenced for 2021 compared to 2019. If it is in respect of felling, there were very high figures for hectares licensed in the early months of 2019, which he will have noticed were completely out of sync with the other months before and since. This is because they were on Coillte thinning licences that issued in large batches around then. We prefer the volume to be the ultimate metric because hectares do not always translate into volume. The thinning volume can be very different to the felling volume.

Senator Tim Lombard: To clarify-----

Mr. Colm Hayes: I can write to the Senator to give him a more detailed explanation of that.

Senator Tim Lombard: I compared the months. There were 3,619 licences in 2019 compared to 1,130 in 2021, which means we are at roughly 31% of where we were in 2019. This is based on licence figures, which are the crux of the argument.

Mr. Colm Hayes: The answer remains the same. In those early months in 2019, there were very large numbers of thinning licences for Coillte, which inflated everything from the number of licences to the number of hectares. I would also point out that the early period of 2019 pre-dates the legal judgments that have knocked us back on these particular issues. We are in a new phase because of the impact of those legal judgments. They forced us to change our processes and procedures and do things very differently. Comparisons going back beyond those judgments involve a different time. What we are about is getting the whole thing back on track to reach the levels we and the sector want to reach. This is what every effort is going into. I might pass the question about the role of the ecologists to Mr. Dunne.

Mr. Seamus Dunne: The Senator asked whether we require the ecologist to do something similar if the applicant gives an ecology report. Our ecologists review everything that comes in so if there is an ecology report by the applicant, it must be reviewed on our side by an ecologist. In the case of felling, we issue licences that do not have land information searches where we carry out the appropriate assessment report and appropriate assessment determination. When the private ecologist produces a land information search, our ecologists would review it and produce an appropriate assessment determination so in all cases where there is ecological input on the private side, it would be reviewed in the Department by our ecologists.

The Senator asked about the number of ecologists in the Department. I think the figure is around 21. There are nine permanent staff consisting of a head of ecology with eight staff. We have a contract with Fehily Timoney, which has seven ecologists plus one environmental scientist working on licensing. We have a lot of freelance ecologists who mostly work part time but bring it up to about 21 full-time equivalents.

The Senator asked about what other member states are doing. It is fair to say that many member states do things differently from us. Not all of them have lighter regulation regimes around forestry. The Netherlands has a complete ban on all felling from April to September during nesting season whereas we would have a similar ban in special protection areas. Not all regimes around Europe are similar. The major difficulty we have had in the past two years is compliance with the appropriate assessment procedures and the habitats directive. This has led to delays. We would have to do a really detailed analysis of how other countries comply with the habitats directive, which basically refers to any project that may affect any site regardless of the separation distance involved. As I said earlier, the 15 km are not laid down in law but are used as an industry norm in this country. If many of a country's protected areas are in one part of the country, that would explain how the appropriate assessment would not feature in the other parts of the country. Ireland has designated many of its river systems as SACs, which means that virtually every catchment in the country is hydrologically connected to an SAC. This may not be the way in other countries. We would need a detailed look at other countries.

The Senator mentioned management plans. Certainly management plans are received instead of a licence application. Regarding the management plan detail, we have guidance around management plans and it is really useful for owners to have management plans. It is normally a bit more detailed than we would expect in a licence application. If we look at a licence application, and we have templates on our website, we can see that we receive management plan-type information. Does that explain some of-----

Senator Tim Lombard: Could I get clarification on European norms? Will a body of work be done to find out what the European norm is? Mr. Dunne mentioned an investigation or study. I have looked at France and Belgium and I think we have all read the actual publications. There seems to be a different forestry regime in those countries. The 15 km rule is not taken to that

degree and management plans seem to be the key. Can I take it that the Department is going to do a body of work to review what other European countries are doing so we could be in line? If there is a more appropriate way of dealing with it, could that be the way forward?

Chairman: I support what Senator Lombard has said. We have all been contacted by various stakeholders about the norm in other European countries. When we look at some western European countries, it is very clear that farmer-sized forestry can get felling licences without any regulation attached. In Germany, we see that they can still get permission to clear and fell their plantations without a licence in a nature conservation or water protection area. We are all supposed to be under the same level of regulation. How can this happen in other European countries whereas here no matter where someone's forestry is, he or she must go through the whole complicated regulations regarding getting a licence?

Mr. Seamus Dunne: The Chairman is right. We all act under the environmental impact assessment, EIA, directive. Initial afforestation is an annexe to development under the EIA directive and building private roads is an annexe to development under that directive. We consider them to be projects under the habitats directive. We would be open to looking at other member states. I am on working group 4 of Project Woodland, and part of that is an end-to-end review of processes. We are absolutely open to considering this. We would need a very detailed analysis of how other countries comply with the EIA directive and the habitats directive. We certainly do not want to follow another country that is in difficulty with the European Union, and we know a number of countries are in difficulty with the European Union at the moment.

Chairman: Will the Department give us a commitment that it will undertake an analysis? We have a submission from a farming organisation. Germany and France are two countries we are very close to in regard to regulation and everything else. Will the Department give a commitment to do a study on how they are issuing their licences for different sizes of plantation and how they are complying with EU legislation? This is going to become a significant issue going forward. There is clearly a different interpretation in the way they are implementing the legislation and the way it is being implemented here in Ireland.

Mr. Seamus Dunne: There may not be a difference-----

Chairman: I asked Mr. Dunne a straight question. Will the Department commit to doing a review of what is happening in other European countries to see how they are interpreting the legislation and how those countries are issuing permits, as they call them, for clear-felling and for afforestation? Will Mr. Dunne give a commitment that a review will be done on how they are interpreting the legislation?

Mr. Colm Hayes: That work is being done as part of working group 4 under Project Woodland. The Department is on it but there are a lot of stakeholders on it as well. For the avoidance of duplication, we will let that work develop. Mr. Dunne mentioned the end-to-end process review that is being done and that will inevitably give an immediate comparison with other member states. We are seeing stakeholders already making submissions to us on that, highlighting the differences they believe there are between what we do and what other member states do. As soon as that work is available and recommendations are made, subject to all things being equal, I am sure there will be no issue with forwarding that to the committee for discussion.

Chairman: Thank you. I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the witnesses for coming before us today. This issue is

exasperating, to say the least, and we are under severe pressure to resolve it, as politicians on the ground. It does not look like it is being resolved and it is costing the industry and costing many people jobs. The pressure is unbelievable.

I have a number of questions. I hope I do not read them too quickly but I would appreciate answers because it is the people on the ground who are speaking. The system must guarantee that a farmer has to wait no longer than four months for a decision on a forestry licence, as set out in the Forestry Act 2014 at section 18(1). When is this going to happen?

Second, forest road construction and thinning operations should be removed from the licensing system and approved under a forest management plan. Why can this not happen?

Why is Ireland such an outlier when it comes to licensing of forestry? There is no other country in Europe which is experiencing a similar disaster to the one which the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has inflicted upon the forestry and timber industries in Ireland. Have the Ministers and their officials looked overseas to see what can be learned from forestry regimes elsewhere?

Members of the forestry and timber industries are rightly in despair when they see what has happened to their sector and how the Department has handled the crisis so far. They have major concerns over the prospect of Project Woodland succeeding unless there is a significant move towards regulatory reform. Is regulatory reform a feature of the work being carried out under Project Woodland? If not, will it be included?

The Department has set a target of 4,500 forestry licences for 2021, a target which the industry has argued is totally insufficient in the first instance. We were recently told by the Minister, Deputy Charlie McConalogue, that only 1,080 licences have issued so far this year yet the Department maintains it will reach the 4,500 target. With reference to specific detail, how is the Department going to increase its input in the coming months to reach that target? The Minister, Deputy McConalogue, said he expects the output for April and May to be significantly up and for this to continue in subsequent months. What specific detail is that statement based on and what is going to change to allow for an increase in licensing output?

What communication, if any, has the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine had with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in regard to the impact the forestry licensing crisis is having on the housing crisis? Has the Department, for example, raised concerns in regard to the country being left short of the timber needed for house building?

What communication, if any, has the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications had with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine regarding the forestry licensing collapse? Has it, for example, raised the collapse of afforestation in the context of Ireland not reaching its climate targets?

I hope I did not read the questions too quickly. If I did, I can go back over them again.

Mr. Colm Hayes: I hope I captured all of Deputy Collins' questions. I touched earlier on the first question around the four months and the key performance indicators. This is one area on which we are expecting detailed recommendations from the working groups under Project Woodland. We are aware we are not meeting the deadlines set for ourselves in many cases, although we are in some cases. That range between when applicants receive their licences is too broad at the moment and, obviously, our aim is to drive that down to the lowest possible number

and to help to meet these targets.

The stakeholders are doing some very good work on this as part of Project Woodland and we will wait to see their suggestions in terms of deadlines. Obviously, they have to be realistic about the processes and procedures that an application has to go through in terms of third-party referrals and all that sort of business. I will wait to see what they come up with. There is a strong recommendation within the Mackinnon report around the development of a customer charter for applicants, and that is something we will certainly do. However, we first need to have that discussion around the indicators.

On the question of Ireland being an outlier when it comes to regulation under the EU regulations, I think it has been answered and I do not think we need to repeat what was said before. I am very happy to engage with the Deputy bilaterally or I can repeat what was said earlier. Again, we are expecting an end-to-end process under Project Woodland which will see a comparative analysis with other EU member states and for that to be a key feature of the work.

In a way, that answers the Deputy's third question, which is what role regulatory reform plays in this whole process and in Project Woodland. It plays a key part. We have always been very clear that if anyone comes along with any feasible suggestion on how the regulations can be done in a different way, or how we can meet our environmental goals under the EU directives and, at the same time, issue more licences in some sort of alternative way, we are absolutely open to that, no question. We have engaged with every stakeholder and repeated that message at every opportunity. I am very hopeful that Project Woodland will be the vehicle to do this. There is serious work going on under four excellent working group chairs, aided by the arrival in the Department of a new business analyst, who started this week, and by Eamon O'Doherty, who is managing the whole project. I expect we will see some significant recommendations in that space. To put the Deputy's mind at ease, regulatory reform absolutely has to be part of the discussion and absolutely is part of the discussion.

On engagement with other Departments, we engage with the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications on the implementation of the climate action plans. We have done presentations on this at various forums. Our output is well known and is not a secret because we produce a weekly dashboard, which is effectively a public document at this stage. I am on record from earlier in the meeting about sharing the concerns of members in terms of the afforestation targets not being reached and how important it is to reach those, particularly in the attainment of the climate action plan goals. It is full shoulder to the wheel on that.

We have not had direct engagement with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage as regards any potential impact on the housing sector. I would reiterate earlier points that everything, including evidence from the construction sector itself, is pointing towards a significant boom at present in commodity prices across timber, steel and concrete, and all of this has to be better understood. We obviously do not buy or sell an ounce of timber, so it is the sectoral representatives who will be better able to fill in the Deputy on that. Looking at what is coming from some sectoral representatives, we are dealing with global commodity price increases. To what extent the supply situation here exacerbates that domestically is something the committee would need to hear directly from sectoral representatives. Much of our material is exported as well. At a guess, this is somewhere between a market and a supply issue but I am not qualified and do not have the commercial information from individual companies to answer in detail. It goes back to everything we have been doing so far. The solution here is more licences and that is our aim for 2021.

Deputy Martin Browne: I have a good few questions and I will do them in lots of three. I welcome the guests.

I am disappointed, as others have said, that we are still discussing how to reach the target the Department has set. We seem to be standing still or going backwards and the buck has to stop with the Department and the Minister. It is wrong that we are seeing businesses close, as the Chair and Deputy Fitzmaurice said, because of incompetence, it seems, from the Department.

In a recent parliamentary question I asked if, prior to March 2021, Coillte had been able to provide generic non-site specific harvest plans with felling applications and if this had been accepted practice between Coillte and the Department. In the response, the Minister said that applicants are encouraged to include them with their licence application and that Coillte have done this with their recent applications accepted in March. He added that Coillte had undertaken to provide further site-specific information in support of their recent applications. Yet, in response to another parliamentary question, the Minister told me that 1,864 licence applications were received from Coillte on 15 March 2021 and pre-licensing work had begun immediately with applications. Given that Coillte's licence applications did not contain the required site-specific information, how come pre-licensing work began immediately on them? If a private licence application is not up to the required standard, the Department returns it immediately and it is not processed. Is Coillte receiving preferential treatment from the Department? Is it a coincidence the applications were being processed and not being returned to Coillte until around the time the issue started to be questioned? Why is the Department prioritising Coillte licence applications when there are applications going back to 2016 still in the system?

There is a feeling out there that there has been an industrial system in forestry, which was to some extent rectified in 2009, when the case was made that forest farmers should be entitled to the single farm payment. Yet some elements of this industrial consideration continue to exist in terms of the 15 km Natura impact assessment rule. Other countries make a distinction between industrial and agricultural and use a 5 km rule for the latter. Why are we different?

Is there concern in the Department that trees ready to be felled would have an impact on our carbon sequestration targets because of a failure of the licensing process? A vast proportion of trees were planted around 1990 and it is coming up to harvest times for those. I have been told there are concerns in the Department that if the trees are felled which are due to be felled then, because of the Department's poor management of the forestry sector over the years, by 2025 we could be sequestering less carbon than we are now. In other words, there are suspicions that the delays are happening by design to hold up harvesting.

If I can get answers to those first, I have another couple on ash dieback and Project Woodland.

Chairman: We will stick to the licences today. We will have to have another meeting on ash dieback and those issues.

Deputy Martin Browne: In that case, can I ask two quick ones on Project Woodland before the witnesses answer?

Chairman: Okay.

Deputy Martin Browne: Can the witnesses tell me what the working group in Project Woodland has produced for the foresters at this stage? The foresters have been in a crisis situation for years and need immediate results. Is it true the first few meetings were wasted by

allowing some members time to become acquainted with forestry?

Mr. Colm Hayes: I do not want to get into a Coillte versus private debate and I am not a spokesperson for Coillte but it is important that facts are introduced to the discussion. The breakdown last year in private licensing volume was 52% Coillte and 48% private. This year to date it is 58% Coillte and 42% private. On the basis that, as I understand, Coillte supplies 75% of processing timber for the mills, I do not think that could be described as favouritism towards it. It is short-sighted to engage in comparison between two sectors. Coillte is not an international conglomerate; it is an Irish company that supports Irish jobs and harvests Irish timber for processing in Irish mills. Every licence is valuable and in our role as regulator, we will drive out every licence we can, assuming it is correct and in the condition it should be. Every licence has value to the rural economy and it is important that is done.

On the climate question, in simple terms, Ireland's forestry estate is and will remain a net sink for carbon dioxide up to 2050. We outlined this recently in our national forest accounting plan. Beyond 2050, we have some detailed modelling projections and work to do. There may be some older forests that will be a small net source of emissions up to about 2025, after harvested wood products are stripped out. That is in our forestry accounting plan. Projections indicate the forestry estate remains a net sink. It has no bearing on our licensing regime. It is important the national forestry estate is well managed but we would never bring to bear on any licence application any consideration of the national forest accounting plan. I draw clear blue water between those two issues.

The Deputy asked a detailed question on the Coillte applications and I think Mr. Dunne can shed some light on that.

Mr. Seamus Dunne: The Deputy mentioned the harvest plans. A harvest plan is not a legal requirement at application stage. We do not generally get harvest plans from Coillte at that stage. We encourage all applications from private sources and Coillte to supply harvest plans. It is good practice to discuss the harvest plan with the contractors who are doing the work.

For sites that are screened out for appropriate assessment, we assess whether there is a need for a harvest plan. That is for Coillte and private sites; there is no difference. For sites that are screened in, we always look for more detail, up to and including a harvest plan. This is important and Coillte has always provided sufficient information when we sought it.

The Deputy asked whether the information is generic. Is the word "generic" similar for everyone? As Coillte harvests perhaps 1,000 sites annually, there will be a high degree of consistency and standardisation with all of its harvest plans. For each application, it gives us a map of the harvest area and details of what will happen on that site. We are receiving harvest plans for screen-in sites. It is essential. We have clarified this with the sector. We sent circulars to the trade, including the private sector and Coillte, and clarified that harvest plans are essential for screen-in sites. That is for Coillte and the private sector; there is no preferential treatment. Coillte has invested heavily in ecology resources. It has approximately 20 ecologists preparing Natura impact statements, NISs. It produces them to a high standard. It probably produces more NISs than any other organisation in the country. We get the NISs with harvest plans from Coillte for us to process. It is not fair to say there was preferential treatment with Coillte.

Deputy Martin Browne: To return to public and private, I am not pitting one side against the other and I appreciate there is a great deal of employment in the sector, but both sides should be treated equally. Is Mr. Dunne saying that if Coillte does not have the site plans, it cannot

continue on, as is the case with a private contractor? If the private contractor does not have the plan, his application is returned. It is not processed any further until he has the site plans. Is Mr. Dunne saying that happens with Coillte as well or is it allowed to continue without the specific site plan?

Mr. Seamus Dunne: For screen-out sites, we have processed licences for the private sector and for Coillte without harvest plans. We encourage them because they give us a lot of good information. For screen-in sites, it is essential that we have a detailed description of every harvest site. That is the same for both the private sector and Coillte.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I will be brief because we are running out of time and many members have indicated that they wish to speak. There are three matters. In terms of the ecology, I will stick to the points in the statement from our guests. I welcome them and thank them for their work, particularly their presentation. My questions will be on that, rather than broad-stroke questions. Mr. Hayes referred to investing heavily in ecology resources, training and, more recently, streamlining the procedures in order to address the backlog in ecology. That is the subject of one question. If Mr. Hayes cannot do so today in detail, he might supply the committee with a summary of what is meant by that. How has the Department increased streamlining the procedures? Clearly, there are problems and they have to be streamlined.

Second, I am interested in the individual working groups. The presentation refers to working group 1, pre-application discussion and a planning grant system. That is very positive and important. I am familiar with pre-planning in other planning structures and perhaps there is room for developing a pre-planning system, or screening or assistance. We do not want a situation where people go so far and then some of the stuff is sent back. It prolongs things. Pre-planning discussion and a format for that are very positive.

I share the concerns of others that the goals in terms of climate action are disappointing. The goals for replanting are disappointing. Other speakers have asked why small farmers are disengaging. It is because of the bureaucracy. I can speak about people who have bought land or have an option to purchase land for forestry, but the process goes on for too long so they walk away from it. They just give up. They do not feel the system is with them and is supporting them. They are not inclined to hang around, so they decide it is not for them and they move on. Clearly, that is not in anybody's interest.

Finally, the presentation refers to the planting of native woodland in Bord na Móna bogs. That is an exciting project. I would like to know more about it, as I am sure the committee would. Rather than take time now, I ask the witness to send the committee more details about that. Hopefully, when the Covid-19 pandemic passes, the committee might take the opportunity to visit some of these projects. That would be important. I thank the witnesses for submitting the paper and for answering the questions so far.

Chairman: The Senator's points are well made. I call Mr. Hayes.

Mr. Colm Hayes: On the first point about the recruitment of ecologists and streamlining the process, the Senator suggested that we refer back in writing with more detail. I am happy to do that. We have significantly bulked up our ecology resources from one 12 to 18 months ago to 21 working on this now. It is a massive investment on our part in environmental compliance. Streamlining the process is back-office stuff, to be honest, but I have no problem with outlining some of the detail because it is impactful in terms of output. There is nothing particularly exciting about it. There is no game changer, but it is all part of the process of continuous improve-

ment when it comes to licensing.

On Bord na Móna and Coillte, I addressed this in the opening statement and I would be happy to supply more information. I suggest direct engagements with Bord na Móna and Coillte as well, if that is of interest. We can certainly give as much information as possible on the pilot scheme we have launched on this, which both agencies intend to use. A site visit would be excellent and could easily be facilitated when the Covid restrictions lift.

Have I dealt with everything?

Senator Victor Boyhan: What about the pre-planning application? The pre-planning is very important.

Mr. Colm Hayes: Working group 4, Project Woodland, is looking at both the pre-planning application and the grant for planning system. The pre-planning discussion appears to have worked well, particularly in Scotland in terms of lifting its numbers. It works in the local authority context as well. Obviously, resources are finite and we have set ourselves the very ambitious target of 4,500 licences this year. It is something that has to be factored into the business planning for the rest of the year. We are open on it. We can see the benefits. It has to be something that delivers a net gain, both for ourselves in terms of the efficiency of outputs and for the sector. First and foremost is the expertise of the foresters who are submitting the applications, which we rely on as well in terms of the quality of the applications. There are a number of ways in which one can approach this which would improve the quality of the applications. Better quality applications mean faster turnaround times. Like the Senator, I am quite excited about this. I am expecting recommendations and detail from that working group under Project Woodland on how they might work, for us to consider in more detail. We have an open mind on this and I look forward to seeing those.

Deputy Michael Ring: I have two or three brief questions for the officials. When the recent legislation was before the Dáil we were told that it would help to speed up licensing and felling. What has gone wrong? If the officials wanted one thing today to speed this up, what would they seek?

Second, we have a crisis now. It is one of the biggest crises in forestry since the foundation of the State. This will get worse. Twenty years hence, people will look back and ask what this Parliament and Government did about forestry, particularly with all the talk about carbon, the environment and saving the environment. Is the Minister of State taking an active role in this? Is she bringing anything forward to encourage more people to plant and get more people to stop objecting? Can any campaign be done by the Department to advise people on how important this is for the economy, the country and the environment?

There is real frustration at present. People do not want to go into forestry. Like everything in this country, it is over-regulated. We are over-regulated in planning and in every Department. Over the last 20 years everything has been over-regulated and people are now fed up. They are not even bothering to do anything. It is the same with housing. Everybody was giving out about the builders and about building houses. Now, there is a crisis and people want houses to be built. It is the same with timber. There is a crisis and people have to go to Scotland to buy timber. It is an awful situation in this country. There is some marginal land on which people should be growing forests. Instead, there is a crisis and people are competing in Scotland to buy forestry to keep jobs in this country. It is a very sad situation.

Those are my few questions.

Mr. Colm Hayes: I will refer to the recent legislation first. The legislation presented last year was quite simple and was designed to align the planning and appeals system with what happens in other local authority planning systems. That had a number of effects, including the introduction of a fee for an appeal and for a submission. It amended the legislation underpinning the Forestry Appeals Committee that allowed it to be more flexible in terms of how it does its business and subdivides into committees. It has been effective in many ways, particularly the subdivision of the Forestry Appeals Committee into four different committees. As I said in my opening statement, in its short lifespan the Forestry Appeals Committee has received more than 1,100 appeals on forestry licences. There are 48 cases left to be scheduled and 130 on hand. The difference between that 48 and 130 are the cases scheduled for hearing in May, June and July. Relative to where we were last year in terms of all of this, forestry appeals and the delays for all stakeholders in how the appeals system is run, it is fair to say that this is a welcome development and great credit and testament to the work of the people involved.

The Deputy also asked what is the one change we would like to see. There is no one change and that is the point. There is no silver bullet here. We are looking around and implementing various types of solutions. We have gone to Scotland to see what people there have done. It is sometimes gets forgotten that Scotland went two years without planting a single tree but eventually got its planting rate up to 10,000 ha per year. These are big ships to turn around. It is a big planning system, a €2 billion a year sector, involving thousands of landowners. This is big environmental legislation. For that reason, I think Project Woodland is the vehicle to deliver all of that because it is bringing all those elements under one roof to deliver on each of those aspects.

The current situation on licensing cannot be divorced from the long-term perspective on forestry and the development of a new forestry strategy and programme. The Chairman asked me at the start to address only licensing today but it is important that we take a longer, rather than an immediate, perspective on all of these things. We obviously have an immediate focus on resolving the licensing issues but we also need to keep a longer perspective and see where are we going. What is the next CAP going to do for tree planting? What is the next forestry programme going to do? How is it going to re-engage farmers? These are all perfectly valid questions that the committee has raised with us previously and we are considering them. I hope that answers the Deputy's questions.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I appreciate the opportunity to make my views known on behalf of the people I represent. I have been trained from a young age to treat everybody with nothing but respect and courtesy, and the Chairman knows I will act that way today. However, today is testing me very much and I will tell you why. I am personal friends with farmers whose lives have been held up, disrupted and upset and whose financial situations have been detrimentally affected. I am friends and personally close with contractors who own forwarders, harvesting equipment and lorries that are on the road. They slaved to get those lorries going. These are fellows who started out at a very young age. I am proud to be friends with one man who celebrated a special birthday recently and who recently celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary. That man has been on the road and hauling timber as long as I can remember. He is a highly respectable man with a great family coming up after him who are involved in the harvesting business and taking trees out of the wood, drawing them away and all that type of work.

I am personal friends with millers, people who own a mill. Their operation might look like a big one from the road or the sky and one would say money is not a worry for those people. It is

a worry for them because they are up to their eyes in debt. All they want to do is get timber in. The people who need the timber at the other side, including the users, the building contractors, the people who want to build homes and the construction industry want to use their own timber and do not want to be drawing it in from the rest of the world.

The reason I am cross and exercised about this issue is that I know every one of the people involved in the sector, that is, those involved in growing, harvesting and milling timber. I know them all. I think of what they have been put through. They see us today, including myself, dressed in suits, shirts and ties, and with clean hands. They have worked so hard in their industry and they are looking at the officials and asking what in the name of God they are doing. I assure the Chairman that I am going to control what I am going to say but if I were in the officials' shoes, I would be ashamed. They gave us assurances most recently on 29 January and I would be ashamed to think that nothing has improved since then. If anything, it is backwards we are going. That is a fact. Deputy Fitzmaurice indicated earlier that we are taking one step back and half a step forward. I think of what the officials are doing to the people. The confidence in the timber-growing industry in Ireland is completely gone. No farmer or young person would dream of planting a bit of ground because all they are hearing is negativity.

The Department is not capable of issuing a felling licence or a thinning licence. It is incapable of issuing a licence or permit for a person to construct a road. If it does issue a licence, it then tells people to do impossible things. We are dealing with the issuing of permits. Fellows are being told to import all the material and not to backfill a road, the way we have always dug a road. One digs out the clay, buries the bog, brings up the clay and makes a road as one goes along. We have people telling others to take off the bog and draw every bit of material from a quarry nearby. No one in his or her right mind could even undertake such a process because it would cost a mental fortune of money that no farmer or person developing a road could even imagine. We are not a local authority. We are not being funded from Europe. My goodness, we are talking about farmers who only want access to the timber they want to cut and sell. They want to manage their forests properly and cannot do so because of the Department's incompetence. I would be ashamed to be an official coming before the committee today. How in the name of God can the officials go to bed at night thinking they have brought a fine industry to its knees?

We are one of the best countries in the western world for growing timber. If you threw a sapling on the ground, it would be up to your knees in no time. God gave us this country. He gave us growth conditions. My goodness, I think of the highly respectable people who I adore, foresters who did so much in our area to encourage people to plant trees, and the shambles the Department has made of the whole thing. The officials are incapable of processing a few God-damn permits.

Chairman: Okay.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I ask the Chairman to leave me finish on a happy note. I ask, on two bended knees, our guests to do the necessary work. It is not impossible. We are not asking the officials to climb Mount Everest. All we are asking is that they start to go through the backlog in a workmanlike way. I call on them to roll up their sleeves and tear at the job of work that needs doing. Do not mind talking about ships. If the Department were a ship, it would have sunk further than the *Titanic*. The politicians, farmers and representative organisations have all lost confidence in the Department. I am disgusted to say that because I was brought up to respect officials. I was brought up to respect people whether they are in a local authority or a Department. What the officials have done to themselves is to lose the respect of the public

and of the people of Ireland. By God, they are going to have to roll up their sleeves if they are going to gain back that respect.

I am sorry for being cross but I am cross on behalf of an awful lot of people who are cross today because of the inaction of Department officials and people in the Department who are not capable of doing the job that they are being highly paid to do.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I will ask about the unenclosed land where the pilot scheme is taking place. I know Mr. Hayes said that farmers with an appropriate assessment do not get the grant aid or the yearly scheme but they do get the cost of it. Are they allowed to do the same as Bord na Móna is doing at the moment on degraded bog?

My understanding is there was nobody from the forestry sector on the CAP negotiation team. Is that correct?

Mr. Colm Hayes: To respond to Deputy Fitzmaurice, the scheme to which he refers is intended for planting not on unenclosed land but rather on industrial cutaway bogs, which are no longer used for that purpose and which Bord na Móna has effectively decommissioned-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Why can somebody not do the same on his or her bog, if Bord na Móna can plant on industrial bogs?

Mr. Colm Hayes: We are working this as a pilot initiative on industrial cutaway bogs to see what is possible for that type of land. We are seeing whether the vast tracts of land in Bord na Móna's possession could make a valuable contribution to the environmental goals in the-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Could a farmer who has 30 or 50 cows not make a valuable contribution to mitigation measures under the CAP? Will they be allowed? If the Department gives Bord na Móna a licence to do that, is it not only right and proper, if someone has 20 acres of degraded bog and gets the appropriate assessment, that he or she would be able to plant the same type of timber? I am not talking about spruce or anything; I think it is all native stuff.

Mr. Colm Hayes: Any landowner with any type of land is entitled to inquire or make an application to the Department for planting on that land, although it may not be possible, given that I am not sure of the type of degraded bog land to which the Deputy is referring. I think we are talking about two very different issues.

On the second question, I think the Deputy was referring to the CAP consultative committee, in respect of which the Department is a stakeholder. There are a number of bodies on the committee and there is a strong overlap between it and-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Does the forestry sector have a representative on the committee?

Mr. Colm Hayes: -----the forestry policy group, including farm organisations among others. An application was made in the past two or three weeks from the forestry sector to join the CAP consultative committee, and I understand our colleagues on the CAP side are looking at that at the moment-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The game is over. The Minister is in Brussels and whatever is going to happen with CAP will be decided this week. The game is over if we have had no one on the committee for the past three years. The CAP negotiations have been ongoing for three years and the farmer organisations have been prodding us throughout that time. It is damnable

that no representative was put on the committee to fight for the forestry sector.

Mr. Colm Hayes: Forestry issues are considered within the design of the CAP schemes because the forestry divisions of the Department input heavily into the design of the CAP schemes and agri-environment issues. The forestry sector itself came along only in the past two weeks to request a place on the consultative committee, which is up and running. What has been happening in Brussels for the past two days is the setting of the ground rules for what the scheme will be. A great deal of work has yet to be done on the design of all these schemes, and the forestry sector has now asked whether it could be a part of the committee that has input into that. There is still a decision to be made on that and, obviously, many different groups would like to have input. We met representatives of the forestry sector last week to discuss what the input to the CAP schemes might look like. Whether the forestry sector is inside or outside that formal structure of the CAP consultative committee, it is absolutely no barrier to ongoing discussion. We are open to any sensible suggestions in regard to the next round of schemes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Our committee spent some time putting together a document. The Chairman can correct me if I am wrong, but we did not receive any feedback on the ideas. In fairness, every member spent a long time on it. Deputy Kehoe or another member asked about the issue of unenclosed land and what we could do about it, and there was supposed to be feedback to the committee but we got nothing. What is the story with those two issues?

Mr. Colm Hayes: On the committee's report, the Minister recently responded in detail outlining how the Department could incorporate the suggestions. We considered all the suggestions. There is a fair degree of overlap with Project Woodland, as one might expect, and the Minister touched on that in our letter, as I am sure the Deputy will have seen.

On the question of unenclosed land, I apologise if we did not respond in detail to a question raised at our previous appearance before the committee. We will do that immediately as part of our response following this meeting. That should not have happened and we will rectify the matter in our response.

Chairman: We have gone over time. I thank the witnesses for their engagement. As can be seen clearly, there is great frustration on our side over the issues facing the sector. I hope we will not have to return to the matter in the near future, but the licensing issue has to be sorted out. The sector cannot survive with the licensing output that has obtained in recent years. It just cannot function. There have to be licences for afforestation, thinning, felling and roads. We are not talking about something in the future; this has to happen now. We will closely monitor the issue of licences over the coming weeks. I hope we will not have to address it again as a committee but, if so, we will not be afraid to do so.

Members, including Senator Boyhan and Deputies Carthy and Martin Browne, wanted to raise other issues that affect the forestry sector, so we will need to have a further meeting in the near future to discuss them. Today's meeting was intended specifically to address the issue of licences and the disaster in the forestry sector. I thank members for their engagement. We look forward to seeing significant progress in the sector immediately.

I propose we suspend the meeting for 30 minutes before meeting in private session on MS Teams.

Sitting suspended at 2.37 p.m. and resumed in private session at 3.01 p.m.

27 MAY 2021

The joint committee adjourned at 3.22 p.m. until 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 1 June 2021.