

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THALMHAÍOCHT, BIA AGUS MUIR

JOINT COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

Dé Céadaoin, 16 Feabhra 2022

Wednesday, 16 February 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 5.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 5.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Matt Carthy,	Victor Boyhan,
Michael Collins,	Tim Lombard.
Michael Fitzmaurice,	
Joe Flaherty,	
Paul Kehoe,	
Michael Ring.	

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

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

Eradication of Bovine Tuberculosis: Discussion

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senators Paul Daly and Boylan and Deputy Martin Browne. Senator Daly is debating the passage of a Bill in the Seanad that he has sponsored and hopes to join us later.

I remind members, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery to turn off their mobile phones and request they ensure that, for the duration of the meeting, they are turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe or flight mode, depending on the device. It is not sufficient for mobile phones just to be put on silent mode because this will maintain a level of interference with the broadcasting system.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the eradication of bovine tuberculosis, TB. I welcome the representatives from Macra na Feirme, the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, ICMSA, and the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, and thank them for coming before the committee.

With effect from 25 January 2022, members and witnesses have the option of attending committee meetings in the relevant committee room rather than participating via MS Teams. Masks should continue to be worn by those present when not addressing the committee. Room capacity will continue to be reduced in the short term until all microphones and seating can be returned.

Witnesses giving evidence within the parliamentary precincts are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they give to the committee. This means a witness has a full defence in any defamation action for anything said at a committee meeting. However, witnesses are expected not to abuse this privilege and may be directed to cease giving evidence on an issue at the Chairman's direction. Witnesses should follow the direction of the Chairman in this regard and are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that, as far as is reasonable, no adverse commentary should be made against an identifiable third party or entity. Witnesses who are to give evidence from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts and may consider it appropriate to take legal advice on the matter. Privilege against defamation does not apply to the publication by witnesses outside the proceedings held by the committee of any matter arising from the proceedings.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect they should not comment on, criticise nor make charges against a person outside the House or any official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. Parliamentary privilege is considered to apply to the utterances of members participating online in a committee meeting when their participation is from within the parliamentary precincts. There can be no assurance in respect of participation online from outside the parliamentary precincts and members should be mindful of this when they contribute.

I welcome from the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, Mr. Eddie Punch, general secretary, and Mr. Hugh Farrell, chair of animal health and welfare; from the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, Mr. Lorcan McCabe, deputy president, and Mr. Paul Smyth, executive secretary of the dairy committee; from the Irish Farmers Association, Mr. T.J. Maher, chair of animal health, and Mr. Tomás Bourke, senior policy executive; and from Macra na

Feirme, Mr. John Keane, president, Ms Gillian Richardson, acting head of policy, and Mr. Shane Fitzgerald, chair of the agricultural affairs committee, who will substitute for Mr. Keane when he leaves early.

I invite Mr. Keane, who has to attend another meeting shortly, to make his opening statement.

Mr. John Keane: I understand committee members have read our opening statement, so I will not reiterate much of what was contained in that. As for where we are in our eradication of bovine TB, we have engaged in a programme since 1954 and there has been progress over recent decades in respect of the eradication and the reduction of numbers, in terms of both the incidence rate and the prevalence at which TB occurs. From the point of view of the role of the TB forum, which was established in recent years, progress has been made in developing both the science base on which the eradication programme is built and the knowledge and education base among the farming community.

The pressures among farmers and farm families as a result of a breakdown cannot be underestimated. The breakdown of a family farm affects not only the farmer but also the entire enterprise and the family holding. The role farmers have played over recent decades in the eradication of the programme and the role farmers will play into the future will continue to be one of supportive engagement, seeking the ultimate eradication of the programme. Nevertheless, the support of farmers from a financial point of view and the integration of farmers' viewpoints in developing any policies that will ultimately affect the eradication of the programme must be at the core of what is determined to be a success as we move forward. Farmers have continually engaged in biosecurity measures to improve, enhance and reduce their risk from the spread of bovine tuberculosis.

It is worth noting also the role wildlife has to play and the further research and development that is needed, in respect of both the interaction of the badger population and improved knowledge and research of the relationship deer have to play in the transmission of the disease at farm level. Over recent years, the roll-out of the vaccination programme to the badger population in areas that have previously been culled and where the disease is said to be under control has merited some rewards, but there must be ongoing research and continued investigation in respect of the merits and the occurrence rate, the frequency rate and the continued effectiveness of the vaccine in those badger populations. As for the role of deer, particularly in high-density volumes in Wicklow among other places, research has shown that in high density and high volumes of deer, badger and bovine animals, the isolates of the samples of the species and also the strains of TB that have been found are similar to those found in bovine animals and badgers and among the deer population. Research presented to the TB forum in recent months has also highlighted this as a possible pool of infection.

With all that in mind, the development of science and the research will bring about the change that is necessary for the eradication of TB. We must look to some of our partners throughout the world who have successfully eradicated TB and to states such as New Zealand, which is down to fewer than 40 herds that have become infected with TB. It is a science-based model of research. We look at the area of whole-genome sequencing, which the TB forum has been briefed about this week and which it has also discussed in previous sessions, and the role that has to play to identify the species, the strain and isolate the strain has come from. Essentially, it identifies the occurrence, the species it occurred in and whether the transmission was from bovine to badger or from badger back to bovine. Macra na Feirme feels that it is essential that the studies that have been conducted in the UK are carried out in the Republic of Ireland

for us to gain further insight into the transmissibility of the disease.

We must also be cognisant of the need for a consistent and sustainable funding model into the future. The TB forum has consistently heard that a funding model must deliver for eradication but also for farmers. The farmers' contribution in recent years has been around €34 million with decreasing funding from the EU and the Irish taxpayer increasing the funding to an overall funding of €105 million in 2021. That must continue if we are serious about eradication of the disease.

Macra na Feirme feels there must be front-loading of investment in funding to eradicate the disease. We feel that from a farmer's perspective, our labour is not included in the costs incurred. It must be considered that we have young farmers who are highly educated and highly qualified with level 6, 7 and 8 degrees and qualifications. If we are serious, we must consider as significant the labour expense and labour wage and associated qualifications and then the subsistence provided must reflect the quality of education among the farming community.

We welcome any questions. Macra na Feirme's goal is held in common with that of the TB forum and all the other stakeholders; the eradication of disease is something we all strive for. Continued support, engagement, education and investment in research is how will achieve that by 2030 and beyond.

Mr. T.J. Maher: It is great to be back in person. We appreciate the invitation to come in. We were told it has been over two years since we were here in person.

We have sent a submission to the committee but I will give some key points here. The TB eradication programme implemented in Ireland remains the single largest animal health cost for Irish farmers each year with combined direct and indirect cost of over €55 million per annum. In addition, despite 4% of herds breaking down with the disease annually, the fear of a TB outbreak continues to be identified by farmers as one of the largest annual stress factors associated with farming as a result of the severe impact on normal farm practice and associated losses.

Irish farmers contribute in excess of €55 million each year to the TB programme with more than €27 million in annual TB testing costs, approximately €8 million in disease levies and €20 million in labour when facilitating the testing of more than 9 million animal tests a year. For the €55 million investment, farmers receive just over €20 million in compensation in 2020, rising to €26 million last year, reflecting the higher stock values for animals and production losses associated with the TB programme on our farms.

Clearly, eradication of the disease within the shortest feasible time frames must be the objective. However, this will not be achieved by the simplistic approach of tightening controls on farmers while ignoring the impact this has on farmers and the associated losses for their farms. In recent years, the levels of TB have increased throughout the country with more than 20,000 reactors and more than 4,000 herds each year experiencing restrictions.

While the objective must be eradication of TB from the national herd within the shortest feasible timeframe, we cannot lose sight of the impact TB controls and measures have on farmers, their families and their business. Regardless of how effective any new or enhanced controls will be in reducing the levels of TB and ultimately achieving eradication, we cannot lose sight of the fact this will be a long-term process throughout which farmers will incur financial losses through animal removals and trade restrictions. The support schemes in the TB programme must be enhanced to reflect the full impact animal removals and restrictions have on the income

of their farms. This will provide the platform to move forward the controls and measures necessary to make meaningful progress in pursuing eradication of the disease and maintaining farmer support for the process.

Today we are here to discuss TB eradication. The main driver to achieve this will not be a simplistic and one-dimensional approach. While a multifaceted approach will be necessary, the main driver has been and will always be the effective implementation of the effective wildlife control programme. We have seen first-hand in this country the impact this programme can have in reducing the levels of disease. In the late 1990s we were having up to 44,000 TB reactors a year taken from our farms. The commencement of the wildlife programme in the early 2000s reduced these numbers to less than 16,000 by 2013. There is no doubt but that a number of factors have contributed to the increase in reactors since then but central to that has been the lack of progress in enhancing the wildlife control programme.

The committee will be aware the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has committed additional resources to the wildlife programme in the last budget and through the implementation group, enhancements to the programme have been agreed which include a comprehensive resurveying for setts, assisted by the roll-out of the new app which farmers support and have already engaged with and are starting to see the results in terms of additional setts identified and the proactive implementation of the programme in advance of major infrastructural works.

However, the main limiting factor here is the human resources available to the programme to effectively and efficiently implement the programme to positively impact on the levels of TB. Additional funding has been provided for and we must now see this translate into boots on the ground to carry out the surveying and capture work. The IFA has made a detailed submission to the TB implementation group in this area. Members will have been provided with a copy.

The programme effectively requires a doubling of the human resources available to it with those resources deployed on the basis of TB levels within the area. If we are serious about eradicating TB, we must have effective and efficient implementation of the wildlife programme with the primary focus on density reduction of badgers where found associated with TB outbreaks.

The Minister has announced the re-establishment of the national deer management forum. This must happen as a matter of urgency both to address the TB risk associated with deer, which is becoming more prevalent, and the broader impact these animals are having roaming through our farmland, eating grass, damaging crops and fences and raising safety issues on roads.

I now turn to farm controls. We can never again have a situation where the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine unilaterally embarks on an approach of blacklisting farmers through herd categorisation for TB. The new structures of engagement are helpful to avoid a repeat of this but the episode has rightly caused great anger among our members. Categorising herds based on TB risk does not eradicate the disease, but severely penalises farmers who through no fault of their own experience TB breakdowns. Good progress has been made in this area.

Between 2012 and 2020, the level of farmers' direct contribution to the programme increased by 13.8% from €30.6 million to €34 million. Funding from the Exchequer increased from €45 million to €57 million, while the contribution from the EU reduced from €11 million to €5.4 million. Farmer contributions in 2021 have increased again with a further reduction in the contribution from the EU. Farmers' direct contribution consists of payment for the an-

nual TB test and the payment of disease levies amounting to over €35 million in 2021. Until recently the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine refused to recognise farmer labour as a contribution to the programme. The Grant Thornton cost-benefit analysis identified this contribution to be worth only €8 million. The IFA has rejected this figure. Our conservative estimate puts the farm labour contribution at €20 million annually. That brings farmers' total contribution to over €55 million.

It must be remembered TB breakdowns are primarily associated with issues outside the control of the farmer. TB controls have a huge financial impact on farms and facilitating the programme on our farms creates significant labour demands. All this must be taken into account. Clearly a sustainable funding model needs to be agreed. There is broad consensus here on that. This model must recognise the full level of farmers' contributions currently and must involve all stakeholders who benefit from farmers' implementation of the TB eradication programme. Maintaining access to our export markets and the value-added chain for our produce is only possible because of the facilitation of the TB programme on our farms, which benefits all stakeholders in the agriculture sector and beyond. All of these must contribute to the funding of the programme.

Long-standing agreements are in place in relation to liability to pay for testing on our farms. As farmers, we are liable to pay for one test in a calendar year at no shorter interval than ten months. Any other additional supplementary testing requirements are the responsibility of the Department. We will not be deviating from this position.

The IFA is acutely aware of the importance of maintaining the hard-won, high-health status of our national livestock herd as a major exporter of agricultural produce. Farmers have and continue to support the efforts of the Department in eradicating TB from the national herd at an enormous direct and indirect cost. The IFA is demanding the eradication of TB from the national herd in the shortest feasible time. However, this cannot be achieved by further increasing the enormous and disproportionate cost burden on farmers. The main contributing factors to TB spread can be addressed in a practical and effective way that takes account of the farming dynamic in Ireland and the critical importance of animal movements and live exports.

The IFA is actively engaged with the TB forum process with the clearly outlined objective of eradicating TB from the national herd while minimising the impact of controls on our farmers. We have the tools at our disposal to achieve significant reductions in the levels of TB and, ultimately, eradication. While science is important and we must always seek to improve what we do, we cannot lose sight of the measures that have proven effective in the past. We must have the wildlife programme fully resourced to ensure the enhanced programme that has been agreed is fully implemented throughout the country. We must address the deer issue before it starts to contribute to disease spread to the same extent as badgers. Farmers must be fairly compensated for the impact of the controls and animal losses on their farms. The funding model must recognise the full value of farmers' contribution to the programme and include those outside the farm gate who are beneficiaries of the programme but currently do not contribute.

I thank the Chairman and committee members for their attention. We will be delighted to take questions.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Maher and call Mr. McCabe.

Mr. Lorcan McCabe: I thank the Chairman. Our objective, as the committee knows, is to get rid of TB as quickly as possible and our submission is on the record. There are a couple of

things I want to highlight on that. The main one, as the committee has heard from everyone before, is the wildlife problem. The badgers are obviously a problem and it is under-resourced. As late as yesterday I was talking to people with TB in their herd in the southern part of the country. They were saying they had no personnel for the last two years and it created havoc with wildlife. For a start, the wildlife is considered to be one of the biggest problems. It is completely under-resourced. There need to be many more feet on the ground to sort that out.

Moving on to other things, the new animal health law suggested we bring in the pre- and post-movement testing of animals that have been out of test within six months. We have continuously pushed forward that it be the pre-movement test only because it will be very difficult to police the other. A policy we in the ICMSA have pushed for a long time relates to inconclusives. Going back to 2019, there have been over 2,000 inconclusives in the country every year with 12% to 13% of them going down subsequently. I am glad that as of last year all inconclusives are under a strict regime of testing. It is now showing up that two out of three inconclusives are subsequently failing on the blood test and subsequent testing. We have continuously looked for a programme to be put in place so that historical inconclusives - there are approximately 4,000 of them - are taken out at full market valuation because there is no doubt they will turn up problems as we go forward.

The other thing that is very critical is communication. We have heard constantly from the Department about this new communication programme called the CRM, or client relation management, that is to be up and running. Under it, anyone with TB can, in one phone call, have everything explained to them as to what happens. This is not the case on the ground. It absolutely is not. It is irrelevant whether people lose two, 50 or 100 cows because for them, these are animals they care for going down. They are under stress starting off. They want a phone number to ring to find out about valuation, all the forms they must fill in and everything that must be done. That is not there. If we want farmers on side the Department needs to have a direct line people can ring with everything they need. Going back to the badgers and catching, snaring and vaccinating them, you must get farmers on your side first. If farmers are in the dark they are not aware of what is happening and where to go. The communication is one thing we have been promised and it has fallen down very badly.

The compensation scheme is probably going 20 years now and there are a couple of issues. The income supplement was set at €55 probably 20-odd years ago and with costs, etc., it is completely outdated. In our submission we have set it at a minimum of €90. We have heard from people who have lost cows. Their income is way down. I have people screaming at me on the phone that their income is way down. Everything is there in our submission.

Going back to financing, the wildlife programme for 2019 was €4.5 million. That needs to be upped much more and as I said before, we need feet on the ground to sort it out. In some areas you have fantastic officers on the ground who work hard at it. In other areas it is not that they do not do a good job but that they are just not there. We need an update on that.

On research, only something like €2 million is spent on research every year. Scientific research is the way we must go. That research must be updated. Recently there is genomic sequencing and it has huge potential in tracing where TB has come from. In other words, if I bought an animal off Mr. Smyth, they would be able to trace it back to wherever it came from and we will knock that out in the end.

We have a couple of other points there. We believe there should be a loan scheme for people who have been held up with TB because it can be catastrophic. One other quick thing. With

Covid in the past two years, there was a relaxing of the regulation regarding calves such that you can sell them up to 120 days. Our friends in the Department have at all stages said it has not impacted on TB whatsoever so we will be hoping that rule could be reapplied. It has not since last September. I will be willing to take any questions. Our objective is that there will be no TB and so no need for compensation.

Chairman: I thank Mr. McCabe and call Mr. Farrell.

Mr. Hugh Farrell: I thank the Chairman. The ICSA takes the opportunity to thank him and the committee for the invitation to appear on the topic of bovine TB eradication and to be back in the committee room. We really appreciate it.

The TB problem remains one of the most difficult challenges faced by all of the stakeholders in agriculture. For the past four years, the TB forum has provided a framework to chart a way forward. Obviously, the Covid situation has impacted the work. Nonetheless, the TB forum led to the publication of a national TB strategy. To some extent, the strategy remains an aspirational document detached from the practical realities of implementing a programme that is workable and fair to all. We are now working with the other stakeholders through a number of sub-groups of the TB forum.

The committee will undoubtedly be aware the Department is expressing concern at increasing costs for the programme. There is the reality that EU funding has been cut and is likely to diminish further. Our basic position is that all farmers must be treated fairly and that no farmer should be expected to carry an unacceptable financial cost towards the meeting of a national goal. We do not accept the proposition that farmers can be asked to carry more cost. The problem, as we have seen with Covid, is that measures to alleviate an infectious disease cost money and require public funds. The more draconian the measures, the more public funds are required. To some extent, we are concerned that the subgroups of the tuberculosis, TB, forum are not working in tandem. Measures that hit farmers are being proposed at the implementation subgroup without reference to the finance subgroup. However, the problem for sucklers is that, in certain cases, the loss of a cow has a lifetime impact on the calf. The ICSA believes that the impact on the calf needs to be fully compensated for.

We have several key asks. We ask that on-farm market valuation is independent, reflects the real value of stock and is not subject to artificial limitations which deprive farmers of fair play. We ask that the hardship grants and income supplement and depopulation grants must also reflect real costs, particularly in the context of increased costs and stock values, and they must also treat the farmers the same whether full-time or part-time. It is completely unacceptable that more measures are being proposed to focus on cattle unless we have a comprehensive programme to deal with the undoubted wildlife elements of the TB spread. We have seen that badger culling has been a necessary part of making progress, but there is a need to ensure that the badger vaccination programme is used to improve data collection on badger infection rates.

The Department cannot continue to wash its hands of the deer problem. We know that deer infection rates are comparable to bovine rates. It is very frustrating that the only answer farmers are getting is to look for a licence to shoot deer. We want a proper forum to deal with the issues around deer and other State and State-sponsored bodies, such as Coillte, need to play their part as good neighbours. Any new proposals will only be acceptable as part of an overall package.

If the Department wants pre- or post-movement tests for cattle for fattening or in certain other scenarios, then there has to be an agreement in place for paying for this. Farmers already

pay enough for the annual herd test and this principle must be respected. There are still problems with individual farmers who experience unacceptable delays in the removal of reactors. The ICSA has been totally opposed to herd categorisation or any other process which leads to the devaluation of a farmer's herd. There was strong resistance to mart board information and the unfortunate incident with the letters last year did not help. Overall, the problem we see is that the Department wants to add considerably more burdens on farmers but is also trying to cut costs. We are all in favour of fast-tracking the eradication of TB, but this implies spending money today in order to eliminate spending at a future date. However, despite this, the cost of the programme is not escalating out of control. It has increased by 12% over the past four years, but that must be taken in the context of significant dairy expansion.

The increase in dairy cows, compared to suckler cows, makes higher funding under the valuation scheme inevitable. Dairy cows that are culled due to TB have very little salvage value compared to suckler cows. Suckler cows usually are very valuable in a meat factory by comparison. Therefore, if we have more dairy cows, we have more cows where the salvage value falls well short of the on-farm market valuation.

However, dairy expansion and the related increase in beef exports has also delivered a massive increase in State receipts through taxation, investment and employment. The value of food and drink exports increased 21% between 2016 and 2021, or an extra €2.3 billion. The Exchequer cannot have it both ways. Increased exports cannot come without some increase in the cost of the TB programme. Total disposals of livestock, including slaughtering, live exports and deaths, increased by more than 500,000 head in the period 2012-2019. In this context, the increased cost of the TB programme over the past four years at 12% is not unexpected and does not represent a disproportionately higher burden on Exchequer funds.

The cost of the programme is estimated at €97 million in 2020, compared with €87.5 million in 2012. We think this does not fully capture the contribution of farmers. The testing element, which farmers pay for, is costed at a national rate per animal tested, but we believe that many farmers, especially those on smaller or fragmented holdings, are paying more for testing. It is also the case that the programme does not allocate a cost to farmers for their own time in testing cattle and other programme requirements.

Department staff costs for 2020 were €28.5 million, which is a figure that we have repeatedly challenged. We do not understand how it makes sense that the Department figures show that its staff costs for administering the scheme are roughly equal to the costs of testing the entire national herd under the annual herd test, paid for by farmers, particularly when one considers that more than 95% of herds are clear and, therefore, these herds do not entail much interaction with the Department.

A sound strategy must be based on fair play for all farmers and a recognition that full and accurate compensation is the essential foundation of success. Academic research is important, but we are talking about the livelihood of our members here.

I will add some general comments on compensation. The ICSA wants to see a review of the financial impact of compensation arrangements on suckler and beef farmers. In the case of suckler farmers, the entire business viability is very sensitive to selling at exactly the right time and weight. For example, an enforced slaughtering of a calf before it reaches optimum weight for a weanling of 350 kg means that it will be undervalued. Moreover, the remaining cohort of suckler calves will not be sold in time to achieve the best balance between price per kilogram and the cost. Timing is also significant. Weanlings are generally priced higher in July and Au-

gust and therefore being locked up at this time can have serious implications for viability. This impact is not captured by either the on-farm market valuation, depopulation or income supplement grants. Likewise, the restrictions on buying in cattle or on selling at particular times of the year can have devastating impacts on the entire viability of an enterprise. In terms of overall cost, the compensation scheme is only the third highest area of expenditure, well below the costs of testing and staff administration.

I will speak on on-farm market valuation. In 2020, the cost of on-farm market valuation compensation is estimated at €16.3 million. Using the September 2019 to September 2020 data, there were 21,289 reactors which works out at €769 per head average compensation cost in today's markets.

The ICSA believes that there is a particular problem with the valuation of high value animals being capped unfairly and that valuation should be always in line with the real market value of the animal, particularly in the case of breeding stock or pedigree stock. Valuers should be free to fully and correctly value all animals and there should be no artificial cap on breeding or pedigree stock values.

Depopulation and income supplement grants are paid to help alleviate loss of income due to loss of stock. The rate of dairy cows is €55 per month and suckler cows at €38, which presumably reflects loss of milk sales. However, the problem of sucklers is that in certain cases, the loss of the cow has a lifetime impact on the calf. ICSA believes that the impact on the calf needs to be fully compensated for.

The hardship grant is paid, in particular, to cover extra feed costs incurred during the winter feeding months as a result of being unable to sell stock. It only applies where there is no off-farm income. The rate of €38 per suckler cow is reasonable except for the fact that the maximum payment is €250 per month, which is totally inadequate to cover feed costs in many cases, particularly with recent inflation and it is outdated. We also question why those with off-farm income are excluded. This may be appropriate for high-net-worth individuals, but the suggestion that there is no financial hardship for someone with a modest level of off-farm income is absurd. The TB forum will need to align the deliberations of all subgroups if we are to make progress. We cannot accept new measures unless the thorny issue of funding and fair compensation is sorted. It is also essential that the wildlife element to TB is given as much prominence as proposals for more farm restrictions.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I apologise because I will have to leave to go to the Seanad. There is an important animal health and welfare and forestry Bill in the Seanad which is important and which relates to all of us here. I will ask two or three questions. I first thank all our guests for the comprehensive documentation they provided, which we have read and considered. They add a great amount of weight to the discussion and the experience and knowledge of our guests is always paramount in formulating legislation and advocating on behalf of the agricultural industry.

I have a question for Macra na Feirme. I always say it would be helpful if submissions were made by the number because we have to number them ourselves. Page 2 of Macra na Feirme's submission refers to providing disinfecting footpaths and overalls for personnel visiting their holdings. I understand the significance of that but I am also conscious of a controversy that is regularly raised with me, namely, uninvited guests to agricultural holdings and those who sometimes assert that they have some sort of right of way. It is becoming common for agricultural land to be tied up along greenways. Even in Dublin, organisations are talking about keep-

ing Ireland open. While I have no problem with, I am also conscious that farm owners have private property rights that must be vindicated, and these farmers must also be supported. That is another dynamic and challenge. It is an area that I ask the farm organisations to direct some attention to. I am always walking around the greenways and the countryside. There are issues with this in terms of a source of infection. It is an argument that the agricultural advocacy groups have not advanced enough. I would be interested to hear about that. I raise this issue because our guests from Macra na Feirme have raised it. Perhaps they will address that point.

Everyone has covered the issue of the challenges around deer, the role of deer in the spread of disease and the need for further research and innovation in this area. What do the witnesses mean by that? What quick and simple measures could or should we look at?

The ICSA and the IFA both raised the issue of mart boards, which I am familiar with. There is negativity around mart boards, which both groups mentioned in their submissions. There has been extensive coverage of this issue in the media. Farmers remain deeply dissatisfied with the way the Department has taken herd categorisation at marts upon itself and that is impacting negatively on prices. This has the potential to seriously compromise the prices at the marts such that cattle could not be at the mart in the first place. I would have thought cattle could not be at the mart if they are not clear of TB. Why are we talking about the integrity of the TB test system? It is ridiculous to suggest that about categorisation. There is an element of the flawed pedigree and lower price mechanism about this. I have an issue with that and many farmers have raised it with me as a concern. I have seen it at first-hand and it is always nice to go to marts. There is an issue there. I will leave it at that because that is one of the biggest recurring issues and it one I regularly hear about from farmers. The witnesses might comment on that. What can we do about that and what is the alternative? I see the flaws, the negativity and the impact on cattle prices in marts. Farmers either have a clear bill of health and are in the mart because it is legal, right and appropriate to be there or they do not have a clear bill of health. If not, what is the issue with the integrity of the system?

Mr. John Keane: I thank the Senator for the question. I will touch on a few elements. We talked about the biosecurity measures that are ongoing at farm level and the Senator mentioned disinfection and its use at farm level. The wider context for that is the boundary fencing for farmers and the reduction of spread. There are gaps within that, however. With regard to the funding streams available for the security of farmyards, for example to protect from wildlife entering farmyards, there are no funding streams for that under TAMS. To take Wicklow and the reservoir of *Mycobacterium bovis* in the deer population there, under TAMS there is no funding available to farmers for effective deer fencing or other supports to prevent deer from entering their land and engaging with their livestock enterprises. Control of the sources of infection is as important as the on-farm practices that farmers are carrying out. While work can be done to improve engagement and education, the sources that occur in farmyards and through deer populations must also be addressed through funding.

The Senator mentioned the perceived rights of individuals travelling on farmland. There is a bigger discussion to be had around the impact that has, not only on the transmission of disease at farm level but also its implications for the legal rights of landowners. The full expression of the legal rights of landowners must be looked at as well. As has been highlighted around the country in recent months, we see cases of walkers taking dogs that are not under effective control out on land and these dogs end up worrying sheep. There are a number of issues that must be addressed in the spread of disease from foreign bodies. I refer to people entering into or trespassing on farms in that regard and to the impact their role has in dog worrying or sources

of infection.

The Senator's last point was on display and mart boards and so forth. It has been mentioned that equivalents to the TB forum have been done in other regions where eradication has been achieved or partially achieved. It is important to note, and this has been highlighted in the TB forum as well, that the make-up of the mart sector in the Irish context is greatly different from the make-up of the sales arenas in other sectors. In particular, it differs from those in overseas regions where there are tens or hundreds of animals in different lots. In Ireland, animals are sold in individual lots of ones or twos. A simple copycat of the measures introduced in other countries and jurisdictions to allow that will not work here or provide a fair and transparent market return for farmers.

It is Macra na Feirme's view, which is shared by many, that this market disturbance will further negatively impact farmers who are suffering from a TB breakdown. We have already touched on the impact on them from the effect of the TB, whether that be the hardship support grant or others which members will see in our submission, and the implications in costs incurred by the farmer as a result of the disease. Thereafter, for a protracted period, perhaps three, four or five years, the farmer is in a negative market trading position. The farmer suffers for three, four or five years as a result of a breakdown that may not be his or her fault and could also receive a lower return from the market as a result. The science tells us that one third of farms that become infected with TB will have a reoccurrence of infection within the following two or three years. There will be a cycle of continued impact on that farmer as a result of that. The financial impact that will have on farmers needs to be given much greater thought and it needs to be established that it will work for farmers. We should not think only of the effect it will have on the market.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I will address the final issue Macra na Feirme raised in its opening statement, namely, categorisation and the concerns and challenges around that. The ICSA and the IFA raised that issue. I know the issue and concerns, as does Macra na Feirme. What are the witnesses proposing and suggesting?

Mr. Eddie Punch: It is very simple. The Department has become a little hung up, for want of a better word, on the idea that the track record of a farm over several years would be presented on mart boards or under herd categorisation, such as in letters sent to farmers. The implication is that, even though a farmer may be clear of TB and his or her herd may have passed the TB test, he or she may be somehow less safe as a source of livestock than his or her neighbour because his or her farm had TB, say, three or four years ago and the neighbour did not. We think that is a dangerous road to go down because the implication is the devaluation of one herd against another. Moreover, it will ultimately devalue the merit of the herd test. If someone's herd test indicates that all the stock is clear, that must be either accepted, as is the foundation of the entire TB programme, or not accepted. While it may have made some academic sense to examine this from some sort of research point of view, in the real commercial world in which farmers have to operate it creates an appalling vista whereby people would be financially devastated by having their herds devalued. In tandem with that, when we discuss the Department's concerns about the cost of compensation, for example, we cannot now introduce an element that creates a significant devaluation of some stock that has nonetheless passed the TB test, and not accept that has incredible implications for the cost of the programme as a whole.

For those reasons, we in the ICSA and other farm organisations are deeply alarmed at the proposal that this information would be shown on mart boards. As committee members will be aware, mart proceedings are now shown live on video as well, so it would mean advertising the

information far and wide. Furthermore, even though we succeeded in getting that rolled back, a letter sent out last year seemed to create an impetus to reintroduce that topic by the back door. We do not accept it is a good road to go down. The TB testing programme either works or it does not.

Mr. Tomás Bourke: On the mart boards issue, as the Senator will be aware, it was a proposal from the original TB forum that was implemented by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine without any agreement or discussion with farm organisations. It was subsequently removed from the process. Unfortunately, however, as the previous speaker outlined, the categorisation the Department carried out of all the herds in this country remains, given that it continues to be published at the top of our annual TB test letter. The information continues to be there despite the fact there are significant issues with data protection, which was breached, from our perspective. We lodged a complaint with the relevant office to have the matter investigated. Farmers' private data, based on historical trading interactions with other herd owners, have been communicated throughout the country unnecessarily, with a severe impact on the potential for many herds to have further trading arrangements with those farmers.

The Senator asked what the alternative is. There is no need for an alternative because devaluing farmers' stock for a prolonged period of five to six years, having undergone the burden of a TB restriction in the first instance for a period of anything from six months to two years, does nothing to eradicate TB. We have considerable problems with TB on the 4% farmers where it exists, but TB remains a low-prevalence disease. The vast majority of TB episodes on farms relates to two animals or fewer, and we have to bear that in mind when we talk about controls and the appropriateness of controls in controlling the disease.

The other substantive point is that TB is primarily a disease of older animals, with two thirds of TB reactors in this country coming from the cow population, yet our entire agriculture sector is based on the trade of younger animals. This crude approach by the Department to eradicate TB, which has no basis in science, has had the impact of devaluing 75% of the animals that are traded in this country, which were at an extremely low risk of ever being found with TB. It was an unnecessary approach and it does not require an alternative. It is not part of the current programme but, at this week's TB forum, it was again raised by the Department as a proposal for enhancements to the 2023 programme before we have fully implemented the agreed improvements and enhancements to the current programme from last year, particularly in respect of wildlife.

The herd categorisation does not contribute to the eradication of disease and has no place in the Irish TB programme because it fails to recognise the unique dynamic of the Irish farm infrastructure and the high dependence of the vast majority of farmers in this country on trade, whereby weanlings are born on small-scale farms in the peripheral areas of the country that are subsequently traded to larger farms for feeding, and whereby dairy farms need to move calves from their farms to sustain and maintain the production systems we have. Neither science nor the figures back up any further advance in the devaluing of our herds through this blacklisting approach and we continue to reject it.

Chairman: All four organisations raised the issue of wildlife. A programme is in place for badgers. Vaccination in that regard is being upped in tempo. They all mentioned deer in particular. Do they have proposals for how the Department should tackle the issue of deer? What can be done? Should there be a severe culling or a vaccination programme, for example? I took from all our guests' presentations that they believe one of the major contributory factors for the continuous spread of TB to be wildlife. The badger programme is in place and the vaccination

rate in that regard is increasing. What are our guests' proposals in respect of deer?

Mr. T.J. Maher: Before I address the deer question, I re-emphasise the badger and wildlife vaccination programme cannot operate without the resources that are needed for it. There is a commitment there but the boots are still not on the ground. I gave an example of what happened when we took the foot off the gas. Unfortunately, there is clear evidence the badger population has increased dramatically and a huge number of setts have not been mapped. Boots on the ground are critical for that.

On deer management, we are clear. The establishment of a deer management forum, which will look after density reduction around TB outbreak areas, needs to happen immediately. In that context, our former regional vice president Tom Short was key in establishing a programme in Wicklow that identified a strain correlated from cattle, and that linked the disease from deer to cattle, which then spread. The density of deer in TB outbreaks is a crucial problem and has to be addressed early. We are very clear it is a problem in Wicklow, where it has proven so. We have to ensure a deer management forum will be properly set up and that people will take responsibility. At the moment, people are not taking responsibility. A national deer forum needs to be established, with responsibility placed at its door, in order that when disease outbreaks occur, a proper management programme will be instigated, density will be reduced and proper management of the population will flow throughout the country. That is the critical issue and we are in a position to do that now. If we wait much longer, we will not be.

Mr. Paul Smyth: I echo what Mr. Maher said. Within the forum, once it is established, a number of key priorities should be focused on. Currently, most of the resources for dealing with wildlife go to dealing with badgers. We cannot have a situation where resources are then taken from badgers; it has to be an extra resource that goes in. It involves simple things. Mr. Keane mentioned this earlier, in terms of fencing. TAMS-funded fencing around areas such as Coillte forestry is a simple proactive approach to this.

In terms of culling of deer in areas where there is a high incidence of TB, it is not only Wicklow that has this effect. We can see that in numerous areas in Cork, Waterford, etc. We need to look further into the genome sequencing in deer and the effect of how it passes between bovine and the deer population, and understand that more fully.

In saying that, at present there is too high a density of deer within the bovine catchment area and that is the sole focus that should be there in reducing that density. It is slowly coming to the attention of the Department that this is a major factor and the reduction of that density for established deer needs to be a priority for the Department.

Mr. Hugh Farrell: I reiterate what the previous speaker has said but I want to add to that. We have no idea of the population of deer in the country. We always talk about Wicklow or very small areas. This is a problem in every county. Where I live, nearly on the Fermanagh-Cavan border, there is a transfer from North to South and it is affecting Cavan, Leitrim and into Donegal. What we are finding is that there are massive breakdowns in these areas. There is no follow-up. I go back there to where the Department took its eye off the ball, maybe back when the value of deer meat collapsed and privately farmed deer were just let roam. Out of that, the numbers grew and grew. Nobody had done anything about it.

Yesterday evening I was helping a farmer to fill in a form for a new entrant for a herd number. They asked what different types of farming he had, whether it was pigs, hens, cattle or whatever, but deer was mentioned on it. They have to be regulated on one's own farm. As

with bovine, the Department is lacking in its responsibility of taking care of them, and reducing numbers. Whether it is through the OPW, the national parks service or the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, they need to come together, reduce the numbers and take responsibility for them because there is no point in us talking about risks of anything else in farming unless that is dealt with.

Mr. John Keane: First, to touch on the badgers, the study that was conducted in Kilkenny a number of years ago was conducted over three years of full vaccination in one particular zone, half-vaccination in another zone and no vaccination in a third. After the three years, it was still found in the fully vaccinated zone that 24% of the badgers in that area that were caught after the three-year period were still carrying the infection of bovine TB. There still is work to be done in terms of effectiveness and in terms of the endurance of the vaccine for protection. We are all well aware of Covid and we are boosted three, four and five times. The research still needs to be done in terms of the effectiveness and how long that lasts within the badger population. The research from the study to which I referred would suggest that even after three years there was still a certain amount of infection transferring within the badger population.

An earlier study conducted in Offaly in the early 2000s drew significant links between a reduction in the density of the badger population and the occurrence and frequency of the infection of mycobacterium, *M. bovis* within the bovine population. Work still needs to be done there. As for simple acceptance that we have that solved in the badger population and once we get them vaccinated we will be fine, from our side of things there is still more research needed to be done there.

In terms of the deer population, and I understand that the Department was in front of the committee not too long ago speaking about this as well, the numbers of deer that have been captured and tested for lesions are very small. Over 200 is the most that have been tested in any calendar year that have been captured, and results from that are available as well. In more recent years, as a result of Covid fewer than 100 deer have been captured to distinguish the prevalence of TB, with the numbers in the region of three or four out of 70 or 80 that have come back testing positive for the presence of the strain within the deer population. The Department has been on the record in saying that it cannot ultimately deny - in front of this committee - the possibility that in high-density areas of the deer population there is the ability of the strain of *M. bovis* to transfer from deer to cattle. If we look across the world, the research in places such as America, Australia and New Zealand would also show that there is prevalence and the possibility that the strains of *M. bovis* can be carried in animals such as foxes. The research needs to continue, but also there need to be controls in terms of the density of the populations in high-prevalence areas. The evidence would suggest that the control of the wildlife in those areas has resulted in the occurrence and frequency of occurrence within the bovine population.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank all our guests for being here. It is good to see them back in the committee room again.

I have a number of questions. I will deal with them individually in case we run out of time. Thankfully, a couple have already been asked.

The first is in respect of the TB forum and its subcommittees. Conscious that the Department has set it up in lights, in effect, as the source of the solution to the issues that have arisen, and following on from the discussion around the herd letters that were issued, the clear breakdown of trust that that led to and the other issues that have arisen, I would be grateful if some of our guests could give an indication as to whether the TB forum is an effective body. Are they

confident that it will deliver on its stated objective, which is to drastically reduce the incidence of TB? I note that in its submission, the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers' Association, ICOSA, cited concerns that the sub-groups were not working in tandem, and across the submissions today, there were a number of similar type of concerns. I would be grateful if some of our guests gave a sense as to whether they are confident that those concerns are overdressed, and that the Department and other stakeholders are eager to ensure that the TB forum is a viable proposition to meet its stated objectives.

Mr. Tomás Bourke: I thank Deputy Carthy for the question. I suppose we go back to go forward here. Members will be acutely aware of our position on the original TB forum that was established because it is important we make a distinction here.

There was a TB forum established a number of years ago that effectively provided one opportunity for one representative from each farm organisation to have an input along with all stakeholders. Despite only two stakeholders contributing to the programme - one being the Department or the State and the other being farmers - we had multiple stakeholders that were deemed to have equal voice to farmers in discussing the TB programme. The approach in that group was that effectively we would be called together, lectured on what the Department felt should be done and three months later we would see a press release outlining changes to the TB programme. The original TB forum was in no way fit for purpose and we are on public record already in stating that.

However, the new TB strategy has addressed significantly many of the shortcomings in that. There is now a structure where the TB forum is effectively the overall body that oversees the work of the sub-committees. Part of our submissions to amendments to the original TB forum was to ensure that those impacted by the decisions that were to be taken would be actively involved in the discussions and the decision-making on how they would be practically implemented at farm level.

The new TB forum, that has grown, I suppose, or has been set out in the strategy that was launched last year, has sub-groups. The implementation working group is one of those. The critical issue there is that the TB forum deals with high-level principle ideas, suggestions and proposals but the work of the implementation working group is to take that down to what would this look like at farm level, how would this work on farms, what impact it would have on farms and whether it is practical to even implement it based on what the costs associated would be. The financial working group allows for detailed discussions around the appropriate levels of financial support for farmers, such as amendments to the live valuation scheme and targeting of income loss supports. The scientific working group is the forward-looking group. We have a technical group dealing with the more technical aspects of live valuation and various schemes to avoid these getting all hung up in one big round table.

To answer Deputy Carthy's question, we believe the strategy provides the basis for us to progress the TB programme, but the success of the IFA, the groups and the forum will be measured by taking the appropriate decisions and having them implemented at farm level. One of the frustrations coming through at this point is that some significant decisions have been taken. For example, decisions were taken to enhance the wildlife control programme and funding has been provided to implement those enhancements, but we have not seen that happen on the ground. We have not seen-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Who is responsible for that?

Mr. Tomás Bourke: The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine needs to put the staff in place to implement it. The decisions have been taken in the group-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is the delay a recruitment delay or a-----

Mr. Tomás Bourke: We are getting reports and they are working through it. Let us be clear; there have been significant improvements in the workings of the wildlife control programme over the past year or so. An extra €1 million was committed by the Minister to that programme in the last budget, but we have to see that in increased staff and resources for capturing, vaccinations and removals, and set identifications being carried out on the ground because having all of these agreed enhancements will not eradicate TB. Action on the ground is what will eradicate it, including the effective and timely implementation of the wildlife control programme.

The reality is the structure is there. Key decisions are being taken but they need to be implemented and they need to be given time to see the impact they will have on the levels of TB because there is no magic fix or silver bullet. Measures taken today will probably take two, three or four years to come through in a meaningful way in the figures. From our perspective, the current iteration of the TB forum is far more effective than the original concept of it and there is the opportunity to advance issues. The workings of the finance working group were significantly delayed because of a change around staffing last year. It probably resulted in a six-month period where we did not have any engagement. Who is to blame for that? I would not blame the structure of the forum, but there were staffing issues due to changes in the Department, which meant work on the areas of the support payments could not be progressed to the level we would like them to be at this point.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Do any other representatives want to comment? Is that a fair reflection?

Mr. Lorcan McCabe: Yes. It is a fair reflection. The structure is working reasonably well now in that every month we hold the Department accountable, as Mr. Bourke said, for the wildlife programme. As I said, staff on the ground is a major problem.

Communication was also supposed to be enacted. We are constantly asking about that. We understood it was enacted, but it is not. The scientific group comes back with recommendations. They are all scientists from UCD and vets, etc. We have no input on that but they are the experts.

On the financial group, as Mr. Bourke said, there has been a break of four to six months because of personnel. I find this to be the trickiest issue because the Department seems to be constantly against us as regards financing. It seems we are to take all the pain-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will come to financing in a minute. One of the points Mr. McCabe made was the target to eradicate TB by 2030 is ambitious. Many farmers question the-----

Chairman: Mr. Punch wishes to answer. We will then go to finance. Is that all right?

Deputy Matt Carthy: My point was not on finance, but go ahead.

Mr. Eddie Punch: I agree with most of the sentiments expressed. There was a need to improve the original TB forum because there was definitely a governance issue around how decisions were made. It is a little early to say for sure whether this new iteration is working well. We hope it will, and it is definitely an improvement on what has gone before, but there

is still the difficulty of marrying the proposals of, for example, the implementation group with the financial consequences of same. As the previous speakers indicated, there was a hold-up in the finance committee for six months or so. We are still concerned that the Department needs to respect the fact there are financial implications to every proposal.

Ultimately, I am not convinced yet from an ICSA perspective that we have got it exactly right. In other words, what are the final decisions on funding? It is all very well having proposals for actions, but the funding needs to be in place, agreed and thrashed out, and ultimately a final decision made. It is a little like when committee members talk every year about fully costed budget proposals. It is much the same in this instance. Proposals are meaningless unless they are fully costed and how we fund them is figured out. That is the key issue.

We will see how it goes in 2022. We hope the work programme of the finance committee and the implementation committee will lead to progress. We have to be able to sort it out because in the end there is a big difference of opinion on funding between ourselves as stakeholders and the Department as funders.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As we are on funding and because I do not think we will get away from it, are the representatives satisfied that the budget as it stands is being expended effectively? In other words, in respect of the Department element and what it is putting forward - we can argue about the breakdown - is it spending that in the most effective manner?

Mr. Eddie Punch: We will make the following comments about the €97 million. The farmer contribution is underestimated because the farmer contribution to the herd test programme is a notional figure that is worked out at €450 per head. It is a guesstimate. If we look at the figures for the past four years, there is no increase in the farmer contribution, but that does not stack up in the real world, where vets' fees are going up and the national herd is increasing. In our view, and we did some sampling of our members who are paying more than €450, particularly smaller farmers or people with fragmented holdings, the Department is underestimating the actual cost to farmers of the annual herd test. That is separate from the fact farmers also make a significant labour input.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am sorry. I get that point, which is an important one, but the question I am trying to get to the heart of is about the money being provided by the Department, specifically. References were made to the wildlife programme and other elements. Is that being spent as best it could, even if it remained static? Is there wastage?

Mr. Eddie Punch: We question how the Department is spending €28.5 million on administration, which is by far the biggest element of its expenditure. If we compare that to the fact the entire herd testing programme is costing approximately €27 million, going by the Department's estimates, how is it allocating €28.5 million to administration, in essence? In our view, it seems strange, if we compare it, for example, to the €2 million spent on research.

We would also like to see results from research rather than just spending €2 million on it every year. Research should come to a conclusion and there should be results, but there is definitely a need to allocate more resources to the wildlife programme and the culling of deer. For three or four years, we have listened to the Department wash its hands of the deer problem by stating people can get a licence to shoot deer if they like. That is not good enough. The Department has also been of the view that this is not a problem because the incidence rate is low, but the limited amount of testing it has done of deer has shown an incidence of 3% to 4% TB infectivity, which is the same level as that in the cattle herd. There is, therefore, a big problem

with deer. Some €27 million in farmers' money, or €35 million including the payment of disease levies, is spent on testing bovines. Very little money is being spent on testing badgers that are being vaccinated, though, so we do not know what the story is there. Realistically speaking, no money is being spent on testing or culling deer. It is clear that there is an imbalance in the way the budget is being spent.

Regarding the €28.5 million in administrative costs, we do not understand how it is that high. Think about it. Everyone here knows what is involved in a herd test. It is heavy work. The entire national herd is tested for the same cost as the administrators dealing with the 4.5% of herds that have reactors. There is something amiss here. The issue is that a cost is being allocated across a range of veterinary staff and is being attributed to TB. We would question that. Either the figure is wrong or too much is being spent on administration *vis-à-vis* research and, in particular, wildlife.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is an important point. I wish to address Mr. Keane on the broader question but also on a question that I was going to put to Mr. McCabe. Anyone can answer it, actually. Is anyone who is on this call or in the room confident that, on our current trajectory, the target of eliminating TB by 2030 will be achieved? Can it be achieved at all without a cattle vaccination programme that works?

Mr. John Keane: The 2030 target is ambitious in light of the most recent annual trends in the figures. It will be challenging. Without a front-loading of investment to build capacity within the wildlife programme and, as McCabe and Mr. Punch touched on, the resources and research needed to provide evidence to build on that programme, delivering on the 2030 target will be challenging.

Like many others, we have touched on how the labour costs incurred by farmers are not being covered. That will also be a significant challenge in the funding model. TB eradication can be achieved eventually and Irish farmers need it to be. They need and deserve the ongoing labour costs at farm level and the stress and worry associated with TB breakouts to be resolved. Eradication is something that we must deliver. It will have to be based on research and science without having a negative impact on farmers' market returns or without the on-farm actions required to eradicate TB being so onerous as to make the cure worse than the disease. There needs to be a front-loading of funding and more investment in research and the realities of research need to bear fruit at farm level. There needs to be a full implementation of the wildlife programme, as well as follow-up work to determine what the research is showing. I have spoken about badgers and deer. Even with vaccination, they remain a source of infection. We all agree that the development of a vaccine for the bovine herd would be wonderful, but the front-loading of investment to ensure that we can reach the eradication target, which farmers deserve, must be done.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to present to it. I apologise that I have to shoot off early to another meeting. I look forward to future engagements.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank Mr. Keane.

I will discuss the funding model as briefly as I can. The IFA's submission mentioned that the funding model must include those outside the farm gate who are beneficiaries of the programme. I presume that refers to the factories and, ultimately, all of us. Will Mr. Maher elaborate on how the IFA envisages that model working?

The witnesses have been unanimous in saying that the compensation schemes are inadequate and outdated. What do they need to be to cover farmers' costs associated with the programme?

Mr. T.J. Maher: I will take the second part of the Deputy's question first by replying with a question: what value do we place on the protection of our bovine industry? It has never been more valuable around the world than it is right now, and we have one of the great resources. The largest impediment to protecting that seems to be an unwillingness to front-load investment. Everyone around the farming table has shown a commitment to investing in science and what are effectively more restrictions on farmers. Restrictions mean hardship for farmers. We were clear in our submission, in that we are targeting increased rates of income supplement - €110 per cow, €55 per dairy cow and €55 per suckler cow - and an increase in the hardship fund. TB means a significant income loss for farmers. We make no apologies for defending the rights of the 4,000 farmers annually who suffer income losses because of it. We must protect them. We must ensure that they stay in business. They are a vital resource for the country. Two elements are critical to achieving this: finance for the wildlife programme and putting boots on the ground. We are a broken record but this is the reality. To reduce the incidence rate in the animal population, we must invest in reducing the incidence rate among the wildlife population. We must protect the businesses of those farmers who are suffering because of TB breakouts.

The model is up for debate; the Department has asked this question. We are willing to engage in that debate. Openness and transparency are crucial. We are clear on this, in that, if the Department is of the view that everyone is entitled to be part of this programme, then everyone should be involved in investing in it. Farmers contribute in excess of €55 million annually. That is one hell of an investment. If other bodies feel that they have an entitlement to be part of the decision-making process, then they should be required to pay into it. We did not invent the forum. Rather, it is what has been presented to us.

Our number one priority is to protect the bovine industry and the livelihoods of our farmers. That is our request of the Oireachtas Members who are present in this room or online. This is going to require a front-loading of investment. We have invested in the science to protect us, but it requires front-loading and full recognition of everyone's investment. We are part of that. We are tied into it. We have no choice but to target 2030. That is eight years of further restrictions on families. That is eight years of income hardship and people suffering. That might sound like an exaggeration but the income losses on farms as a result of TB outbreaks are significant. It is our job to protect farmers and we make no apologies for that.

The Department's financial working group has opened the debate on a model. We are putting €55 million into that, so we require that any further investment be front-loaded. It is up to everyone else to step up to the plate.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Before other members contribute, I might ask a further question. Mr. Maher correctly referenced the value of the bovine herd and industry to Irish agrifood and the Irish economy more broadly. That value is predominantly based on the positive image of the Irish beef product. It is the image of a farmer standing in a field beside a cow and her calf, maybe with a dog as well. It is in this context that I ask whether people have a view on the role of controlled finishing units, which are sometimes referred to as factory-controlled feedlots. Beef slaughter figures for last year show that 20.21% of animals killed came from controlled finishing units, which clearly presents a threat. Does Mr. Smyth agree? It could distort the image on which our product is based. Will Mr. Smyth indicate if he sees a role for controlled finishing units and if that role has been expanded beyond where it needs to be for the reasons I outlined, or does he have any proposals in that regard? There is anecdotal evidence, if nothing

else, that those units - and the role those feedlots are playing - are impacting on the prices his members are receiving at the factory gates in particular.

Chairman: The Deputy's last question does not have anything to do with the eradication of TB.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It does. It is in the context of the TB eradication programme that the controlled finishing units are in place. At least, that is what the Deputy of Agriculture, Food and Marine has told me.

Chairman: I will bring in Mr. Smyth first and then Mr. Bourke.

Mr. Paul Smyth: I will start by addressing the Deputy Carthy's initial question on the financial side. From our perspective, there is an unwillingness to pay for the current control programmes on TB that are in place. That unwillingness will result in the 2030 target for TB eradication not being achieved. Further proposals were outlined to the TB forum on what further restrictions they want to bring in. The main TB forum is considering bringing in further restrictions and the implementation group and financial group want us to tighten our belts in terms of the funding that is put towards it. Those two rail tracks will not meet and that will mean the 2030 target will not be achieved. It will also mean that we, as farmers, will not be fully compensated for the strain that will be put on us if further restrictions are introduced. That is the simple answer as to where we are going with that. The finances do not add up.

On the feedlots and the distortion in prices, in a roundabout way, that has a wider perspective. Quite a high percentage of the kill comes from there. It is likely to distort prices. That will have to be an issue in terms of compensation and things like that but that is not being dealt with currently through the TB forum and it will have to be examined.

Mr. Tomás Bourke: The Deputy asked three or four questions. I will deal with the question on the controlled finishing units first. From our perspective, we are firmly of the view that they were vital and have proved to be such for beef farmers to be able to continue to function because of our TB programme. As anybody in agriculture knows, once a farmer has a TB reactor or even a suspected TB reactor, for example, in the form of a lesion spotted in the factory, the farmer's herd is restricted in terms of purchasing in and selling out. Most finishing farms and beef farmers with 50 to 60 cattle only buy in and sell out to the factory. Unfortunately, when a lesion shows up, it takes eight to ten weeks to establish its status and the farmer is prohibited from trading and from purchasing in, which is the lifeblood of that farm. All those beef finishing farmers who do not have breeding animals on their farm have been forced down the years to become registered as controlled finishing units in order to be allowed to continue to do their business. They undergo two herd tests a year and that removes them from the 60-day testing, the factory lesions process and the prohibition on purchasing in. It has been crucial for those farmers. It is important we distinguish between those and what the Deputy referenced in the context of processor-owned large units. The vast majority of ordinary finishing beef farmers because of the TB programme have had no choice down the years but to become registered as controlled finishing units in order to be able to continue to do their business.

There has been a second major benefit in that regard from the point of view of farmers restricted with TB in their herds. There are a number of components to the way the TB programme impacts on farms. The main one is the restriction because it is a low prevalence disease. The restriction prohibits the farmer from selling his animals on the open market. As the Deputy would know, suckler farmers depend at the end of the year on selling their weanlings, as

they do not have the feed or housing to hold those animals. Amendments to the TB programme dating back 15 or more years provided that trade from restricted farms to controlled finishing units, or feedlots as they were called then, was facilitated. Any farmer who is restricted because of TB in his herd, who has culled cows and who has store cattle and weanlings that he must sell but for which he does not have the feed or the housing can sell them into a controlled finishing unit. Those are not unique to Ireland. They are facilitated in other EU member states. It is important we distinguish between the two, namely, the impact with respect to potentially large processor owned units and with respect to those who are called the same thing but are stand-alone ordinary farmers doing their daily grind and trying to avoid the impact of the TB programme on them doing their business while at the same time offering a major service to other farmers restricted because of TB.

On the question of whether departmental funding is being used as efficiently as it could be, I would say it most certainly is not. Everything would have to be reviewed in a funding model for the future. I will give the Deputy an example. Despite all the reports and technology we have on mart prices, and anybody can pick up a phone and get a mart price anywhere in the country, the Department, in compiling the summary weekly prices for the live valuations scheme, persists in sending agricultural officers out to sit in marts to record prices. In this day and age and with the technology available, that is certainly a waste of taxpayers' money and of funding for the TB programme. That is one small example of it.

Clearly, we will have to agree a funding model for the future but that will only commence when there is full transparency on all the costings, including the cost the Department put forward and claimed for its contribution. It will also require a correct appraisal of the cost what we, as farmers, have put in. At present, the Department claims its labour is worth almost four times farmers' labour in carrying out the TB programme in a year. A Grant Thornton report estimates all we are worth is €8 million to facilitate the testing of 9 million animals on our farms, including the time it takes to do that. Yet the departmental staff's contribution to that same programme is worth €27.5 million. There is certainly a need for an in-depth review of it and full transparency on every line of it. It cuts both ways.

On the question on whether TB can be eradicated without vaccination, unfortunately, it will have to be eradicated without vaccination. While the purposes of the TB programme originally were different its main function currently is to enable us to continue to access export markets for our produce. Unfortunately, the criteria set out in all the trade regulations, EU trade directives and international trade arrangements we have require TB freedom. Even if the marker vaccine on which work is currently being done, in which the Department is involved, can be developed - this is probably be eight to ten years down the road - a fundamental change to the trading rules with member states and all our trading partners would be required. I am not sure they would be overly flexible given that they do not want TB. There are seasons when it is not predominant. It is not as simple as saying we could vaccinate a herd. When the prevalence of the disease is reduced in the badger population, the vaccine used in that population may play a role, but it will not remove the need to manage the population and keep the density at a level where the disease is not spread among them, which is what we have in the deer population.

To finish on the Deputy's substantive point, he rightly identified there is a fundamental issue with the compensation levels. The ask to compensate farmers fairly through the various schemes has been costed. It would cost only an additional €7 million to offset all the financial impact of the TB programme on farmers. That is costed by the Department to provide full income loss for every animal removed from the date it is identified on the farm. We do not believe

that is a major ask for the 4,000 farmers who are losing their animals in the TB programme considering what we, as farmers, put into it year in, year out in order to recognise the impact it is having on farmers' livelihoods. This has been costed. It is not figure that is off the radar. The methodology by which we arrived at the €110 per month for a dairy cow and €56 for a suckler cow was based on the national farm survey over a three-year average because we will get peaks and troughs. Obviously, when an animal is removed from the farm, some costs are no longer incurred but other fixed costs remain and these have been costed on to the production of the animal. Other variables have also been taken into account. Seven or eight years ago, we used a methodology whereby we took the three-year period of the national farm survey and we repeated that process three years ago. We took three years as a rolling average and the figures did not change much. If we were to run them today, they would increase.

We are seeking to have this methodology, which removes all ambiguity, used. Let us use a three-year rolling average and be fair to every farmer. If an animal is being taken from a farm in the national interest and for the greater good, the farmer should not be out of pocket because TB is not a farmer-caused problem. The main driver of TB is a protected species of wildlife over which we have no control.

Mr. Hugh Farrell: I will follow up on Deputy Carthy's question on feedlots, much of which Mr. Bourke has covered under the different categories. As he rightly said, we need it there as part of the TB programme, where there are stressed herds and numbers of cattle have to be sold or moved on. A lesson has also been learned over the past year or two, which we need to take on board, in terms of Covid, new testing and PCR. When an animal goes to the factory and has a lesion or whatever, there is no reason the farmer should wait 60 days or more for the test to culture. We have a PCR system that can return results in 24 to 48 hours. We have the laboratories available. They have been proven to work and have worked through Covid. That has been a massive saving for farmers and has allowed them to trade and be in business. That has to be the case for the Government too. Instead of monitoring something for 60 days, it should be done in two days to roll over the system and keep moving. This needs to be directed. We need to learn our lessons and move on, instead of staying static.

With regard to feedlot status, while there are many feedlots in the country, they are directed through the Department. In many cases, animals are bought to feed that have continuous lesions. Some of those people could have herd tests five times in a year with no skin reactor, yet lesions may appear again in the factory within days. This is not working. The skin test is not accurate. The farmer suffers when a lesion is found and is locked out of trading for months. Nobody can afford to lose trading time. We have to get round this.

This is what builds up the numbers granted feedlot status. The Department is giving them the option of pre- or post-testing or going into feedlot status which, as Mr. Bourke said, is one test per year or two in some cases. We need to take this on board and with the help and direction of the committee, we might help to drive that further. We have modern technology, the best in the world, and that will make a massive difference going forward.

We spoke earlier about vaccinating cattle to go forward. Such a programme is under way in England and it is hoped to know more about the matter in a couple of years. I would be very interested to follow that and see its outcome. Earlier on, Mr. Punch and I were talking. It is amazing we cannot vaccinate cattle to export them, whereas we cannot travel unless we are vaccinated. Where is the comparison within the one system? We have to get real here. How many games do we play?

I do not know whether that answers the question. We have a few options. The Department is imposing on many farmers that they should go feedlot status. It is being done by the Department directly. There is an option to speed that up so they would not need feedlot status. With a PCR, they would be trading again within a week.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank the four groups for coming in. It is always great to hear and see them. They give such an informed insight into the industry and we learn an awful lot when they come in. I will deal with each of the groups. I have one question for each of them. An outsider looking in would say it has taken us 70 years to get this far. We went from a prevalence rate of bovine TB of 80% with 17% infections to just 4%. We are marketed as one of the most ambitious, intelligent and technologically-advanced countries in the world and we still have not been able to eradicate TB.

Hypothetically speaking, if a large public limited company, plc, or multinational company decided to take over Irish farming and suddenly became “Irish Farming plc”, the first decision it would make to reduce costs and streamline farming would be to eradicate TB because the disease costs the guts of €100 million per year. If an additional €10 million was front-loaded into eradication every year, the problem would surely be resolved within ten years.

We are constantly told about the tight margins with which farmers are working. Whether the direct and indirect costs to farmers amount to €35 million or €55 million, if that was put back in farmers’ pockets, it would substantially improve the sector. I am sure the Department would prefer not to be spending €27 million on this each year. All told, it makes sense to eradicate TB by 2030.

I will put questions to Macra na Feirme first. Mr. Keane is gone so I am not sure whether Ms Richardson or Mr. Fitzgerald wishes to respond. New Zealand was cited as one of the examples of best practice throughout the world. I am conscious of the time. As succinctly as possible, will Macra na Feirme give us an example of a country where TB has been eradicated or all but eradicated? What has that country done that we have not done?

Mr. Shane Fitzgerald: I do not sit on the forum so I do not have detailed knowledge of the issue. As such, Mr. Keane would probably have to answer the Deputy’s question. From what I do know, Scotland is a place close by that has managed to eradicate TB. That is probably down to its wildlife control. I am not sure what Mr. Keane spoke about but the science has to be followed with regard to wildlife and vaccination programmes. That will be the key thing we can do in this country. It is probably hard to compare Ireland with any other country. New Zealand is probably similar as it also has a grass-based model and animals are outdoors all year around. Scotland is probably a similar enough country that could be looked at to see exactly what it did. I imagine it is based on science, as well. I know that-----

Deputy Joe Flaherty: That is great. I am sorry if I put Mr. Fitzgerald on the spot with that question but he did very well. I thank him.

I will move on to Mr. Smyth and Mr. McCabe of the ICMSA. We have not mentioned the new regulations coming in, which will require pre- or post-movement testing of cattle. The case has been made that farmers cannot be expected to be burdened with this additional cost, given the considerable costs they already face. Has there been any engagement with the Department on that? What is the position in that regard?

Mr. Lorcan McCabe: There has been engagement on the pre- and post-movement testing

and new animal health laws. The conclusion is that this testing will apply to female animals and breeding bulls. They are the highest risk animals. We have constantly said that anything beyond the annual test should be paid for by the Department. Farmers have been paying for the annual test for years. We have constantly said, even though it has gone further than we would like, that it can be either a pre- or post-movement test.

We see huge problems with the post-movement test that we have to iron out. If the herd has not been tested in six months, an animal from that herd must be tested again before or directly after it is sold. There is that option. We would be happier if the testing was pre-movement because the problem is identified in the herd before the animal moves to another herd. If it goes to another herd, more problems arise because if the testing is not done on time, the herd is locked up for 30 days. A question we have to put to the Department is whether it further complicate things if you have more reactors. It is a new animal health law and will affect all animals within the next couple of years.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: We would probably welcome an update on that matter as it progresses. One of the points which was not mentioned in the ICMSA's initial submission was on inconclusives and taking the animals out and paying at market value. Someone looking at that issue with a plc hat on would say the two big issues in TB were deer and the inconclusives and we should go after them to eradicate the remaining 4%. In terms of engagement with the TB forum, is there any move on inconclusives?

Mr. Lorcan McCabe: Since last April, if there are more than four inconclusives, they are deemed reactors and are taken away. If there are one or two inconclusive results, they are on the herd forever but they would be subject to a blood test. In the initial blood test, 60% went down and more go down further on. This has been a hobbyhorse of mine. In 2019 around 2,300 results were inconclusive and within a couple of years 12% of them went down. The harm they caused in the meantime was horrendous. The problem is being addressed at the moment but not as well as we would like. Cattle with inconclusive results should be taken out at market valuation on the day and that would be sorted. There are historical inconclusive results and those cattle could be there six, seven or eight years. There are something in the region of 4,000 or 5,000 historical ones that are not attributed. We put several different methods to the Department. If they were taken out at full market valuation they would be gone out of the system. The other suggestion was that those animals be blood tested during the annual test, and they would be found that way. The Department is lagging way behind on this. It is putting constraints on us but there are such obvious things that could be done, like cattle with inconclusive results being taken out.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I would agree with that. We need to pursue that with the Department. Mr. Maher touched on the hardship scheme with Deputy Carthy. He proposed €58 and €110 for suckler and dairy cows. The existing scheme is capped but he is obviously proposing an uncapped scheme.

Mr. T.J. Maher: At the moment people qualify for income supplement while more than 10% of their herd is in a breakdown. We believe that all animals should be eligible for income supplement once a breakdown commences. That is part of the €7 million costing.

Regarding the Deputy's two previous points, we have a proposal on inconclusive results. There are currently less than 4,000 historical inconclusive results. Our proposal, which has gone to be costed, is that there would be an incentive for farmers to remove the animals at the end of their annual production cycle. That is far cheaper than full production value because

farmers can sell when it suits them at the end of the production cycle but they would get an incentive to do that. It is far cheaper than paying vets to retest these animals year after year.

There is no basis in science for the EU law on six-month post-movement testing. We have clearly said that the vast majority of all reactors - 60% - are cows. If the Department is not able to amend that proposal with the EU, we have clearly stated in our proposal, which is before the implementation group, that we should target the pre-movement and post-movement test on cows. The cows that are going for slaughter and control feeding units should be removed from that. That would be far cheaper for everybody and it is based in science. That would be doing something to target the disease.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank Mr. Maher. I am conscious of time because my colleagues want to come in. I have one more question for the IFA. Mr. Bourke gave some very good information on the age analysis. It would be helpful if he could share that with us. It was not in the submission. I do not want him to go into it now but it was a good insight and I ask him to send it to us in an email.

We have spoken a lot about deer. This came up initially with Macra na Feirme and I had hoped to speak to Mr. Keane about it. Scotland has the largest deer population *per capita* in Europe and it is infinitely bigger than ours. What is Scotland that we are not? I do not mean to pre-empt Mr. Bourke's answer but we are about to do a horse census in this country. It is astonishing, given the cost of this, that we have not done a deer census and that we do not have a programme in place for testing TB in deer.

Mr. Tomás Bourke: I will send in the age analysis of the TB reactors. It is based on information provided by the Department. We will submit all of that. It makes for interesting reading and validates the position that has been adopted regarding pre-movement and post-movement testing because it avoids any impact in the marketplace on the bulk of the animals we trade.

As has been noted, Scotland has eradicated TB. As a result of that, we engage directly with farmers, vets and elected farm representatives in Scotland to see exactly what they did differently from us. The substantive message is that they did not have a TB problem in the wildlife like we did and, therefore, their on-farm animal controls were adequate. When we discussed the controls we had in place, even prior to amending them, the people we spoke to were of the view that they had achieved eradication with lesser on-farm controls. The disease has to be addressed in wildlife in order to address it in the bovine population. Until you break that link you cannot achieve eradication. The answer in that regard is that Scotland did not have to do anything with deer from the point of view of TB. They also did not have to do anything with badgers as there was not the same level of interaction because of the location of the two species. Unfortunately, we have a situation where there is very close interaction between badgers and cattle and there is a high prevalence of disease within the badgers. It is cyclical and you have to break it within both species. We cannot just focus on cattle. We have to reduce the density of badgers.

It is the same principle with deer. The Department has regularly referenced studies on this. Any real disease control is based on density reduction and reducing the opportunity for spread. That is why the peak of the problem is in Wicklow, although it is now being replicated elsewhere. As the national deer population has been allowed to increase year on year without any natural predator, density has increased and their level of encroachment on farmland has increased dramatically. The key issue here is density reduction around TB outbreaks and a national control programme to bring the deer back to a population level that is sustainable

within their environment. We do not need a census. The measure will be when the deer are being maintained in their own natural habitat and we as farmers are no longer feeding them in our fields, and they are no longer mixing with our cattle, knocking our fences or affecting our plantations. That will be the census for us as farmers and that will reduce the disease threat.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank Mr. Bourke. I look forward to that additional information. The ICSA stated in its submission that the value of the 21% increase in food and drink exports over a five-year period was €2.3 billion. Farmers bear costs of between €35 million and €55 million per annum in trying to eradicate TB and over a seven-year period we have had to slaughter half a million animals. What are the ICSA's recommendations to make that 2030 target for eradication? What are the two main things that need to be done?

Mr. Hugh Farrell: The Deputy identified the issue of expenditure. We are spending so much money every year with €50 million on testing and what the Exchequer is taking back out of it. We are looking to put extra funding into that and front-load the testing or maybe do PCR testing. There are so many aspects, including deer, badgers, inconclusive results, and testing, that need to be pulled together. There is not just one thing. Everything that can be done by farmers inside a farm gate has been thrown at us at this stage and a lot more was put to us at the meeting earlier in the week. It was said that things could be compulsory and there was talk of maybe reducing compensation. We are trying to keep businesses going in the country in dairy and beef and everything else but we are not getting the support and support has been withdrawn from us. We have been left out to dry and farmers are up against the wall and under pressure. We never saw this coming. It is at a stage where you would question if there is bullying or what way it is. We cannot take it. There was talk of front-loading that €10 million. That is probably needed more in comparison with the money that is at our disposal. It is about addressing the main issues and taking on board what we are saying on the ground. The wildlife really has to be addressed. We were talking about funding earlier and spending in the Department. It could be taken from contiguous testing and different things and reducing costs. It is about bringing the funding back to the wildlife and making a wholehearted effort to direct it towards eradication.

We spoke about reducing the badgers and the deer. I meant to say something about badgers earlier. Culling and vaccination were mentioned earlier. We have no testing report on any of those. Therefore we call for every badger to be tested and the results mapped because we do not know what is on any farm or the area around it.

It is time for the Department to say what it is going to do without asking us for any further ideas. We are willing to help with it but unless every badger is tested the same as every animal, we are not working on a level playing field and therefore how can we play the same game?

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank Mr. Farrell. I will hand back to the Chair and thank all the speakers for their engagement.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank all the witnesses for coming here. It has been a very interesting session. It is very interesting to hear all the angles and takes on the matter. TB testing has been going on since I was a young fellow anyway. That was quite a while ago. We did succeed in the warble fly eradication and with brucellosis. Other countries have practically got rid of TB and what is happening here is worrying. It is very clear that the deer and badgers are causing the problem. The deer have moved into farms. Before they were in the national park and up on the top of the mountains but they are practically inside our village now. Many is the morning you could go over the road and there will be a deer that has been killed by a car just outside the 30 km/h limit area. They are inside the town in Killarney. Something has to be

done about that. It is time now because not enough recognition is being given to the upset this is causing to farmers. One man told me how he was locked up and got clear. Then, after ten months, he was locked up again. Another constituent, Tim, is a milking man who sold six cows the other day in a mart. One was killed out with lesions but now they are telling him that he will not get any test results back for two months. He says when his father went down 40 years ago, the lorry came and took the offending animals and two days later they were tested. There are more laboratories now with more testing ability. Surely it should not take 60 days to come back with a definite result or that he cannot be tested until then? It think Mr. Bourke mentioned young cattle and calves. This man will be loaded with 60 calves that he has no housing for. It is February. They cannot go out in a field until May around our way. It poured in Kerry yesterday and it was the grandest day of the year here. We have a different climate down there. It is heading for more of that. Something needs to be done to help the likes of that man.

We have been told by the witnesses there were 20,000 reactors and 4,000 herds. Those figures are massive. I am sure that if something was done with the deer and the badgers, it would help. I will give an example of another farmer. He was a small milking man in the middle of other, bigger dairy farms. They kept going down continuously. They might get clear for a bit and then they would go down again; they would get clear again and go down again. This man, inside the middle of them, never went down. I will tell you why. What he did may have been illegal but he stopped the badgers coming in. He dealt with the badgers. In one year he dealt with 111, big and small. That proves that the badgers are causing the problem. Now, I do not condone that - I am asking that they either be vaccinated or culled properly - but they cannot keep this thing going. Farmers' backs and hands are broken and help is very scarce, as the Chair knows.

There was mention of the thrill seeker who said that all farms and all of Ireland should be opened up to walkers. I do not approve of that. We can see what is happening with the deer where these fellows can go from one farm to the next without any control and can wander around. I bet if you went to his house, he most likely would have an electric gate and you would not get inside that. He is the very same man who wants to open up the country, spread disease and do what he likes. He might bring an old dog with him or something that would hunt sheep. These are ridiculous types of suggestions and statements. I know that the Chair would not approve of that and nor would any of the representatives here.

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to listen to everyone. I came in here the very minute I knew they were here. I appreciate everything. I know that they are good men to have on the farmers' side and I appreciate them very much. I am happy to give any help that I can give to do something about the deer. The deer are fine. We have nothing against deer but they must go up the hills away out of the farmers' fields and let the farmers farm. Things are tough enough. Look at the fertiliser and everything. Testing has to stop somewhere.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank everyone for coming in. Mr. Bourke spoke about keeping control of the deer. I do not know how we will do it for the simple reason that anywhere you sow a bit of new grass, you see them ploughing in from the woods. There are more and more woods everywhere. I just do not know how we will do it. How does Mr. Bourke see us doing that?

Mr. Farrell has helped me with a few different problems and I thank him for that. I would like the others to answer this question. There seems a problem around the country whereby if I went out with, say eight or ten cattle, a valuer would come out and then the Department would say that it did not like the price and would send someone out again. The Department sends

someone out again and while that person will not give a straight answer one way or another as to whether he or she agrees with the valuation, he or she will expect to bring your cattle. Not many people like to see their cattle going out of the yard without knowing what they are getting. This seems to be a problem with the Department the whole time. It will not agree with the first price or the second price but they expect a farmer to put his or her cattle on a lorry without having been given a price. I think it is a complete disgrace. The least the Department should do would be to say that it would give one or other price and they could battle it out for the difference.

There was discussion about vaccination and reactors. Will someone educate me on this? My understanding was that when you take these samples that they have to incubate in some way. I am not a scientist and I do not know anything about it but it has to incubate and that is why it needs a certain number of days. Is that correct or not? Maybe I am reading it wrong. They are vaccinating badgers. We must be careful too what we say because it is about when the badger gets it in one place and he is pegged out of the den and brings it off down the road to give to other cattle. We cannot just say every badger is at fault, in fairness. Sometimes badgers that are in places never get infected and you leave them alone because the last thing you want to do is put them flying around the place. We should put out that message so everyone is not just going out saying every badger in the country is at fault. It is the same for deer. I noticed one thing with the badgers. I understand that even with the vaccinated badgers, 8% to 10% of them are still showing up TB. Why is that?

I have another question for the representatives. If I am a farmer on 30, 40 or 50 acres and am working somewhere and go down with TB I do not get the hardship money because I am working. Where are we at with that? Is there a feeling among the farming organisations - no more than with us many's the time, because I will call it out straight - that Departments will bring them in to have a meeting and this, that and the other and then next week or the following one they will announce something that may not be agreed with the organisations? The Departments then just drive on regardless of who is there. Is that a problem? Is there a problem that they are not listening?

Chairman: Who wants to go first?

Mr. Tomás Bourke: I will.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have one last question as I wrote down a few points. I raise pedigree cattle. I was with a fellow who went down and went into an appeal. Pedigree cattle are at a certain rate. You could have the greatest pedigree bull or cow in the world but they are at a certain rate and that is it then, good luck. Is there anything that can be addressed there? I am sorry for interrupting.

Mr. Tomás Bourke: That is perfect. I thank the Deputy. It falls in and I might just pick the specific compensation questions first. On the pedigree cattle, the Deputy is clearly referring to the ceilings within the scheme, which are not appropriate. It is supposed to be an on-farm market valuation scheme. As a farmer, if your animal goes down as a TB reactor you are entitled to get through that scheme the value you would reasonably expect the animal to get on the open market. As the Deputy and I both know, the current ceilings were not even covering some of the commercial cattle sold in marts in his own county and indeed across the country. That is under review under the live valuation scheme. There was a Grant Thornton review of that. It is one of the areas where changes have been sought. Discussions are ongoing to agree that through the financial working group dealing specifically with the live valuation scheme.

The key issue there is maintaining the independence of the valuers. The system has become way too prohibitive and constrained. It is effectively a box-ticking exercise with qualified auctioneers and valuers being paid to go out and write down tag numbers. We are looking for simplification of this system. These people are approved by the Department having undergone a tender process, are then trained by the Department, have auctioneering qualifications and are selling cattle four or five days a week in the marketplace. We do not need a 40-page booklet telling them which box to push the weanling into and which box to push the cow into. A simplification of the live valuation scheme is being sought. Let these experienced people go out and assess the animal based on their knowledge of the market. Take away all the bureaucracy around it. We referenced earlier all the money being wasted sending Department AOs around to sit in marts. They sit in the very mart the independent valuer is an auctioneer in to write on a page to send to Dublin, to send back down to the man who sold the bullock, the price he should give for a similar bullock when he goes out to a farmer's yard. Going back to the Deputy's other point about whether the money is being used correctly and efficiently, it certainly is not and there is another example. With the controls that are there we as farmers are not being allowed to get the correct value of our animal because that valuer is being hamstrung by bureaucracy and conditions around it. We are seeking that the ceilings be changed and that is under discussion. It applies to all animals because it has not been just a pedigree issue, as the Deputy is aware. Some high-quality springing heifers made well in excess of the €3,000 ceiling that is there.

The Deputy is 100% right on the information the farmer gets when he is asked to accept or reject a valuation. This is an issue we raised with the Department again last week. It is not only on the second valuation. On the first valuation the farmer is being asked to sign a V8 form but there is no actual value of the animals in the V8 form. He is given a valuation sheet that might have nine or ten animals on it, such as within calf, not in calf and various prices. There is no total. Then he is asked to sign a V8 form asking whether he accepts the first valuation. But what is the first valuation? This is the substantive point we have made. The Deputy is right. The farmer must be given full sight of the price on offer to him. We accept there may be variables. If the pregnancy status of the cow has a big bearing on the value, we can say it is either-or or put that caveat in but it certainly cannot and should not continue with a blank sheet because you do not know where you are going. Then you have the arbitration process, as the Deputy rightly identified.

On the hardship grant moneys, any farmer with enough farm income is not eligible for them. That is one of the problems. The biggest problem with the hardship grant moneys is the actual rate of pay. It is a maximum payment of €350 a month. While it is better than nothing, it certainly does not reflect the additional costs of maintaining 20, 30 or 40 weanlings if you are a suckler farmer who is set up to sell them in the back end of the year. Equally, from a dairy farmer's perspective as referenced by Deputy Danny Healy-Rae referenced earlier, the €250 does not go any way towards the cost of maintaining those 50 or 60 calves in February, March and April. We have sought fundamental changes to that which the committee will have seen from previous submissions. It is very easy to cost this and quantify it. If you are forced to maintain animals you ordinarily resold because of a TB restriction, your AIM system will show if you sold them last year and now you are forced to keep them. Teagasc has all the costs of maintaining these animals. These schemes need to be built on those real-time costs to offset the impact on the farm.

On the control of deer, it must be national. There was good work, or some good work, done by the original deer management forum. In Wicklow, two or three pilot areas were set up to see how you could address this within hotspot areas, that is, areas where studies found 16% of the

deer had TB. The message here is it is a multi-stakeholder approach but somebody must be in charge and be responsible. Our view is that should be the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine because it is responsible for TB and the biggest and most identifiable threat deer are causing at the moment is TB. They-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am sorry for interrupting. I am aware there is a fencing grant if you have sheep but should there not be a measure brought in where you could have higher stakes with a sort of kick-out on them like on a football field?

Mr. Tomás Bourke: The only point I would make on that to the Deputy is that if he is fencing them out from his land, he is probably fencing them into mine. We need to deal with the national population and get them pushed back, as was identified, into their own national environment because at the moment it is us maintaining the national deer population. The hills have been allowed to become overgrown. They are not fools when they get used to the better food and forage. They are down now along the coast in Wicklow. This is a national issue that must be dealt with in a co-ordinated national plan to reduce the numbers.

The Deputy asked the question about the lesions and the length of time. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae had the same point. Unfortunately, if the status of the lesion cannot be identified under histology done within a few days of the sample going into the lab, which is effectively looking at it under the microscope to determine definitively if it is TB or not, then it must go on to culture. The approval of the culture test requires you to get a negative a minimum time-frame of six weeks in the platelet to see does the TB organism grow or not. If it grows you get the positive result a bit earlier, unfortunately. There is work being done on other tests that are quicker. The Department is starting to run some tests to get early recognition. What they can tell you is that you will perhaps be restricted a bit sooner. The difficulty here is, from the point of view of EU animal health law, there are criteria set out and tests identified that you must pass in order to have your trade status established. It is ultimately down to the trade status and that is the frustrating thing. The bigger issue with the lesions is we have a situation in this country - probably forced on us because of the requirements of EU regulations - that every TB outbreak is the same, whether you identify 30 TB reactors in your skin test or a factory lesion that confirms a positive result, you are restricted for a minimum of 120 days. Yet we know that in this country 85% of herds with a positive factory lesion do not have any more TB reactors. It is not a good indicator of a TB problem on a farm. We have continually pushed the Department to treat those farms differently. If we are putting in tighter controls where there is a lot of TB, we must counterbalance that. We accept that EU approval is required for that but the facts, figures and science are there. We can offset the impact of many of these restrictions if we can move that forward.

Mr. Paul Smyth: I will respond to a couple of points although Mr. Bourke has, in fairness, covered most of them. The forum will fall or rise depending on where the financial side of this goes. The points the Deputy made about valuation, pedigree, off-farm income and all of that are under consideration by the financial working group at the moment. Where we, as a group, go in that regard will ultimately decide the success of the programme. All those things are up for discussion. There is extra finance involved and it depends what way we go with it. That is the ultimate part of the programme and its rise or fall will depend on the finances.

One thing that Mr. Bourke did not cover was the vaccine and badgers. We are probably all aware of the efficacy of vaccines and things like that. The vaccine does not work on all badgers and that is where that comes from.

Mr. Eddie Punch: The Deputy mentioned the valuation of animals. There is €97 million for the programme, 17% of which goes to on-farm market valuation. There is a difference between the salvage value, the factory price, and the on-farm market valuation. We have consistently argued that the Department is getting a bad deal in the price it gets from factories. The standard response of the Department is, to put it in colloquial terms, that its hand is in the dog's mouth. That is not good enough. The Department could do a better deal with meat factories. It is the differential.

The second part is that it seems to us an inordinate amount of money wasted on fighting over a few shillings and objecting to the valuations that are put in place by the independent valuers in the first instance. It would be an interesting area for the committee to consider. We are doing that as well. Perhaps the Committee of Public Accounts could also look at these issues. How much of the €28.5 million is spent on arguing the toss over €50 for an animal or arguing about the tiny percentage of animals are high value and of high merit. These things need to be discussed. An arbitration process involves hotels being rented and all that kind of stuff. I am curious and it would be good if we could get to the bottom of it. We have not been able to get to the bottom of it yet. How much is the Department spending on fighting valuations? How much does that cost in terms of mileage and all the costs that go with those inspectors compared with how much is saved? It nearly seems to us that if the Department just accepted the original valuation, it would not end up spending any more money. Slightly more would be spent on the valuation and slightly less on the administration. I think that is worth saying.

Senator Tim Lombard: I apologise to our guests because I was delayed on another issue in the Seanad Chamber. This is an important debate. I should declare I have a vested interest. I am locked up at the moment when it comes to TB so I know more about it than most, unfortunately. The majority of farms in my area have gone down with it in the past eight months. There are between 13 and 20 infected animals in farms. That is the case throughout the townland and probably half the parish. The other half got it last year and we got it this year. That has a considerable impact without a shadow of a doubt. That cannot be taken into consideration. We are in calving season at the moment. Every one of us is locked up. We are all dairy farmers. One can only imagine the situation. It is a significant issue for the farming community. There is hardship. How will farmers cope mentally, physically and financially at this time of year when they are locked up? Being restricted with dairy calves, bull calves in particular, has its own issues. One can manage but it comes at a cost to oneself and one's family. These are issues for us.

I do not believe the programme should be called the national eradication programme. There is a fundamental view that we will never actually beat this disease. We have been fighting TB since my father's time and well before it. The figures have increased dramatically. They have, at times, dipped and then increased. There is an idea that we need to find a way of dealing and working with TB on a long-term basis. We have heard about the 30-year strategy. Dr. Margaret Good attended a previous committee that was under different chairmanship and we were on about a 30-year strategy to get rid of TB. Some of the committee members, including the Chairman, were also members of that committee. We were hesitant to think we could deliver a 30-year strategy that would eradicate the disease. It is obvious, four or five years later, that the 30-year strategy for the eradication of the disease was never going to work on the ground. How we look at the issue needs to be considered.

I will ask our guests' views on a few matters. How do they believe the blood test will be a part of the solution, going forward? Do they believe it is appropriate and used appropriately?

Where do they believe it falls as part of the solution when it comes to eradicating TB? On some occasions the blood test is used appropriately but on other occasions it is not used at all. I would like our guests' views regarding it and where they believe we need to be going forward.

The wildlife issue has been declared and spoken about on a continuous basis. There is an issue about how to deal with badgers and deer, and how the Department can work with urban society to deal with those issues. That is an issue for us. The Department pulled out of the vaccination programme in certain areas because of issues arising on Facebook, where pictures of snares were put up. There were scenarios of that kind. We are on the back foot when it comes to those issues. How the Department manages those issues is important and has an impact on us as farmers. When the Department pulls out because of so-called negative publicity, it is an issue. How can we move forward to get everyone onside on this issue? Unfortunately, not everyone is onside regarding this issue.

Money and compensation are also issues, as others have mentioned. The valuations in some of the documents are not related to what is happening in the marketplace. They are totally off-kilter. Mr. Punch made an interesting point about animals going to the factory. One wonders was it the same animal that left the yard. There are significant issues in that regard, which is worth talking about and acknowledging. A farmer might send off a cull cow or a milking cow to a factory and get €212 for it. That farmer might wonder was it a calf he or she sent off. That was happening in some of these situations. We must find out how we can address those situations so everyone can have the opportunity to survive the issue of TB.

Numbers in some places have got bigger. That is an issue in some locations. The numbers in some herds are quite horrendous, particularly on the second test. The first test might be okay but the second test is a blood test. It is a blind spot. One does not know what will come until one gets the report. That is a significant issue that we need to start talking about.

I apologise again for being late to the meeting. Those are my thoughts.

Chairman: I will add a question. Heifers in early pregnancy can go down as reactive. Only a visual assessment is done in the factory and scanning results are not being accepted. There can be a considerable differential in value. Has that matter been discussed at the forum? Are there any proposals to address it?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: When a farmer goes down, everyone in the whole area gets that information. What is the status on GDPR around this? Is it allowed that nearly everyone in the country knows your business and whether you are down or up?

Chairman: Many questions have been put so I will go around in sequence. It is getting late so I would appreciate concise answers.

Mr. T.J. Maher: In regard to the wildlife management programme, the Deputy's point is valid. I refer to departmental eradication programme. Like elements of ear to the ground, clearly this programme is seen to be of benefit to the badger population as well. That is the reality. A sick badger is kicked out. We are trying to prevent sick badgers. The problem is that it is not totally effective. The reality is that we have sick badgers infecting animals. It is in our interest to continue to work with everybody here. We are in a difficult situation with the way urban society is moving. We have no choice but to encourage the Department to do its best and to work with farmers. The key is to work with farmers to identify these sets. One of the critical problems is that sets are not being identified.

On the question of compensation and evaluation, we made this point and declared our demand for €110 for dairy cows and €55 for suckler cows and that every animal is eligible. The key point is, and this is a point we have made continuously at the forum, that this is not just about income loss. This is just about the stress this places on the entire family. Family labour is never accounted for in all of these points. The Deputy is correct on those two points. They are our proposals to attempt to address that.

Mr. Tomás Bourke: I will pick up here. Senator Lombard mentioned the live valuation and agreed that there is a blind spot in the actual live valuation scheme for what we would call mid-production animals, third-fourth lactation, suckler or dairy cows because they are not offered for sale on the open market. Any of them that are offered for sale are offered for a reason and the market reflects that, so there is a huge blind spot for those animals that has to be addressed. We raised this with Grant Thornton in the review and it was recognised. One of the areas currently under active discussion is how to get an appropriate data-set for that cohort of animals. I anticipate that the main disappointment in any live valuation is with that category of animals which are the most productive and profitable animals on the farm but yet the market value does not reflect that.

Early pregnancy is a similar point. The system was changed a number of years ago whereby pregnancy diagnosis only takes place at a later stage in cows to address this huge shortcoming. The difficulty here is that maiden and served heifers are treated in the same category so there is not a price differential. The first point at which a price differential come in on the in-calf heifer is for the mid-term, from four to seven months. Obviously, those are the animals to which the Senator refers. While there is a market price for mid-term heifers, we argue that the pricing system should overcome this issue because there is no point giving the value of a mid-term heifer to put back in a mid-term heifer six months later when you are de-restricted. It is a springing heifer or a first-calf heifer that you need, which is of a higher value, to maintain your farming system. It is a huge issue and the Department continues to refuse to accept scanning certificates, which is somewhat offset by the fact that it is later in the gestation when the assessment takes place. We all know how factory lines work and the speed at which they work at. The issue is how to find a four-month old foetus. That can have a huge impact on the valuation. That is part of the live valuation review where categorisation changes are required. That is being discussed and will have to come through.

In regard to the blood test and the solution, it certainly has a role. If you look at why and where it is used, it is focused on breeding herds that have six or more reactors. It is far more sensitive than the skin test. The reason it is used is to identify reactors that the skin tests have not found, ideally sooner rather than later, and to try to get to the bottom of it. The flip side of that is, and the Department readily accepts this, that it is overly sensitive. False positives may be found. That is why it is used where there is confirmed TB. Has it a role beyond that? We would not support it being used outside cases where confirmed TB is on a farm because of those sensitivities.

Senator Lombard made the point that because we are at it 70 years we should not call it eradication. From a Mayo perspective, we are 70 years waiting to get the next one, but we will still go out this year to win it. From a farmer's point of view, and as Mr. Maher outlined it, it is incumbent on us and on the State that we pursue eradication and that, in the process, we reduce the impact on farms. That is why we make the point that this cannot be all about measures that will reduce disease. Throughout this process, because of the examples given, farmers have to be supported as a result of the impact. This will take time. The Department will make mistakes.

Unless we are fully supported as a result of that, through the compensation scheme, we will carry the can.

Deputy Fitzmaurice raised the contiguous testing. It is covered in the Animal Health and Welfare Act. We must be brutally honest. If we outlined, which we have done in this committee today, our view that wildlife is the primary driver of TB, then we must expect that the TB is likely to be in the area and not confined to one farm because the badger and the deer do not recognise farm boundaries. That is the logic behind the contiguous herd testing programme. The figures show that farms contiguous to a high risk breakdown are more likely to have TB on them. From our perspective, we cannot argue on one hand that the badger and the deer are causing the TB but that it did not cross the ditch from my farm to your farm. That is why it closes out the loop.

Mr. Paul Smyth: Mr. Bourke has covered much of it. The blood test probably has a role to play in terms of getting to the nub of the problem on a farm more quickly. Like Mr. Bourke we would not support it as having an initial role on the farm. The Department would probably not be in favour of that in terms of the compensation. However, it has a role to play in expediting TB off the farm.

In regard to contiguous testing, it is a statutory disease and must be notified. We cannot get away from that in terms of you having a higher risk of having TB if your neighbour has it. Mr. Bourke has covered many of the points.

Mr. Eddie Punch: I agree with the previous comments in regard to the blood test. To return to a previous point, in regard to the deer population, we had discussions a few years ago with Coillte. There is a question mark about Coillte being a good neighbour. It is a profitable organisation. Many deer come through its plantations. It has been utterly unwilling to engage on whether it should fence its own plantations. It has said that farmers are welcome to fence and to keep out the deer but in some cases the deer come from uplands through the Coillte plantation and on to farms. When I was a garsún, there was a television advertisement about the neighbour who does not give a damn and know him for what he is was the phrase. There is a question mark about Coillte and the fencing of deer. There are issues in that it might only move the problem from one place to another but there is also a question about whether it is acceptable that there is an entire semi-State forestry which is not fenced.

Mr. Hugh Farrell: To follow on from Mr. Punch on the point about the eradication programme, it came up only this week at the TB forum meeting. It set a target for 2023 to 2025 of a status level or a goal we could achieve. We cannot do that either because we do not have wildlife or anything else in place. It is looking at alternatives. Eradication measures may be one way of driving it. In our hearts, we know a great many things have to be addressed and changed or it is not possible. There is no point saying otherwise as it is only misleading everyone else along with ourselves. That is being honest with the taxpayer and everyone else, including ourselves, in terms of who is funding it. Mr. Punch has covered the issue of blood testing. On compensation, valuers and valuations, there should never have been a big forum or anything else. If we want to have somebody value a property or anything else for us, there are people licensed and qualified to do that job. It is like the members or anybody else in their own positions; everyone has their own job and we have to leave them to do it. They are now being directed by people who do not have those qualifications. This needs to be addressed. It should go back to the valuer. This would save a lot of time that is now being wasted when agreeing valuations, as Mr. Punch has said.

Regarding the factory return on salvages that Senator Lombard quoted, every cow going in there is coming back at a much lower grade, with the farmer being paid a lower premium. I heard a man saying he had got €210 for cows. There could be 80 cent to €1 lost on the salvage value, perhaps along with grade, weight and different things. I always remember being locked up and getting back £480 for cows. Every of them was worth £700 or more dead. We have to address that. It is not being monitored within the system. That is a loophole.

I will go back to the Chairman's question on pregnancy and in-calf heifers. Anyone that artificially inseminates or scans an animal has an artificial insemination or scanning certificate. That has to be acceptable. Everyone is working in good faith here. We need this to be done in that manner. That is the big thing for me.

Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned the GDPR. Before Covid, when we were going to meetings in Backweston, we would sign in but we would not see our own name, let alone anything else. Still our names come out and we can be on every sheet of paper in the country, whether for bovine viral diarrhoea or TB. There is a real problem there and it needs to be addressed.

There was a question on herd breakdown and different issues going forward. With the science now, we need more identification. We got a few results at some of the last TB meetings with regard to a genotyping test. That is only being used on a trial basis. Some of the tests could be conducted far away. They may not always have been carried out on neighbours' animals.

Chairman: I thank the representatives from the various farm organisations for participating in today's meeting. TB is a very significant issue and can cause great financial hardship for families. I wish the organisations the very best of luck at the TB forum in getting an equitable solution to ensure fair play for farm families. It would be remiss of me not to say that we have reduced the number of reactors substantially over the last 20 years. The number of reactors was far higher 20 years ago than it is now. That is not to say anything about anybody who has the misfortune to experience a breakdown and the great financial hardship that entails. There can be loss of income in the years following. You lose your herd one year but there is cash flow with the animals leaving. It is in the second, third and fourth years, while trying to build the herd back up, that farm families can face really severe financial hardship. I thank the witnesses very much.

The next private meeting of the committee will take place at 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 22 February. The next public meeting will take place at 5.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 23 February, when the committee will be resuming post enactment scrutiny of the Animal Health and Welfare Act and examining the development of the hemp sector in Ireland.

The joint committee adjourned at 8.13 p.m. until 5.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 23 February 2022.