



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Bovine TB Review: Ulster Farmers' Union and Northern
Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association**

8 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mrs Dolores Kelly (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Clarke	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association
Mr Sean Fitzpatrick	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association
Mr Donal McAtamney	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association
Mr Wesley Aston	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr Harry Sinclair	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr Colin Smith	Ulster Farmers' Union

The Chairperson: I welcome Harry Sinclair, president of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU); Wesley Aston, UFU policy director; Colin Smith, its policy officer; and Michael Clarke, Sean Fitzpatrick and Donal McAtamney from the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA).

Gentlemen, you are very welcome to the Committee to give evidence to this very important inquiry into bovine tuberculosis (bTB). Before I ask you to give your presentation, I congratulate Harry on becoming president of the Ulster Farmers' Union. He is somebody whom I have known for a number of years, and it is good to see him in that position. Congratulations to you and all your staff. I am sure that you will have a very productive time working with the Committee on various subjects.

You will both have a short presentation to make, after which we will go straight into questions on your submissions. I assume that all Committee members have read the written response that you provided to the inquiry.

Mr Harry Sinclair (Ulster Farmers' Union): Thank you, Chairman and members of the Committee. I assume that you have all read our written submission, which should have been received in the middle of April. I will give you a brief outline of what was in that.

Tuberculosis (TB) has been in Northern Ireland now for 60-odd years — before any of our time, I think. A number of measures have come through over the years, at a great burden to the agriculture community. For a number of years, we have been TB-testing all herds in Northern Ireland annually, with the valuation, removal and slaughter of reactor and in-contact animals. We increased the frequency of TB testing for individual animals a number of years ago and have a severe interpretation of the test. That has had a fatal impact on the farming community in Northern Ireland. The administrative cost of TB is £8.25 million a year. There is a significant impact on farmers because of the cost of testing — both the performance of animals and the man time involved — and the loss of a lot of genetic improvement that has gone on in herds over many years.

There is frustration among farmers on the ground. We seem to have got to a level and are now sitting there. The farmers have done a lot on the cattle side, but we feel that there has been no, or very little movement, on trying to address the problem in wildlife. We feel that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) should recognise that attacking the reservoir of TB disease in wildlife is an essential part of the disease eradication programme.

The Minister and DARD should commit to developing a wildlife intervention programme that includes time-based milestones for detecting the disease in wildlife. DARD should establish a group to operate with the sole aim of working up the elements, practical and conceptual, that would form the basis under which a robust, effective and defensible wildlife intervention programme would be delivered. DARD's Veterinary Service should commit to identifying a series of hotspots, or recent outbreak locations, where focused actions and research could be carried out with a view to further improving the already existing science and supporting the planned wildlife intervention. A lot of science has been done on the whole TB issue, but that seems only to lead to more science needing to be done rather than any actual action being taken on the ground.

The UFU recognises that it remains an aspiration of DARD to reduce TB compensation levels, but no such reduction will be implemented by the Department until an agreed intervention programme is operational in rural areas. Undoubtedly, biosecurity measures play an important role in controlling the spread of TB. Those should be incentivised at farm level, as adopting biosecurity measures to prevent cattle-to-cattle spread, and the incursion of wildlife can be very difficult and extremely costly.

Vaccination is an option that has been raised many times. Although we believe that vaccination has an important role to play in the eradication of TB, there are a lot of associated problems. The production of a cattle vaccination has consistently been delayed. Even if it is developed, deployment will be delayed because of EU regulations. The main problem would be that, if cattle were vaccinated with a TB vaccine, the current testing regime would deem all cattle to be TB reactors. That would lead to great trade difficulties with other countries.

Although the TB test is not perfect, according to DARD it is the best test currently available and can be expected to detect approximately 75% of infected cattle in any one test. One problem that we hear raised many times concerns reactors appearing shortly after tests. Until a more accurate test is developed, that is just one of those things that we have to live with.

The UFU believes that Northern Ireland's eradication programme is one of the most robust in Europe for cattle movement. Herd restrictions can cause significant overstocking difficulties for many farms. We are many years ahead of a lot of regions, in that we have had an electronic database for all our cattle for a long time. We always had traceability. The existing TB policy will not eradicate the disease from Northern Ireland. Cattle control measures are only one aspect of dealing with the disease. Until meaningful action is taken at source, particularly with wildlife, farmers will continue to carry the burden of an ineffective policy. As I said, for over 60 years, TB has blighted the industry, and unless policy changes are made, it will continue to do so. A series of measures must be implemented by the Minister immediately to allow progress on eradication to be made. As I always say, you will never complete a jigsaw without having all the pieces on the table. That is very important as far as TB is concerned.

Mr Michael Clarke (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association): Thank you, Mr Chairman and members, for having us here. We more or less concur with everything in the submission from the UFU. TB has been around for longer than any of us care to remember. We are addressing the problem, and we seem to be making inroads, but then it seems to crop up again. I think that we do not really understand the disease. We can have all the biosecurity measures that we want between farms, but there has to be some other method by which TB is being transported. That is my experience and what I have learnt from talking to local vets. It is borne out by cattle that have been housed becoming infected with TB. That cannot come from a neighbouring farm, so there has to be some other method of transportation. Whether it is wildlife, wildfowl or whatever, there has to be some other method by which TB is transported from one animal to another, and from one farm to another. Harry talked about a scientific approach. We need to take a long-term scientific approach to understand this disease — should it take five or ten years. It has been going for 60 years, and we thought we had dealt with it but now, all of a sudden, it has reared its head again. As I look through some statistics, I see that in our own area, Omagh, it has almost doubled in the past 12 months. A lot of this seems to be in the period when the cattle are housed.

I am not for the wholesale slaughter of badgers, but it is one particular aspect of this that we talk about every year but we never seem to do anything about it. In hotspots, we should concentrate on, perhaps, the eradication of badgers in that area. It is not a sexy thing to talk about. Although it is difficult, we might concentrate on the treatment of diseased badgers, just to see whether that is a way forward. However, there are other elements such as birds, for example, or feed. I spoke to a vet in the Omagh area this morning about this, and he told me of a farm that was almost totally free until they came to the last house and inside there were five calves, which had been born this winter, which had TB. Neither the mothers nor any other cattle had it. When the five were taken to be killed, they were rife with it. That did not come from a neighbouring farm. We need to understand the disease before we can really tackle it.

On the compensation side of things, we certainly do not agree with cutting compensation to the farmer. We all have to work together, and that will not endear us to the farmer if he is doing everything asked of him. It is not fair that farmers should be penalised. The majority of farmers, 99% of them, are law-abiding and are trying to eradicate the disease. It does them no good to have to test stock, especially in the summer, and I am talking from experience. If you have to gather cattle in from conacre, from three or four outlying farms during the summer, it stresses you and your cattle. We have alluded to that in our submission. That stress is unquantifiable.

This is something that we need to take a long-term look at, over five, six or even 10 years. If we can sort it out in 10 years, it has to be a positive. I do not think I have anything more to add at the minute. If I have, I will interject.

The Chairperson: That is not a problem. Certainly, when we go in to questions, we find that in the toing and froing we can bring out more information. There is no problem with that, Michael, whatsoever.

I am sure that you are aware that the Department is going through a phase in its approach, which it calls the area eradication plan. For the last three years, and for another two years until 2014, it is going through this plan of research. However, the Department will not really tell you what will be put in place after that initial five-year plan. There does not seem to be a strategic outlook in the Department with regard to the eradication of the disease. That goes right up to the permanent secretary. He is not confident that the disease will be eradicated by 2020. What I am saying about not being strategic enough comes from a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report published in 2009.

This is a double-barrelled question to both of you: that is the way it is going to go here. How concerned are you about the lack of a strategy in the Department? That is my first general question.

Mr Sinclair: I suppose that it has been one of those things. For 60 years, we have been tackling this disease. The feeling on the ground is that we have got nowhere. We have these little waves and crests within it. The feeling of farmers on the ground is that there does not seem to be a strategy to eradicate TB; the strategy is just to maintain what we have. It is hard to get ordinary farmers to see that we are actually moving anywhere with TB.

Michael talked about the number of new outbreaks over the past six months, and no one seems to have come up with any explanation as to why that has happened. Farmers are not doing anything differently. I myself am down with TB; we are testing today. No one can explain why we have these outbreaks, and, looking to the future, there does not seem to be any move to be TB-free by a certain date. A number of years ago, I was in New Zealand, and they had a strategy that aimed to eradicate TB within five years. They should be halfway through that period now, but at least they had a strategy and a timescale.

The Chairperson: Michael, do you want to add to that?

Mr M Clarke: Not really. Maybe it is the change of personnel in the Department. This is an ongoing thing, and Ministers come and go every four or five years and heads of Departments change. Maybe it is somewhere along that line. I am not accusing anyone of falling down, but, with those changes, sometimes you do not have that continuity of approach.

It is difficult to understand TB. We had an outbreak of TB about 10 years ago and I thought that I had solved it through my own research in the locality. I blamed the badgers. There was an infected herd and the farmer told me that he had seen a badger licking out of a bucket in his byre. It was a diseased badger and they killed it, although perhaps it should have been taken for examination. From that farm, the TB moved along a watercourse and up another smaller watercourse — a burn — and it came round to us. You would have put your house on it that it was wildlife and badgers. However, I have a badger sett and I am not for killing badgers. I know that the wildlife people do not want badgers to be killed, and neither do farmers. We have had a badger sett since I can remember and we still have it. That outbreak of TB lasted for perhaps two or three years. My herd has been clear since, but we still have the badgers. Therefore, we cannot blame it all on the badgers. There is a myth — I am sure you have heard it — that badgers will put sick badgers out of setts and that it is sort of like a nomad, almost. I am not sure if that is true but it would add some credence to the theory. I will leave it at that.

Mr Wesley Aston (Ulster Farmers' Union): In December 2008, the previous Minister, Michelle Gildernew, issued a press release that outlined its strategy. At that time, the strategy had three strands: industry and government working in partnership; addressing cattle-to-cattle spread; and addressing wildlife diseases. We entered into the spirit of that strategy on the basis of *[Inaudible.]* but, yet and all, here we are several years later. We entered into the first and second strands of that strategy, but we have seen nothing on the level of disease in wildlife and the interaction that that plays. That is what frustrates us. As you know, we officially withdrew from the strategy on the basis of that lack of action. We got to the stage of being so frustrated. As Michael and our president have outlined, there is a lot of frustration among farmers. They do not want the disease and they do not want to kill badgers. Certainly, there is an issue about diseased badgers. However, we like badgers; that should be taken as a given. I will ask Colin to outline a bit more detail about that strategy.

Mr Colin Smith (Ulster Farmers' Union): The strategy was announced in December 2008. As Wesley said, two of the strands were implemented, but the third strand remains unimplemented. That is why, in our submission, we have put forward actions that need to happen to get a strategy in place — not just any strategy but an effective strategy that looks at all areas and aspects of the disease. We are asking the Minister and the Department to commit to developing a wildlife intervention programme with time-based milestones. So, you have a strategy there but you also have objectives that need to be achieved within a timescale so that we do not go on for another 60 years and, although most of us will probably not be here, come back and look at this again. It is really about setting the record straight. Unfortunately, the strategy from the previous Minister was not fully implemented and it is important to get the strategy right this time, and implement it.

The Chairperson: You have certainly answered my second question, which was with regard to the three-pronged strategy. The third question is around the testing and its accuracy. What do you know of the Queen's University studies and ideas that they have for testing? They claim to have a more accurate and cheaper test. Do you have any contact with them on that issue? Have you seen anything of that?

Mr Sinclair: At this stage we have not had contact but we will be enquiring now to see exactly where it is at because we have always called for a more accurate test. A long-term objective is to have the disease eradicated from our herds first of all, and maybe we can do that through testing. Most farmers see the third prong as the thorn in the side.

Mr M Clarke: I am not familiar with that experiment and their testing. Is that a blood test?

Mr Sean Fitzpatrick (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association): I think it is a skin test but I think it was not very accurate either. There was maybe only 75% accuracy in it, so it was not a real goer. The last Minister did go forward, and we are all very willing to work with farmers and everybody else. However, the third prong never happened, and that was disappointing because farmers think that we are working to the best of our abilities towards them, and we are, but whenever something like that turns up and the third strand never gets off the ground, it looks very bad on all our behalfs.

This disease is costing our industry and the Government an awful lot of money and is something we could all do well without. We do not want to see disease in our herds at all, if possible, or wildlife wiped out either, because wildlife is part of our countryside. We need healthy wildlife and healthy livestock as well, so we need something that will really bring those three together.

The Chairperson: Yes. Sean, you mentioned in your submission that the length of time taken to collect reactors was an additional problem for farmers.

Mr Fitzpatrick: It has been a problem because, as you know yourself, those animals have to be isolated, especially in dairy herds, where cows have to be going in and out all the time and mixed about. It is not very easy but maybe in the past year or year-and-a-half reactors are going off the farm a wee bit quicker. However, it is most important that reactors are seen to go off the farm within weeks rather than months because we reckon the longer they stay in the herd, the bigger risk it is to other animals.

Mr Sinclair: As Sean said, it was at an unacceptable level a number of years ago but it has got a lot better recently. They are down now to 10 or 11 days.

Mr Smith: I think the average is now 11.2 days. I think the target from the Department is 15 days, but I think we have it below that. Obviously, the risk of spread is reduced the quicker you can get it off the farm. Maybe there could be an improvement from that end.

The Chairperson: We are still awaiting the results of the County Down DARD study, which has not been published yet. However, what hope is there for both organisations that something good may come out of that study?

Mr Sinclair: There is a lot of speculation about how the disease is transmitted. Farmers would like concrete evidence about whether they can do anything to address it. There has been a lot of stuff about biosecurity. Two of the most biosecure herds in Northern Ireland, at Hillsborough and Greenmount, have both had outbreaks in the past year. There are a lot of questions that farmers would like answers to. If something comes out of that study that gives some sort of an answer, that will be welcomed.

Mr M Clarke: I concur with what Harry said. It is one part of the jigsaw, and if it solves that part of it, I welcome it and look forward to the results. It is amnesty-related: there will not be any repercussions for people if things do not turn out to be right or whatever. However, something like that should be done on all aspects of it. We should be doing the same with wildlife. It will be a long-drawn-out process.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome you all. Congratulations to Harry; I hope he has a very successful couple of years.

Obviously, as the Chairman has indicated, the Committee is very concerned about the lack of a target and a strategic direction by the Department. The papers that have been presented to us state that, in

35% of outbreaks, the cause has not been established. What are your thoughts or your diagnosis of that? It is quite a high figure and nobody knows what is causing it. It goes back to some of your earlier comments about the lack of research, even though this is some 60 years in the making.

Mr Sinclair: One of the questions we always ask is this: what happens after an outbreak is confirmed? Other than someone going out to look at biosecurity and putting disinfectant on the farms, that is nearly as far as it goes. The feeling that we get from farmers is that there is no interest in following it up any further. What protocol is there to look at other aspects of the problems and to find out where the infection came from?

Mrs D Kelly: Chair, if I am picking up on that correctly, you have the test done, you discover that there is bovine TB and the animal or animals are eventually taken away, but yet there is no assessment of that individual farm or farm practice, which could eliminate or reduce the risk of future occurrences. Is that correct?

Mr Sinclair: At the moment, the farmer receives a visit from veterinary staff and they look at the biosecurity and disinfection of where the animals are. However, with regard to looking into other aspects of where the disease comes from, many of our members say that no information goes back to them to let them know where the problem came from.

Mr Donal McAtamney (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association): One of the areas that we encouraged a lot of our membership in County Down was regarding what the issues were, as Dolores said. That is the bottom line. If you had a car and it broke down, you would want to know why it happened. You just do not go and change this and do that; you want the source. It goes back to what we were discussing before we came in. A number of years ago, the Government had a thing about the flu, and they had a big place over in England where they worked from post-war until about three or four years ago, and they stopped it. That is almost like the — if I can use the word — intransigence in Dundonald House now: if we cannot beat it, we will try to keep it to acceptable levels. However, there is no level acceptable with farmers for the loss through stress, the monetary value and the genetic value. There seems to be no —

Mrs D Kelly: It is a policy of containment.

Mr McAtamney: Containment and get on with it. At the end of the day, I am not saying that the Department does not have direction, but it is probably doing the best that it can do with the science that is available, but you had the other types of tests, such as blood tests. I know that, in a number of herds that went down, a very high number went down with the blood test compared with the skin test. A farmer near me did some of the tests at his farm, and it just did not make sense. The animals passed the skin test and the other ones went down with the blood test. That case study has been going on too long. Sean had pushed a lot in south Down, where he comes from. It is one of these things where the report gathers dust. If you spend the money and get the people — we felt it was getting the people to help out and to say if it was the badger setts and all the infrastructure around the farm, to go round and see all the watercourses and count down what there was that you could put it down to. I think that is what you were saying, Dolores

Mrs D Kelly: With anything, we are supposed to learn from incidents and accidents and then have risk management. There does not appear to be that follow-up strategy on a farm-by-farm basis.

Mr McAtamney: We wanted to highlight that there was that file, if you could access that. We have asked, and the union has asked a number of times, why that has not come about.

Mrs D Kelly: One would have hoped that the pilot would have informed the Programme for Government and the Budget. Surely, that would have been the rationale for doing it.

I was quite startled by the fact that five newborn calves, which had not been out at all, ended up getting TB.

Mr M Clarke: There is something about the disease that is really disturbing, because you can have a breakdown and then be clear. However, some cattle have an immunity, or build up an immunity, to the disease. So, your herd could still be infected because the cattle have been exposed. I am not saying that as a scientist, but maybe that is an explanation, because newly born calves may not have the immunity. It is the same if you have a herd and buy in livestock: the one that you buy in could take it, or you could have a clear herd and sell something and when it goes to some other herd, if it is exposed to TB it does not have the same immunity and it reacts quicker. I have had outbreaks: the cattle are all together, and you wonder why two out of 60 have contracted it. It is hard to understand. That is what we need to focus on first: understanding the disease.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest as a farmer and a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union. Most people accept that wildlife plays a part. To what level, none of us are certain. One thing I saw recently was that there is hope that there will be an oral vaccine for badgers by 2014 or 2015, which is still some time away.

I have some concerns. I was talking to a departmental vet this morning about the TB issue. As had already been said, some large herds go down, one or two reactors are taken off the farm and there is no more issue. Yet, on a neighbouring farm three miles up the road there could be 200 or 300 animals taken. So, it is very difficult to understand why it spreads so rapidly in some herds and not in others. That leads some of us to believe that there are different strains of TB, not that we are experts.

We are looking at Scotland, which has a much lower level of TB. It is classified as TB-free, because the infection level is below 0.2%. Have members of the farmers' unions in Scotland done anything different? Is it just that the area is not as condensed with cattle? Have they done anything different?

Mr Sinclair: It is a different environment they are working in with different levels and density of livestock. Northern Ireland traditionally has been a very intensive livestock area. We have very high numbers of livestock per hectare compared to any other region in the UK. We have a lot less arable land. Scotland has large areas of expanse ground as well. Unless the science is looked into, as Mike says, there is a lot of information still to be learned about disease. We could easily say that we have much higher numbers of badgers in Northern Ireland than Scotland has, but again that is not scientific.

Mr Fitzpatrick: Right enough, we have a lot more fragmented herds than Scotland has. As well as that, our movement of cattle is a lot more frequent. They move maybe 10 times more because they are big herds. That may have an impact too; I do not really know. We are just different. We cannot really change our farming practices because of disease. That would be impossible really.

Mr Smith: We are the only region in the UK that is not at least trying to look at dealing with all aspects of disease, including wildlife. ROI has a policy to deal with badgers. We are the only region that is not even looking into it. We really need to start somewhere. It is very complex, and I know that DARD staff have looked into it. One of the quotes from them was that the reality is likely to be a complex interaction of the two sources, both of which need to be addressed. We even have the Department's vets stating that in papers. It is about getting a strategy and implementing it.

Mr Irwin: I know of one herd that was closed, and they did not buy any animals. It was practically wiped out, so it looked like it was something like wildlife in that case. There were no other herds. The farmer's land is all on the lough, so he was wiped out completely.

Mr Sinclair: You would like a study done on that case to find out where it came from.

The Chairperson: You are quite right about other plans in the Republic of Ireland and GB. We will be taking a trip over to England to hear about the plans for the cull there and other aspects of biosecurity and everything else. I know that there has been a change of tack in the Welsh strategy of late. Of all the plans that are currently in action, is there one that would nearly fit Northern Ireland? If we were going down the road of talking about a cull of any description, would it need to be the whole of the Province? Would it be realistic to expect that you could do a part, a county or a peninsula, or, realistically, would we need to be talking about doing it Province-wide?

Mr Sinclair: To put it in perspective, Northern Ireland is smaller than one county in England. The lesson was learned. They did a trial cull in part of England at one stage. They found that the badgers dispersed, and there were certain areas that they did not go to. You talk about plans that are operating, but the South of Ireland is the only place that actually has one in operation. The rest are all at the planning stage. The evidence is that the areas in the South of Ireland that have addressed the wildlife have seen a big reduction in TB. In Northern Ireland, it is about getting some sort of a land-bound area to do a trial. It has to be land-bound, otherwise you need to treat the whole of Northern Ireland as one region.

Mr Aston: Ultimately, the issue is that, as the president said, Northern Ireland is a very small region. It is about getting a land-bound area. Going back to my earlier point, it is important to stress that we would love to find a way in which we could identify diseased badgers and indeed healthy badgers. It is a slightly different thing that they are talking about across the water and in the South. It is not about eradicating badgers. It is about eradicating disease that affects both cattle and badgers. If some sort of system could be developed, even on a pilot basis initially, it would at least give us, as farmers, an indication that something serious was being done. Once we saw how that went, we could then look at rolling it out across Northern Ireland as a whole. That would be a more pragmatic approach to the whole thing.

Mr M Clarke: I concur with Wesley. As I said before, we should do it on a pilot basis. If we put it out there that we were thinking of culling all badgers, you would have people outside here with placards. I just do not think that it is going to happen. What happens if we do that and we still have TB? Where are we then? We will be sitting with egg on our face. I certainly do not want badgers to be eradicated. If possible, we should eradicate the diseased ones. We could even deal with the badgers at a particular hotspot and have a cull in that area. If we can prove a point, at least we will have something to go on.

Mr Sinclair: It is about wildlife, and badgers are only one part of the equation.

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Sinclair: We have to keep in mind that it is not a one-species problem. TB has to be addressed as a whole package, no matter where it occurs.

The Chairperson: I understand that.

Mr McAtamney: William Irwin said that we are more intensive. The World Health Organization (WHO) has shown that TB is on the rise, especially in mainland UK. It has intensified in some cities, and there could be a link there, when you see TB in humans. We are groping in the dark, in a way, and we do not know the answers. The answers could be there, and they could be very simple.

Mr Smith: To date, there has been a TB working group. We walked away from that group because we felt that it failed to address the wildlife issue. We have recommended that a group should operate with the sole aim of looking at all the other programmes that we could make use of, as you mentioned. Of course, there will be aspects that we can use, and you will get that information when you go to England. However, it will be important to take all those aspects into consideration and have a group that will work everything out and see how it fits for Northern Ireland. Then, as Wesley said, it can be rolled out nationally.

Mr Swann: Thank you for your presentation, gentlemen. Again, I congratulate Harry on his appointment as UFU president and Colin on his reappointment as vice-president of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU).

We had a presentation from Queen's University last week. One of its projects involved testing badger droppings. That was one of the avenues that they were going down in order to identify, as Wesley mentioned earlier, infected badger setts so that targeted culls could take place.

I want to talk about the different models that are used in other jurisdictions. In the four-areas trial in the South, badger culls succeeded in reducing incidences of TB by up to 60%. There is evidence there that culling can be used if it is used right.

A total of £4 million has been assigned for research studies into TB, and I see that the union is very much saying no and that the study should not be about reinventing the wheel. Where is that £4 million best spent, in your opinion?

Mr Sinclair: When you look at what we have done, the strategy has to be formed before we can decide where the research is done. We need to look objectively at how we get to that endgame and at what the missing pieces are. Without working up a strategy, it is difficult to pinpoint individual items that need to be researched. The number one priority is to get the strategy sorted out, after which we can pick out the relevant bits.

We have to work out how cleans farms get TB and what needs to be done. The work has already been done on the different strains of TB in Northern Ireland. Even when cattle move, the strain seems to stay in the same area. A lot of work has already been done, so it is about taking that forward, sorting out the strategy and making the research suit the strategy.

Mr M Clarke: I thank the member for his question. I agree more or less with what Harry said. I would like to see us concentrate on the research into the disease. We need to trace where it has come from, if a herd goes down, rather than just look for compensation.

At one time, there was an ad hoc programme through which you could send a dead badger in. I did that myself, but I never heard anything back. That should be re-established. We are not killing the badgers; they are being killed accidentally on the roads. If there were a lab facility that could log the locations of those badgers and carry out post-mortems on them, that might give us some information. Plenty of them are killed on the roads. That might give you some wee idea.

Mr Swann: That scheme is ongoing, because we got stats on it last week. You can put in roadkill badgers. One thing to consider is whether it is healthy badgers or sick badgers that are being killed on the roads. You might get a skewed incidence.

Ms Boyle: Thank you both for your presentations. My question is similar to Robin's. On the wildlife intervention programme, what recent engagement have you had with DARD, and what do you envisage the programme entailing?

Mr Sinclair: As was mentioned a number of times, the previous Minister followed the three-tier approach. We feel that agriculture on the ground did a lot of work on the first two, with the third tier being wildlife. We have made the recommendation that a stakeholder group should be formed to look specifically at that point. That has been our communication with DARD since we withdrew from the stakeholder group. We feel strongly that wildlife is the issue on which there has been the biggest lack of research. A lot of work has been done on the farm side. There are some figures that show that 20% of badgers are TB carriers. That has come out in DARD figures in the past as well. With that level of disease in any species, the species could eradicate itself. The last thing that we want is to let things get to that level. We would rather have a healthy wildlife population.

Mr Buchanan: I agree that the sooner that the Department has a strategy in place to try to tackle bTB, the better. Do you feel that it is possible to eradicate TB from Northern Ireland totally? Furthermore, what is your view on vaccination of cattle?

Mr Sinclair: I mentioned the vaccination of cattle earlier. At present, there is EU legislation that means that vaccinating cattle would deem more cattle ineligible for export. Northern Ireland exports such a high percentage of its food products, so the last thing that we want is to put an onus on our cattle population.

Mr Buchanan: If that ban were lifted, what would be your view then on the vaccination of cattle?

Mr Sinclair: Provided that there is an end strategy — there is no point going into a vaccination programme without there being some plan at the end of it. The long-term objective is to eradicate the disease in both cattle and wildlife. If we were to start vaccinating cattle, we would not be doing anything to address the better good of the wildlife population as well.

Mr Fitzpatrick: What Harry says is right. There is really no point in getting into a more costly way of doing things. Vaccination would be very costly, and it could hurt our exports to other countries. As Harry has already said, New Zealand wiped out bovine TB in five years by tackling its wildlife problem. There, it was not badgers but possums. New Zealand did it very quietly and discreetly by poisoning the possums, and there was not a big public issue made about it.

Mr Sinclair: New Zealand convinced tourists that it was a great thing to buy possum bags and possum gloves, and so a market was created for them. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: Badger wraps.

Mr Fitzpatrick: That really worked for New Zealand, so I think that that is something that we should work on. Something can be eradicated without having to go to costly vaccination and without hurting our exports, because we export so much from Northern Ireland. The disease will be a hard one to eradicate, but we should all push together and try. It will be very interesting to see the outcome of the research that has already been done. When did you say it would be out, Chairman?

The Chairperson: The County Down study? A date has not been given yet.

Mr Fitzpatrick: Hopefully, there will be some information there that we can bank on. I would like to think that there will be, because a brave bit of money spent on the study, and it would be nice to have some positive advances coming out of it. We would be a step further forward on the learning curve.

Mr M Clarke: The information that I have is that the BCG vaccination can interfere with the skin test, so if you are vaccinating, you really cannot test.

Mr Fitzpatrick: The cattle would all be deemed reactors.

Mr M Clarke: We agree that there is nothing wrong with vaccination. If everyone is vaccinating, really and truly you should have the percentage down to an absolute minimum, or perhaps even 0%, but, similarly, if you are vaccinating, you cannot really test for bTB. Perhaps you should not have to test, but that is another arm of the octopus that we need to attack.

Mr McMullan: Thank you for your presentation. You say that, on the whole, no research is being done, but I do not think that you are being told what has been done. Research is being done by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). We had a presentation from its representatives last week. Research is being done at Queen's University as well.

To go back to the third strand of the approach as promised under the previous Minister, that has been answered in a way through a lot of that research. For example, Queen's is totally against the culling of badgers. AFBI said that a cull would have little or no effect on the eradication of TB. A very interesting point came out that goes back to what you were saying, Michael, about the strains and the need for more research. You are right. It was stated last week that there are strains of TB that are common to different parts of the country.

One issue that is being examined concerns the breeds of cattle, and whether the breed is part of the problem. That research is ongoing. That is the kind of thing that you say needs to be started, but it is in there. It might not be up to the level that you want, but there are cost implications. The point was made last week that it would cost a lot of money. There is a lot of talk about biosecurity, and that plays its part, but there are also issues around feed bins, nose-to-nose contact, animals being kept in-house in the wintertime, and so on. The point was made last week that the problem will not be solved overnight.

Mrs D Kelly: Can I clarify a point, Chairperson? Does it cost £20 million a year not to tackle bovine TB?

Mr Fitzpatrick: I beg your pardon?

Mrs D Kelly: You mention the cost of research, but the cost of not tackling the problem is £20 million a year.

Mr McMullan: In fairness, I was coming to that, if you had waited until I was finished. There is the cost of tackling and not tackling bovine TB, as you quite rightly put it, but we cannot blame the Department all the time. We have to work together, but the information that came out last week was totally new from what any of us had been told about TB before, and I think that the Committee was in agreement over that. The different organisations should be given sight of the reports that we had last week.

The Chairperson: Once we finish our inquiry —

Mrs D Kelly: Perhaps his colleague might do that.

Mr McMullan: That might answer some of the questions, although not all of them. I thought that the talk about research into different breeds of cattle and different strains of TB was very interesting. We have up to five or six different strains of TB here. I had always thought that there was only one. The closeness of TB in animals and TB in humans is another thing that came out of the research. We are down the line of getting it, but I do not know what the answer would be as to what kind of programme you put together. However, we are further on than you said.

Mr McAtamney: I said earlier that TB in humans is on the rise in inner cities. That goes back to the point that when western Europeans settled in the Americas, their diseases nearly wiped out the indigenous population.

Mr McMullan: Another quick point, Chairperson, if I can —

The Chairperson: Make it a question if you can, Oliver, rather than a point.

Mr McMullan: When culls were carried out in England, the percentage of cases of TB went down in cull areas by around 20%, but the incidence of TB went up 27% in areas adjacent to the cull. That in itself tells you a story. I do not know what you take out of that, but —

Mr T Clarke: It means that they did not cull them all.

Mr McMullan: That leads on to another point: the protected status of the badger. The badger should not be a protected species, because, at present, it is reckoned that there are between 30,000 and 40,000 of them. There is an argument —

Mrs D Kelly: Is that Sinn Féin policy?

Mr McMullan: — over the protected status of the badger. You have it all there.

Mr T Clarke: You should table a motion on that.

Mr Aston: If there is research out there that indicates that we are further on than we think that we are, bring it on, because we would love to see it. The other issue is that other member states, other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland have exactly the same science and have been looking at these things for years and years. Everything is always five years away. I have been with the Ulster Farmers' Union for 20 years, and, when I started, a solution was five years away. Other member states are doing things. They have to do things differently as well. We cannot sit back and wait for this to happen, because, as Dolores rightly pointed out, the cost of not doing something is in excess of £20

million a year, and that is direct cost, never mind all the associated hassle. With the economic downturn and the difficulties at the minute, every penny is important.

The Chairperson: No other members wish to ask a question. I have two questions about issues that have not been addressed yet, one of which concerns biosecurity on farms. You touched on it a bit, Harry. Could DARD do more to incentivise biosecurity, such as wrapping it up in a farm modernisation scheme, or something of that nature, so that there are benefits or grants to incentivise farmers to bring in more security measures, such as bars or gates, to prevent wildlife from getting into barns and the like?

Mr Sinclair: There is always a bit of movement that can be done, but think about the structure of Northern Ireland farms: basically, our farms are small. We are fragmented, and we have a lot of conacre in our system. There are 120 million metres of hedge in Northern Ireland, so imagine the biosecurity required. There is so much that you can do, but there is a limit with livestock biosecurity. As you said, education is perhaps needed on simple biosecurity measures to keep wildlife out of buildings. Until the root of the problem — the source of the disease — is got to, no matter what you do with biosecurity, you will never address the problem.

Mr M Clarke: You make a good point. In the country at the minute, there is the environmentally sensitive areas (ESA) scheme and the countryside management scheme. The incentive is to plant hedges that are wider than six feet apart. Hopefully, there will be money in the new common agricultural policy (CAP) to roll that out. It is a step. Most people concentrate on boundaries. You put in the hedge and fence it six feet apart from your neighbour so that you do not get nose-to-nose contact. As Chairman Mao said, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. That would be an incentive on the land side of it.

A lot of buildings are in a state of disrepair. There could be something in the farm modernisation scheme to deal with that. It is not something that farmers do. Perhaps they could close doors on big cattle houses, and things like that. We would welcome that. If DARD wants to give us some money to make farms more secure, we will not say no.

The Chairperson: My final question is about government policy and DARD setting targets. The permanent secretary told us that the Department cannot produce a target for eradication. I take the points about how complicated the disease is and that we do not know everything about it, but do you think that DARD could and should set a target for reduction? Why has it not even tried to set a reduction target?

Mr Sinclair: The target should be to set milestones along the path rather than actual reduction figures, because, as has been clearly stated, there are a lot of unknowns. In our opinion, the target should be to get to a certain stage along the strategy's path. It is about how you deal with things, especially on the wildlife side. There is no guarantee that that will deliver, but it has to lead to a reduction.

Mr McMullan: Do you think that there should be compulsory biosecurity systems on farms? We have talked about other countries such as New Zealand, Australia and America. In America, some measures have been made compulsory. Should we be going down the same road?

Mr Sinclair: I go back to the point that the two farms in Northern Ireland with the most biosecurity had outbreaks of TB this year. Therefore, biosecurity is not the whole answer. It is part of the answer, but it is definitely not the whole answer. I would hate to see our farmers become bogged down in regulation and cost, and have that not even deliver benefits.

Mr Aston: Mickey talked about taking certain biosecurity measures to protect feed piles for cattle. However, what biosecurity measures would you take to protect fields from badgers?

Mr McMullan: We are talking about the whole issue of biosecurity. That issue has to be broken down as well. What you are after saying is relevant. However, the other example that we keep using is the Scottish model, which slowed down incidence of TB. How did Scotland do that?

Mr Aston: Its cattle did not have it in the first place.

Mr Swann: You could use the Isle of Man model. There is no TB on the Isle of Man, but there are no badgers either.

Mr M Clarke: With all respect, Oliver, it is a different scenario. To my knowledge, Scotland has wide-open, sparse land, whereas we have strips of land, which are two fields or 50 yards wide, stretching from a river to a mountain. I certainly would not want biosecurity measures made compulsory, because that would be unenforceable. As was said before, I do not think that it would have that big an effect. I know from experience — my cattle were not in contact any other cattle — that cattle can still get TB. Therefore, it would just heap more expense on farmers, and you would not endear yourselves to them.

Mr Sinclair: To return to the point about biosecurity for wildlife, the last thing that we as farmers want is to exclude wildlife. We would rather see healthy wildlife on our land.

Mr Smith: What the Department said about targets is unfortunate. I do not believe that any project should start without a target, be it long, medium or short term. The medium- to long-term target should be eradication. You cannot start a project on something such as TB, which we have had for 60 years, and not have an eradication policy. I really believe that targets and timescales should be set.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much, gentlemen.