



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Tree Disease and Biosecurity
Issues: Stakeholder Event

19 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Review of Tree Disease and Biosecurity Issues: Stakeholder Event

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Mr Oliver McMullan

Stakeholders:

Mr Peter Archdale	Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside
Ms Catherine Bertrand	Butterfly Conservation NI
Mr Patrick Cregg	Woodland Trust
Mr John Finlay	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Gregor Fulton	Woodland Trust
Mr Richard Halleron	Farming Life
Mr James Hamilton-Stubber	Royal Forestry Society
Mr John Hetherington	Premier Woodlands Ltd
Mr Michael Large	Michael Large Tree Services Ltd
Dr Pól Mac Cana	Envision
Mr Alan McCartney	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Ian McCurley	National Trust
Mr Mark McKeever	Drenagh Sawmills
Mr Stephen McNeill	Balcas Ltd
Ms Orla Maguire	Belfast City Council
Mr John Martin	RSPB NI
Mr Stuart Morwood	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Robert Scott	Abercorn Estates
Mr Andrew Sharkey	Woodland Trust
Mr Robert Shearman	Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: OK, folks. We will make a start. Thank you very much for coming back up to the mic. We will now start going through the feedback.

I chaired group 1, the topic for which was stopping the introduction of new tree disease and reducing the spread rate of current disease, including ash dieback, in Northern Ireland.

I will just run down through the notes, so forgive me if they sound patchy. On the issue of stopping the introduction of diseased trees, if there are no restriction controls on trees that are imported from Mediterranean areas outside the EU, they can be moved across the EU. That leaves Northern Ireland more susceptible, because we do not know the origin of those imports. There was discussion about

free movement in the EU. There are a lot of benefits to that, such as easy movement and free trade. However, it is certainly a double-edged sword, because when something goes wrong, it is very hard to contain that and fight the spread.

Again, nurseries in Ireland have an uncertain existence. That point came through very clearly. There is a need to remove the uncertainty about the Government's ambitions for tree planting and the forestation of our areas. Our table deemed that it would be much better for the industry and would give us much more certainty if we could forecast the future, whether through a five-year or 10-year plan, and if we were able to update and provide input into that plan, with politicians and stakeholders, of course, applying pressure on the Government to increase their ambition. Companies and businesses would then be able to plan even further ahead.

Again, this is all about stopping the introduction of disease from imported plants, which can be done by basically encouraging more native growth of seed and sapling. Again, the view was expressed that we need to stop direct importation from the EU and to refuse to use imports. Why are we not growing our own? Why can we not grow our own? That might be a hard business decision, and businesses will lose contacts or contracts. However, some have already gone the extra mile and have done that work by trying to use only native stock. Again, it is very hard to prevent this. Is there a reality check on all that? At the end of the day, a business is involved, and business decisions will be made. It is easy and cheaper for people to import from Europe. So, a reality check is needed. That situation has to change, and habits also have to change. We cannot prevent trade, so we should use the carrot approach rather than the stick and pay additional money to incentivise local produce. Again, that is something that the Department of Agriculture and Regional Development (DARD), through the Forest Service, and the Government should take an interest in. They should look at what we can do to incentivise that through our grant schemes and consider why we are paying so little when other regions in the UK and maybe in Europe pay more. Again, that needs to be looked at.

We also need to encourage more tree planting. The issue of how many more trees we need to plant kept coming up. We talked about road schemes and farmers planting lands. Why do we not treat trees as a crop? Why do we plant trees only when we cannot use the land for something else? That is a very important message that needs to go out to the farming community. CAP reform can inform and change that, and politicians will have to keep one eye on that. It is easy for politicians to say that CAP should be about food production, active farmers and all the rest, but maybe by putting pressure on CAP, we could look at incentivising ways and means of increasing our forest and woodland areas.

Another issue that was raised was the ability to develop new markets such as a firewood market for wood-burning stoves. Everybody seems to be involved in the craze of installing wood-burning stoves. If there is a niche out there and opportunities, people should be able to grasp them. However, that should be incentivised by government so that it can be pushed forward.

A lack of forward planning was an issue that came out very evidently. There is also a need to identify issues in connection with bringing material in. The word "radar" was used, and we need to have a radar of research to help detect when we are under threat from the trees, species, bugs or whatever material is out there that can do us real harm.

It was also suggested that there is a need for a plant passport system. If we cannot stop imports, we have to make sure that we can passport them and trace them correctly. That also came across very strongly.

Another issue was the need to focus on high risk. We need to identify the parts of the world and the species that are high risk. We also need to research that and get the information out to the population, businesspeople and those who will purchase this produce.

When thinking about risk, it is very difficult to quantify what the impact of disease will be, so we need prediction and horizon-scanning, which is a bit like the radar I talked about. It is about not just the trees or plants that we import but the soil that is around them. Indeed, it is everything to do with that, including the packaging. However, it is not just the packaging of the tree or the plant but the packaging that is used for bulky goods, such as the wood that is used to pack furniture or other goods that people buy from Europe. It is even the wood that is in the containers in the shipyards and the docks. How do we police that and effect change so that we are all looking for the telltale signs of disease and pests? That is a big issue. If you quantify it like that, you will see that it is very hard to even begin to see how we will ever control and police it.

The second part of our talk was on the spread of disease. When diseases land on our shores, how can we prevent and stop their spread?

The issue of increased public awareness came out time and again, including the need for better communication with the public and the need for the media to give positive messages and encouragement. It was also suggested that we need a message that not only hits everyone but educates and informs them of the issues and tells them why they need to do something or change their habits. It is not good enough just telling somebody that they should not do something; you have to inform them why there is a consequence if they continue to do it. I think that that is sometimes left to the side.

Another suggestion was that we should risk-map the country. We are talking not only about the areas of risk where the disease has spread but about the types of soil, rock, the environment, whether it is near the coast, what the temperature and soil are like and population movements around those areas. Those are all things that could be put in a risk map to help, aid and educate us all, including government and the stakeholders, in planning for the eradication of a disease.

We need to encourage people to plant and identify resistant trees. There was discussion about whether we should take away the risk by ripping out all the ash trees or, when they become diseased, burning them, taking them away and not growing any more as they, too, will get diseased. Is this not the time when we should be going the other way and incentivising the growth of ash or other trees that are under pressure or in danger so that we can help get stronger trees that are resistant to the disease? Again, there is a job of work to do around genetics with that, and you will know better than I how that could be achieved. Should we be targeting the vulnerable trees to encourage more growth instead of turning our heads away from the issue and running away from a species of tree just because it is susceptible to, and has a high risk of, contracting disease?

Other points that were raised included a lack of communication with the private sector and issues with landowners and inspections. Lack of information was also mentioned, which, as an MLA, I have been told about by constituents. The problem arises with officials going on to land, giving very short notice and not asking the landowner to identify where his trees are and what type of trees he has. Basically, officials just jump over the fence, go on the land, have a wee look, do the surveying and then leave without informing the landowner. Landowners could educate the inspectors about where the ash trees are on their land. So, there has to be better joined-up working with landowners, stakeholders and tree experts. There is an army of people out there who are interested in and are passionate about trees. Why are they not being used?

Also mentioned were issues with hedgerows and a resulting fear among farmers. Due to a lack of communication, there is confusion about what is best to plant in a hedgerow. What is DARD saying to those farmers? Is it encouraging them to plant and keep going, or is it turning its face away from the issue?

There is a lack of knowledge of how to get hold of the Forest Service. It has a hotline, but how effective has it been? Who has been entrusted to use it? Those are all questions that we need to be asking the Department. Is the Forest Service under-resourced due to major cutbacks over the years? If it is, why does it not say so and why does it not use the army of people that it has at its disposal, whether they are from the private sector or charitable groups? There are passionate people involved who want to keep and maintain forest areas, so why not use them?

Those were the issues that were raised in our discussion, and I hope that I have done the people at my table justice in going through them.

Joe Byrne was in group 3. I will apologise for Joe; there is an Adjournment debate that must be done with his constituency, and he has had to stay down in the Chamber for that. So, he sends his apologies.

Group 3 topics included the necessity of sharing and communicating information and research through government and the industry. Can someone from group 3 tell me the topic that you were talking about?

Mr Robert Scott (Abercorn Estates): We talked about developing positive linkages between all the sectors that are involved in tree diseases in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: OK, thank you very much. Some of the points that were raised included the sharing and communication of information, which came up at our table, and research through government and industry as a necessity was also discussed. It was also said that stakeholder groups should be set up not just to respond to disease threats but to scan for them on the horizon to find the next big threat. To me, that is vital, and, as Andrew demonstrated in the presentation, all those things over the horizon should be used. Stakeholder groups and the army of volunteers should also be used to help with that threat. Where is it? How is it being dealt with? That information should be shared with, at the very least, the stakeholders.

There is an invasive alien species strategy, which falls under the Department of the Environment. That strategy, as well as plant health through DARD, should be focused on a joint, common sense approach. Again, should we look at this topic and ask where the joined-up government is? How do we get better communication among all the Departments and sectors? Given the number of Departments and MLAs that we have, joined-up government is a theme that hits us every day of the week. Can we do things better? Can we focus on some of the big issues and then wrap Departments around them? Is plant health one of those issues? That subject is up there for debate.

Although legislation is an important and key ingredient in tackling tree disease, far more work could be done. Government should utilise industry stakeholders to get research and information out to a greater public audience. A good base of stakeholder engagement is critical. For example, a group that was set up in Scotland agreed that it would not disband following a disease threat but said that it would continue to work towards the next disease. That resulted in an industry-led decision to label not just the provenance of seeds on the saplings but where they are grown. That is a prime example of where the future focus should be.

The same joined-up approach needs to be taken to issues on trade and free trade, which need to be examined. The possibility of moving the procurement of trees forward based on long-term contracts can only be good for all concerned.

Although those of us at those two tables talked about two distinct topics, you can see where we have merged in agreement along some of the key issues. I certainly feel that this has been a very useful event, even at my own table, and I am sure that Joe feels the same.

I now call on Jo-Anne Dobson to give feedback on table 2's discussion.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you very much. Our table was very vocal. Our topic was building resilience to tree disease in general and ash dieback specifically. I have a synopsis for you, because I think that Mark, the note taker, is away to lie in a dark room. He has pages and pages of notes for perusal.

A range of options and opinions were discussed. The first and probably most radical suggestion was that we should let disease run rampant and then deal with the aftermath. It was suggested that we replant with resistant stock, which I feel was another radical suggestion. Reference was made to the Dutch Elm experience, which I am sure that many of you will remember.

The next conclusion was that the level of control on imports should be increased. For example, trees from countries outside the EU should be quarantined. It was felt that the review of the EU plant health regime could be an opportunity.

Another conclusion was that local nursery resources could be developed to produce plants and trees. That strategy would require financial support, given its long-term nature. My group felt that, currently, nurseries are brokers rather than growers, so we would need to incentivise and encourage nurseries if that strategy were to happen.

A further conclusion was that we could build resilience by planting more native trees from native species and a more diverse seed stock. We felt that there was a need for more research into the diversity and resilience of our local trees. Expertise should be shared across the EU, and we felt that that is maybe not happening as best it could. We asked whether it was best to focus on prevention, control or eradication. So, there is definitely some food for thought there.

My group decided that any approach needs to be long term, taking account of the fact that nature moves at a slower pace than man.

To give more general feedback, we wondered whether we have the skills and knowledge in Northern Ireland to deal with plant or tree health risks. There was some uncertainty about that. We talked

about the need to continue to work on an invasive species strategy, which is critical in dealing with the future risks. My group felt that there was definitely a need for the involvement of other key stakeholders due to the cross-cutting issues among, for example, the Environment Committee and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. So, the unanimous conclusion that was reached was that there was definitely a need for a multifunctional approach.

So, that is just an overview. There was quite a lot of debate, but a lot of it overlaps with what the Chair said. There is quite a lot of food for thought, and it will be interesting to read the report afterwards.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Jo-Anne. I thank all the groups for the feedback. Before we finish the event, I want to give guests a few minutes to speak, because some of you have travelled a mighty long way. You can raise any issues that you feel were not covered. There is no point in coming the whole way up here and not getting a chance to speak. So, I want to afford you the opportunity to raise comments and ask questions that we should ask the Department during the review. You can make points about your frustrations, the work that the Department is doing and what we can do better. If you have any comments, please feel free to speak.

Ms Catherine Bertrand (Butterfly Conservation NI): It was like a brainwave when you were talking about DARD officials jumping over fences and looking at people's sites without consulting landowners. There is a need to spread awareness about the disease as we come into spring with bud bursts. The countryside management delivery branch in DARD has very good relationships with farming people in their areas, and we need to team up those in DARD who do the tree work with the countryside management branch people so that we have interaction between farmer, farmer adviser and tree adviser. Forest Service has been under-resourced, and I know that the countryside management delivery branch is also under a huge amount of pressure because of the mapping business and the fines from Europe recently. We need to make sure that we resource those linkages, because they are part of the communication network, and it is important that they are resourced properly.

Mr John Hetherington (Premier Woodlands Ltd): Paul, I would like you to keep the pressure on the Minister by properly resourcing our Forest Service and ensuring that we do not lose sight of a unique opportunity under CAP reform. We are reacting; we are not proactive. Let us try to move the whole status forward and ensure that our Forest Service is properly resourced. We have fantastic opportunities under CAP reform. Let us not lose those, because we are firefighting, and let us ensure that all of us are moving forward. I would like you, with the Committee's help, to keep stressing to the Minister that we cannot lose sight of the future simply because we are firefighting.

Mr Archdale: I endorse John's last comment very strongly. I sit on the consultative group for the development of the new rural development programme (RDP), and, at the last chalara meeting, I realised that nobody representing the forestry sector was on that group. We press-ganged one of those individuals, shall we say, and, in fairness to DARD, it was very welcoming of that individual. The point is that, frankly, the forestry measures were being worked in isolation, and there is a real need for them to be integrated into the RDP. So, the rural aspects, the farm diversification and the industry elements are being developed completely independently of Forest Service, and it needs to be more joined-up.

The Chairperson: Are there any other comments?

Dr Pól Mac Cana (Envision): DARD recently held a great conference down in Loughry College about flood risk management, and there was chat there about using soft engineering. As part of that, there was chat about using wet woodland along river systems. So, maybe there should be a little joined-up thinking, either with forestry or the farming community, to look at that and to try to hit a number of DARD's targets.

The Chairperson: Pól, just on that, I do not mean to put any pressure on you, but do you mean the forestation of floodplains?

Dr Mac Cana: Yes, in certain places, where that would work. Certain ideas are coming across from England and Scotland that that is the way to reduce the risk of flooding. It would be done not on the tops of mountains but along the flood meadows. There is, of course, a conflict of interest there, but it should be explored.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much. Are there any other comments? We have time; I could stay here all night. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Archdale: When Jo-Anne Dobson said that we should let the disease spread, it occurred to me that we have obligations under European directives. Some of our sites are designated because of the ash trees that are in them. So, we would be in contravention of the habitats directive, and Europe could turn round and say that we are not doing enough. Regardless of whether we let it spread — I realise that this is outside the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's ambit — there is a very strong case for working out what we are going to do about our designated sites if the disease spreads. I think that that question needs to be asked of the Department of the Environment.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Peter. Are there any further questions or comments?

OK. Everyone is content and has said their piece. As the day's events come to a close, I once again thank you, on behalf of the Committee, for your attendance and input. I know that other members and I have found it to be very useful.

It is hard. We are the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. However, it does not say "forest" in that title, so we have to be mindful of all aspects of agriculture and rural development. We have to ensure that forestation is right up there at the very top of what we do. As we apply pressure on and scrutinise our Ministers, we have to ensure that that is to the fore. We also have to ensure that we represent all of you in doing that and that we do not let you down.

As I said, MLAs are not experts at everything; in fact some of us are experts at nothing. So, it is very important that the experts come to us. I will tell you a funny story. A friend of mine came to me one day and said to me, "Frew, what do you know about farming?" I said, "That is not the point, and it is certainly not the statement to make or the question to ask. The question should be to ask what I can do for you, because I am in a position to effect change. You are the expert; you tell me what needs to happen, and I will try to make it happen." So, the message goes out to folks like you that, if there are issues there and you need my help or that of the Committee, please contact us. Please speak to us. Tell us your woes. Tell us your problems, and, if you have the solutions, tell us those, too, and we will try to effect change to the best of our ability.

Today's proceedings will inform the review that we are undertaking and, indeed, the whole Assembly, when the Committee's review is complete. For those of you who are interested, next week the Committee will take formal evidence from Confor, and on 12 March, it will take evidence from Forest Service and DARD. We then hope to get out on a visit to see the impact of tree disease on our forests and woodlands. We also hope to visit a port to see the biosecurity checks, or the lack of them, at first hand and up close. It is also our firm intention to hold a plenary debate on the issue in the early summer. You can, of course, write to the Committee if there is something additional on this issue that you feel that it should consider. If you are going to write, please do it soon — in fact, within the next two weeks, because that will most benefit the review's work.

So, again, thank you very much for attending. The event has been very useful. It is what we need as politicians. We need to hear your views, woes and problems — and your solutions.

A big thank-you must go to Andrew Sharkey for coming over and for doing the presentation for us. Andrew, thank you very much for being present today and for informing us through your presentation. It was very informative, and I know that the members and audience appreciated it.

So, I wish you all safe home and a pleasant journey.