Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ash Dieback: Forest Service Briefing

15 January 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan

Witnesses:

Mr Malcolm Beatty	Forest Service
Mr Stuart Morwood	Forest Service
Mr John Joe O'Boyle	Forest Service

The Chairperson: I welcome the witnesses from the Forest Service: Malcolm Beatty, chief executive; John Joe O'Boyle, director of forestry; and Stuart Morwood, director of woodland development and strategies. You are very welcome, gentlemen, and happy new year.

Mr Malcolm Beatty (Forest Service): Thank you, Chairman.

The Chairperson: That is to be consistent. I had already wished the other officials a happy new year, so I could not leave you out, Malcolm. I am sure that you have a presentation for us before we go into questions, so, without further ado, please proceed.

Mr Beatty: We have circulated a map that will bring members up to date with the picture throughout the UK. Some of the dots are ours. There are now 22 sites and two nursery sites on which infection is confirmed. At this point, no disease is confirmed in the wider environment, and that is a key statistic. Thirteen of the 24 sites were found by forward traces. We found out about nurseries in GB that were infected, and we traced the supply to Northern Ireland, although it works the other way sometimes. The other 11 were found by our normal surveillance around woodlands, which involves going around nurseries and amenity plantings.

We are now starting the process of analysing them to see how common the disease is in the countryside. We have looked at woodlands that are less than five years old. Of the woodlands that contain ash, about 5% are infected in 2010 and 2011 plantings; in older plantings, we have not found any disease present. However, there are caveats. We are looking at disease on woody material in wintertime, but we need to look at it in the summertime when the leaves are on the trees.

We have other things to bring you up to date with. Having met stakeholders, the Minister summarised the lessons that they gave us: they would like us to improve communications and to work in partnership with them. The councils asked us to give them some correspondence and standard lines to take, which seems sensible. Stakeholders would like to see information about outbreaks in the South, and we said that we would discuss that with our colleagues in the South. They would also like us to use partners to improve our biosecurity measures. It is all sensible stuff.

Since we last met, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has produced a control plan for GB. We have prepared to draft one, and we have discussed that with our colleagues in the South. We want to work that up as a joint all-Ireland control plan. There are four elements to it. One is the current position, which is reducing the risk of disease becoming established here. The second element is to support research, because there is an awful lot about this disease that we simply do not understand. There are two elements there: one is about disease modelling, for example how is this thing likely to move on the climate and the wind; the second part is to start planning for contingencies. If the disease did, by some unfortunate circumstances, become established here, how would we improve resistance to it? What kind of breeding programme could we create? The third element is about engaging landowners, professionals, and the public so that there is better awareness of what the disease looks like. We can then get information about its prevalence and take action. The fourth element is anticipating that if disease did become established, what kind of resilience could we build in to our own circumstances. Take the timber industry: where will it get timber from if ash becomes unavailable? Or how would it affect the biodiversity of the countryside? That is a major consideration. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency is represented on our control group, and is starting to think about that.

Looking forward to the measures that we will take for the next period, we will continue our management meetings about controlling this, taking account of the data that comes forward. As I said, we will develop an all-Ireland control plan. We will engage with farmers, which will become particularly important on issues such as agrienvironment schemes. In such schemes, very small numbers of ash trees will be planted, and it is very costly to send departmental staff out to find those. However, we could be of some use in informing farmers what to look for when their farms and trees come into leaf. We will do further surveillance. You will see on the map where the dots are. We need to come up with a realistic strategy for maintaining surveillance around those areas so that we have a good idea whether or not the disease is actually spreading. At the moment, we have removed much of the infected material, but have we got it all? That is what we need the surveillance for. We will develop proposals for professional and public engagement — a summertime job — then resurvey what we have done. We have been round quite a lot of plots, but we need to redo that when the trees are in leaf and make sure that things are as we think they are.

That was a very quick run-over. I am happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Malcolm, for your presentation. You mentioned that, on a number of occasions, what has come out of the stakeholder meetings is communication or, if you like, the lack of it. Look at what has been published by the Forest Service and what has been made available, even to the Committee, by way of information with what has been released in GB. There is no comparison. How would you counter that?

Mr Beatty: There is no point reinventing. If it is published in GB, our website directs you to GB. The Forestry Commission has done the work, and we direct people to it. I see no point in reproducing it. There are two reasons: one, it is done; secondly, if it is amended in GB, we might not actually know about it. It is always better to point people to the source. In GB, the disease is in the wider environment; we are not at that stage. We will need to do more of that as we get into leaf and as there is opportunity for people to tell us about things. We have a helpline, and people do phone us, although not too many. We chase up those calls, but they tend not to add much to our body of knowledge. That is not to say that we should not do it. We welcome it. However, there is a time for it, and that will be in the summertime when the trees are in leaf. Remember, in GB, they did their exercise coming into the autumn. The trees were in leaf and there were lots of opportunities for people to get engaged. It is much more difficult at this time of year. That is where we are.

The Chairperson: You talk about the source. Is it still the case that the Forest Service is not publishing exact locations?

Mr Beatty: We are doing the same as the Forestry Commission, as you will see on the map.

The Chairperson: Yes, but is there a difference between Forest Service land and private land?

Mr Beatty: We have not found it on Forest Service land. That is the first thing. We are reluctant to tell people exactly which farm it is on. If there was a public need or public interest case to be met for releasing information, I would have no problem in doing so. However, I struggle with the concept or value of telling people that it is on farmer Joe's land so that everybody could queue outside his door to look at it.

The Chairperson: What is the difference between that and DEFRA's approach to publishing locations?

Mr Beatty: There is an awful lot more of it, so there is less interest. Not to criticise my media colleagues, but we found early on that there was a lot of interest in wanting to know where it was and in getting people on site to look at it. I do not think that that was helpful. As there is more of it, it becomes less relevant and people can be more mature about it. I am happy to consider it, but I would like to know what the public value is.

The Chairperson: What about private forestries and landowners who have a lot of woodland and forest? How can they be used by the Forest Service?

Mr Beatty: They can be used in two ways. Private industry is already engaged, in that when we find a positive, or we suspect that there is a positive, we talk to its agents about where the plants came from and all that tracing information. Therefore, the industry is working with us to supply that, and it is very co-operative. If action is to be taken to remove trees, the Forest Service, unlike GB, has offered that help. We did that because we recognise that there are not too many cases at this stage. We want to learn quite a lot at this early stage about the nature of the disease and how best to deal with it, and I wanted assurances that we had found everything that was possible to find. I say that, but when we look at the commercial documents, they tell us how many plants are to be found, but when we go looking for them and take all the trees off site, the numbers do not add up exactly. So, where are the other trees? I want to cut that step out until I understand the trade pathway. That is not to say that there is anything untoward going on. The trees may have died or there may be other reasons; I just want to understand that. That is where we are at the moment.

So far, all the landowners have welcomed that approach. The job gets done quickly, which is important. It gets disposed of quickly. We found lots of early problems. For example, we started off trying to burn the trees, but they would not burn at this time of year, which was no surprise. Then we took them to landfill and negotiated with the landfill people about how to set the process up. If it becomes a bigger thing, that information is ready to roll out to engage the private sector more.

The Chairperson: There was a debate in my council not so long ago about whether burning or landfill was better. What precautions are you taking with regard to movement to landfill?

Mr Beatty: The plants go into a bag, and that is very carefully monitored; there is a tracing system in place. If a council does that itself, the Department's inspectors have the same monitoring system of the trace to landfill, and that is one thing that we will always be very careful about. Therefore, under the order, we could serve notice on a private person to do that, but we would still want assurances that it would be done properly.

The Chairperson: It has been brought to my attention by constituents and landowners that there has been a Forest Service presence on their land.

Mr Beatty: Yes.

The Chairperson: You inspect their land and investigate. You have the right to enter any land. Is that right?

Mr Beatty: Yes, under the Plant Health Order, not under the Forestry Act.

The Chairperson: Is there a protocol whereby landowners should be notified in good time? It seems to be the case that they have only seen traces of Forest Service personnel; they have not seen Forest Service personnel on their land. I do not know the tell-tale signs or whether they have seen personnel jumping over fences or gates to inspect land without their knowledge.

Mr Beatty: There should always be a phone call. I will ask my colleague Mr O'Boyle to fill you in on how it is done.

Mr John Joe O'Boyle (Forest Service): We make every attempt to contact some people in advance. Sometimes, that is the landowner directly, and, sometimes, it may be the agent who has been involved in the planting scheme in the first instance. I have no doubt that, on one or two occasions, for whatever reason, an inspector will take a look at a site where he has not been able to make contact in advance. I have no doubt that that happened in the early days in a small number of cases, although we have got better as we have worked through the process.

Mr Beatty: It is not desirable from our point of view.

The Chairperson: I will come to that. Surely, it is not desirable to be jumping over fences and gates and having a juke at trees, especially when the landowner will know exactly where his ash trees are. Those could be massive sites.

Mr Beatty: That is a moot point.

The Chairperson: Surely it is in the interests of everyone that the Forest Service works well with and liaises with landowners.

Mr Beatty: There is a very practical reason for getting in touch, which is for the health and safety of our staff, because the landowner will know what hazards are on his site, but we will not; we have to work that out from first principles. That is not to say that we are putting an onus on the owner. It is just good practice, and we try to do that. It is not desirable; it is not something that we want to do in that way. We are quite happy to talk to people, and, indeed, after the event, I would prefer that we did talk to people about what we had found.

Mr Kinahan: I thought that, over Christmas, having looked at ash trees, we have not planted anything at home for 15 or 20 years. That made me wonder whether you have gone down every woodland grant scheme. Is it just the young ones of five years, or are you looking through everyone who has planted and been on different schemes for the past 15, 20 or 25 years?

Mr Beatty: We have not got that far. We have targeted the schemes in the past five years as the most likely to be infected. Remember that we are looking for plants that came from Europe, as the disease started to spread in Europe a lot more recently. We have found disease in plants planted as far back as 2010, but not prior to that. That is some comfort, although that is not to say that we are out of the woods. Those are the facts at the moment.

Mr Kinahan: What about in the rough wood, where ash is planting itself or self-seeding?

Mr Beatty: If that is coming from native sources —

Mr Kinahan: You are happy that it is not going to catch it?

Mr Beatty: If the disease is circulating, it will catch it. If the disease is coming in in introduced plants, it is vital to get those away before they start to circulate. Provided that the disease is not circulating, everything native is fine. However, if we start to find native trees infected, the disease is circulating, de facto.

Mr Kinahan: That is why I asked, because, having looked around, I had to go back to the photographs because I found other things in the trees. I have never looked at ash trees that closely, and I thought that there must be a mass of people who might start with knowing what an ash tree looks like, but then you move on to knowing what you are actually looking for on it. You have sort of answered my question and said that we do not need 100% cover or to make sure that we check every tree, but are you planning for it if we get there?

Mr Beatty: That is why you engage the general public and landowners. It is impossible for the Department to look at every tree.

Mr Kinahan: I just thought that we needed information, because when I got back, I suddenly realised how little I knew, even from the few photographs that we had.

Mr Beatty: One important statistic is that, in general surveillance, when we take samples, about 5% of those turn up positive. Even with foresters and inspectors well trained in it, we get a very low return confirming infection. Trees die for many reasons. It is a higher percentage when you are following a trace, in other words, when you would expect to find the disease onsite, but even then, it is only 10%. There is a great deal of work involved. That is one of the reasons why communication is very difficult. What is it that we are trying to tell you? We cannot add anything to the photographs. We might be able to do that later, but we have nothing to add to what is already there. If we did, we would certainly share it. What we have done is put on things that people can do about biosecurity — practical stuff. There are other websites that deal with the science. It is not that we are anti-communication; it is just that there is not much that we can tell you at this stage.

Mr Buchanan: You said that there are 24 confirmed sites. Can you tell us how many of those, if any, are not linked to imported stock?

Mr Beatty: There are six of those that we found as a result of our general surveillance. They were all recently planted, and we now need to trace where they came from. My expectation is that it will all turn out have an import bit in GB somewhere. If they turn out to have been grown in Ireland, that is a different game altogether. At this stage, they are recently planted. We still have to find out a lot more about where some of those cases came from, and that means working with the industry, but we are not there yet.

Mr Buchanan: You said in response to the Chairman earlier that you wanted to learn more about the disease and how best to deal with it. Are you telling the Committee that, as yet, you do not know what is the best way to deal with that particular disease?

Mr Beatty: There are practical things that we can do, which will work. For example, we can remove the tree and all the litter and debris and destroy it. What we are really talking about is what we will do if the disease starts to spread into the wider environment. It is impractical to fell every ash tree in the country. Why would you want to do that? How do you minimise the spread or slow down the rate of the disease? That is the kind of lesson that we need to learn.

Mr Buchanan: Well, perhaps, I could move on to another point —

Mr Beatty: There is one other bit. Did we find every leaf in those sites? Probably not. How much debris can you tolerate before it becomes important with regard to disease spread? Those are the kinds of things that we do not know.

Mr Buchanan: OK. Perhaps I could ask another question. If you find a woodland and check it, and it is not infected — there is ash in it all right, but it is not infected — what, if anything, can you do to protect it from becoming infected? Can anything be done to keep it from becoming infected?

Mr Beatty: No. The best thing that you can do is find the sources of the infection rather than plants that are not infected. If the disease starts to spread in the natural environment, it will spread tens of kilometres within a year, and because it is airborne, there is nothing you could do to protect your own woodland. It is more important to find recent planting and remove it at source.

Mr Buchanan: If you find woodland that is not infected, and you are happy that there is no infection in it, how often is it inspected?

Mr Beatty: We now need to work out those things in our surveillance plan. We intend going back to the woodlands that we have seen this year. We will probably do that twice: during the growing season, and, probably, again next year to confirm that there is no infection. If we find infection, we are in a different game. That will continue until we are out of it, which could be a long time. We are still at risk of infection on the wind from the continent or GB. The modelling will tell us how big that risk is.

Scientists have already said that our risk is about 1% of whatever the risk was to GB from the continent. As the disease spreads through England, that increases our risk. That is the kind of modelling that is going on to help us to understand where the risk is. It is probably along the east coast.

Mr Buchanan: Fair enough. As far as I can see, there is obviously a lot of work to do on the issue. It is a huge concern to people who have woodlands. There is no doubt about that.

Mr Byrne: I agree with Malcolm. According to the map, most of the concentration is in the eastern part of England. Is that correct?

Mr Beatty: Yes; it is represented by the red dots.

Mr Byrne: OK. How much discussion have you had with officials in the Republic about the number of incidents there? Have they identified their source of the disease yet?

Mr Beatty: We met twice before Christmas. That was a senior officers' meeting. There are telephone conversations at least weekly on where things are. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute provides the testing service for the South. The samples come up, so there is good co-operation. We understand the things that they are doing, which are pretty much the same as ours. Therefore, we share their information about what we can do about landscape planting, for example. I am not going to tell; it is for them to say what they found. We share intelligence so that we can understand where to look on our side as well.

Mr Byrne: I take it that most of the incidents here so far have largely been the result of imported trees.

Mr Beatty: It is the same in the South.

Mr Byrne: What is the general assessment? Is the problem growing? Are we on top of it? Is there any more resource to be put into it?

Mr Beatty: The prevalence within a planting year is about 5%. Not every tree is infected. Therefore, at this stage, we are still looking for a needle in a haystack. This disease has the potential to grow exponentially. It is a very dangerous disease for trees — not for people or anything else, just trees. Therefore, we will be at this for a long time.

Mr Byrne: Seasonally, is it likely to grow more in winter, summer or spring?

Mr Beatty: Sorry. I did not catch that.

Mr Byrne: Is it likely to spread more at a certain time of the year?

Mr Beatty: Yes. The spores will develop on leaves in the summertime and fall to the ground in autumn. Late summer and early autumn is when spores are released.

Mr Byrne: Are we putting all necessary resources into it?

Mr Beatty: So far, yes, although we cannot do everything. We need farmers, foresters and landowners to look at their plantation, even if we have been to it. That is not a guarantee that there is no disease; it just means that we have not found it. Keep coming back.

Mr Irwin: I apologise for not being here for your presentation. This question might have been asked before, but have there been any new outbreaks from you were last here? Is it possible to identify outbreaks at this time of the year, when there are no leaves on the trees?

Mr Beatty: Yes. We have circulated a map. The dots represent the sites on which notice has been served. There are a few more we are investigating, which may add to that.

Mr Irwin: However, no more have been confirmed since you were last here?

Mr Beatty: Yes, there are more dots on the map than there were last time. Last time, I think that there were six; there are more than six now.

You asked me another question.

Mr Irwin: Is it possible, with no leaves on the trees, to identify the disease at this time of year?

Mr Beatty: It is, although with difficulty. When our staff find symptoms, they will take a sample, and of those samples, 5% turn out to be positive. It is a needle in a haystack. We do not want too many samples coming in; somebody has to process these things.

The Chairperson: Are you finished, William?

Mr Irwin: Yes. Thank you.

The Chairperson: I accept your answer about their exact locations, but can you give us a breakdown of the 24 sites? Are they landscaped areas? Are they farms? Are they nursery sites?

Mr Beatty: Of the 24 sites, 11 are from the wider surveillance, and of that 11, six are woodland sites. Of the other five, at least two are roadside planting.

The Chairperson: When you say roadside planting, are we talking about hedgerows?

Mr Beatty: No; I am talking about recent planting to landscape roads.

The Chairperson: Work that Roads Service would have conducted.

Mr Beatty: That sort of thing. There might be one private site; a garden or something of that order. I do not remember the others. The other 13 are forward traces. At least one is a local authority landscaped site, I think. Most of the rest are woodland grant sites, which predominantly came from one or two nurseries. The forward trace is our acting on intelligence that we follow up. You are much more likely to find —

The Chairperson: Just to be clear, the Republic of Ireland has not had any wider environment infections to date.

Mr Beatty: No.

The Chairperson: We are talking only about the east coast of GB, at the present time.

Mr Beatty: Yes.

The Chairperson: One other issue needs to be raised, and that is hedgerows, which I mentioned earlier. You will know the cycle for cutting hedgerows, which is of great contention to the farming community and the wildlife sector. Does the period for cutting hedgerows factor into your fight against the disease? Do you see a need to look at that to see whether it is correct for the disease?

Mr Beatty: That came into one of our very early discussions. We raised it with our agrienvironment colleagues at the countryside management unit. If the disease is circulating, it is more likely to infect a recent wound than an old one. Therefore, the timing of hedge cutting would be important in relation to when disease might be spreading. For example, cut your hedges in the spring, not the autumn. I have forgotten when the closed period for cutting hedges is, so advice would have to be got out.

The Chairperson: Farmers can cut hedges from September to the end of March.

Mr Beatty: January, February and March sound good. Cutting in September does not sound like all that bright a thing to do for disease.

The Chairperson: September and October could be the critical months.

Mr Beatty: Less sensible if disease is circulating. There is one other thing. Farmers can, of course, cut their hedges at any time, if it is, say, along a roadside or a safety thing. The same applies. The risk is there. Therefore, if it has to be done, it would be beneficial to cut early in the spring.

The Chairperson: Are you looking at the awareness of that at this stage?

Mr Beatty: We have asked our colleagues to address that issue.

Mrs Dobson: Apologies for missing your presentation. I know that most of the questions have already been asked, but I have read that there has been a limited response to the helpline and the departmental e-mail account. Can you give us an indication as to the number of queries handled by both and outline how the Department made the public aware of the helpline and e-mail account?

Mr Beatty: From memory, it is in the twenties, thirties or forties; it is not hundreds, put it that way.

Mrs Dobson: That is very small.

Mr Beatty: It is mentioned in every press release we put out. It is there.

Mrs Dobson: Just through press releases?

Mr Beatty: I remember being on television and am pretty sure that I mentioned it. It is there. Nobody has complained that they have not been able to find out how to get in touch with us.

Mrs Dobson: You are confident that you do not need to review the processes of engaging with the public.

Mr Beatty: Not that bit. We need to do more so that people know how to look for disease when trees come into leaf and report it. That will be an important part of the strategy.

Mrs Dobson: How do you envisage doing that?

Mr Beatty: That is work to be done. There are lots of tools out there: apps on phones or another telephone line; people suggest things to us; and tools are being developed in GB. I am happy to look at any of those. I can see that, out of all the information that would be important to us, without a photograph and geographic location, I doubt that we would respond. People have phoned to say that there is a diseased tree near them. They are sure, from what they have read, that it is this disease, and we have gone out and looked at it. We scared ourselves. However, it turned out to be something quite different.

Mrs Dobson: Therefore, you know the importance of providing photographic evidence.

Mr Beatty: The photographic evidence scared us, but it still did not lead to a positive diagnosis. Photographic evidence is not easy to interpret. The scientists are finding it quite hard to look at the photographic evidence and say that that sample will produce a disease. Sometimes it does; sometimes it does not. Can you get it 100%? That is what we are working on at the moment, and perhaps a paper will come out of that. However, the point is that symptomatic evidence does not lead directly to a positive laboratory test. That is quite difficult. Therefore, we are nervous about putting out more photographs until we are sure that it is right.

Mrs Dobson: However, you do have a sense of urgency about getting information.

Mr Beatty: Oh yes. It is important to us, because it would reduce the number of samples that we would have to take. We would only take samples that were more likely to yield a positive result. It is very important, but we have not found the way to do that yet.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you.

The Chairperson: As there are no further questions from the Committee, I thank you again for your attendance today and your answers, gentlemen. I am sure that you will keep us fully briefed as the weeks go on. We wish you all the best in your fight against this disease.