



**HORTICULTURE FORUM  
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

Mr Robin McKee  
16 Ballyhenry Road  
Comber  
Newtownards  
Co Down  
BT23 5JY  
18 April 2013.

Ms Stella McArdle,  
Clerk of the ARD Committee,  
Room 243,  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw,  
Stormont  
Belfast, BT4 3XX.

Dear Ms McArdle

**Horticulture Forum – Importance of Effective Plant Health Controls.**

As you may be aware the Horticulture Forum was established in 2005 to –

- i. Provide a means of communication between the horticulture sectors on collective horticulture industry issues;
- ii. Provide a channel of communication between the horticulture industry and DARD;
- iii. Operate as a consultative and advisory body for DARD on broad horticultural issues without any statutory or regulatory role.

It was in its capacity of representing the interests of the whole horticulture industry, that the Horticulture Forum recently had a very useful meeting with the Committee Chairman, Paul Frew MLA. During the meeting we discussed a wide range of issues relating to the work of the ARD Committee and the opportunities for growth in the horticulture industry.

The meeting took place in the midst of the recent extreme weather and we greatly appreciate the time taken by Mr Frew to meet the Forum at a time when the pressures on individual MLAs and the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee were intense.

One of the issues which emerged during discussion was the current review being carried out by the Committee into plant health controls, with particular reference to recent tree disease outbreaks in Northern Ireland. The Forum commends the Committee for their interest in this subject but would like to emphasise its importance for the whole production horticulture sector – a case made robustly in the horticulture industries input to the AgriFood Strategy Board.

**Why is effective Plant Health control at point of import so important to horticulture businesses?**

1. Disease directly affects production efficiency and profitability through loss of yield and/or the need to apply more expensive chemical disease control measures. There is also an overall reduction in demand through loss of buyer confidence. It is therefore important that we minimise plant disease impact by preventing new diseases entering the country.
2. This is particularly important at present as EU legislation is threatening to remove many more of the most effective chemicals from the market, thus exposing growers to greater loss of yield. In some cases crops may become commercially non-viable.
3. Where a disease is scheduled in the Plant Health Order it may have to be destroyed under statutory notice. Unlike the situation for animal disease, no compensation is paid and the grower must suffer the total loss. In some circumstances this will have a catastrophic impact on the individual business.
4. Many plant diseases are wind spread so a grower can be affected even though he/ she practices the highest standards of hygiene and purchasing discipline.

5. The industry is already a significant exporter of crops such as mushrooms and seed potatoes and is starting to develop exciting potential as an exporter of cut flowers and nursery stock. This trade is possible because of our high plant health status and could be destroyed by the arrival of diseases already endemic in other Countries.

6. It is well known that there are many “new” diseases threatening these shores and only effective action will prevent their arrival, with the subsequent serious impact on our industry.

**What do we wish to see done to protect the local horticulture industry?**

**1. The Departments of Agriculture in both Belfast and Dublin have been debating an All Island Plant Health Strategy for many (over 10) years. This now needs to be finalised without further delay.**

**2. A Strategy is only as good as its implementation. The all Island Plant Health Strategy needs to be backed by well resourced and effective enforcement action throughout the Island.** The industry accepts its own responsibility but relies on effective enforcement action coupled with good communication between the inspectorates and industry.

**3. The Inspectorates (North and South) need to be supported by well resourced and competent scientific teams.** These teams must be able to -

- a) monitor research and technical information from other countries to ensure that inspectors are forewarned of potential threats (i.e horizon scan);
- b) react quickly to help the government agencies implement effective controls; and
- c) work with the help of CAFRE Development Advisors, to develop and introduce effective control measures at farm level.

The industry is concerned that the AFBI scientific team devoted to plant disease programmes has been reduced in recent years.

**4. The vigilance at import must extend to the general public as well as commercial activities.**

There is a need to educate the travelling public of the threat to the industry of irresponsible importation of plant material. This needs to be backed by port of entry inspector vigilance.

The situation with plant material contrasts markedly with that for meat and dairy products at home and with the vigilance in respect of plant material in other agricultural countries such as Australia and New Zealand.

**Conclusion.**

We believe these suggestions are important to sustain and develop the horticulture industry in Northern Ireland and trust that the Committee will give them serious consideration within your busy schedule.

If you require any further information or wish to discuss these issues in more detail, we will be pleased to do so.

Yours sincerely,



Robin McKee – Chair of the Horticulture Forum.