



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Bovine TB Review: Farmers for Action

15 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
Mrs Joanne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Mr Sean McAuley	Farmers for Action
Mr William Taylor	Farmers for Action

The Chairperson: I welcome William Taylor and Sean McAuley from Farmers for Action. Gentlemen, you are very welcome to the Committee to give evidence to this very important inquiry. The Committee feels very strongly about bovine tuberculosis (bTB). We commissioned the inquiry to look at the ins and outs of the disease and at what the Department is doing.

You will have a briefing to present to the Committee. I ask you to be as brief and succinct as possible, and you will take questions from Committee members after that. Without further ado, please proceed.

Mr William Taylor (Farmers for Action): Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to ask for the help of all the political parties on bovine tuberculosis. Initially, we want to reiterate the position that Northern Ireland is in and discuss where it is heading. We feel that indecision to date and a failure to deal with the wildlife issue has caused a big problem.

The best thing to do is to start with what is going on in western England and into Wales. In our submission, we included a link to a story about a woman who has contracted bovine TB. If any of you have not seen the story, we can pass copies of it around.

The Chairperson: I think that we have it.

Mr Taylor: We also highlighted the very good job that 'Countryfile' presenter Adam Henson has done in highlighting that the disease has moved into rare cattle breeds.

Bovine TB in western England is completely out of control. It has jumped from cattle to sheep, to goats, to llamas, to alpacas and very much to deer. Worst of all, it has also jumped to humans. We were under the illusion that only three people had contracted bovine TB, but the statistics show that 35 people contracted it in 2009. We are here to tell the Committee that Northern Ireland has slipped as far as it can afford to slip before the disease gets out of control. If England were to implement a badger cull of infected badgers overnight and were to sort out the badger problem, it would still have to deal with all the infected deer. Indeed, our chairman, David Handley, asked me to tell you that he knows many deer stalkers who work on government land and forests in England, who tell him that almost 75% of deer are infected with bovine TB.

The Chairperson: Sorry, can you tell us the specific area in England where that is the case?

Mr Taylor: I can come back to you with the details, Paul. That is not a problem.

We are concerned, because bovine TB has jumped to deer in Northern Ireland. As you probably all know, one of your MLAs recently had to cull his deer herd to remove tuberculosis (TB), and he blamed a rogue deer. Sitting behind me is Derek Torrens, who, for the first time, has bovine TB on his farm. I should say that it is actually an inconclusive result. However, the affected animal has now been valued to go for slaughter, and we will not know conclusively until it is slaughtered. Derek's farm is close to a forest at Ballybogey near Portrush, and, in recent times, he has had two or three deer on his land. The connection is that his affected animal was part of the young stock that was outside. Derek also has badgers on his land that do not have TB and have not given his farm any trouble for decades.

We are here today to ask everybody to come together on the TB issue. That should be done from a cost point of view and a practical, common-sense point of view, but, more so, to put an end to the risk that Northern Ireland is facing of this moving into humans, and all the suffering that goes with that. I have been reading that a lot of eminent people have been before the Committee to explain to you how complex the disease is. It is OK until it comes to your door. Then it is a different story.

The idea is that all the MLAs pull together and agree on a cull of infected badgers as the first move to eradicating bTB. However, even if that is done immediately, we must bear in mind that we are still left with the deer problem to deal with. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) information on the TB situation, which is sent to Brussels once a year, states:

"DARD recognises that the involvement of wildlife, mainly badgers, must be addressed if eradication is to be achieved".

I think that that statement from, I think, 2010 says it all.

The Chairperson: What is the context of that statement? What document is it from?

Mr Taylor: It is one that Brian Walker did. I think that he submitted it to you.

The Chairperson: Did he do that as part of this inquiry?

Mr Taylor: No. He stated that DARD has an obligation to produce an annual report on the eradication of TB for the European Commission. Are you familiar with that? Do you want me to carry on?

The Chairperson: That is what DARD has submitted to the European Commission?

Mr Taylor: Yes. It refers in detail to a report approved for 2010 by Commission decision 2009/883/EC, and we invite all who study that response to read the document closely. That is where that comes from.

You wanted us to keep our presentation short and to the point. You have the gist of everything that we have been putting to you and trying to make clear. This is the time for the politicians in Northern Ireland to stand tall and protect Northern Ireland and the image that it is trying to create for food exports. We see the efforts that are being made to try to project the fact that agriculture is going to be Northern Ireland's saving grace, but, in the countryside, farmers cannot do that with one arm tied behind their back. The risks involved in letting the TB situation slip further out of control must be considered, and the fact that it has moved into the deer species is of real concern.

Mr Sean McAuley (Farmers for Action): You may be aware that Professor Chris Pollock was appointed by the Welsh Government as acting Chief Scientist in Wales. He pulled out because of the Welsh Government's decision to go down the road of vaccination rather than a badger cull, which they had initially indicated that they would do. He points out the various constraints that there are with vaccination and the fact that animals remain infected, even after they have been vaccinated. There are other leading people in other jurisdictions who are not happy with the whole thing.

The Chairperson: I have a number of questions, and then I will open it up to members. You have come out very strongly in favour of a cull. Some would say that the research on culling and, obviously, experience in England shows that it disperses the badger population and spreads the disease to some areas around the testing area. How would you respond to that? You mentioned other wildlife issues and the other types of animals that are now contracting the disease. Is culling the only way in which TB will be eradicated? I think that I heard you right. Did you say that it is not the full solution but part of the solution that has to be commenced?

Mr Taylor: That is correct. We take your point about the English cull. However, it must be borne in mind that it was targeted at one particular area. We should make it clear that we want to see a full Northern Ireland cull, not an experiment. If you are doing a full Northern Ireland cull, you should not get any of the peripheral problems that arise. The problem with the English cull was that it was an experiment and not a full-blown cull. The professional people know how to handle badgers and extract those that we are looking for. DARD has that information and knows the hotspots and where to go to get the job done. It would probably require one cull followed by a second, minor cull to mop up anything that was missed. It may not be completed the first time around, but it would be an awful step forward.

How can those who support the badgers sit back and watch animals suffer? We in the farming community have done our bit to try to stop our cattle suffering. We have co-operated with DARD and done everything that we have been asked to do. We have jumped through hoops to ensure that we do our best to prevent the cattle from suffering. However, it is also not in the farmer's nature to leave wildlife suffering. We cannot see how the badger people can object to putting animals out of their misery.

Mr McAuley: I do not know whether any of you saw 'Countryfile' on Sunday night, which showed a farmer in England who has worked for over 30 years to build up a special herd of long-horned cattle. Adam on 'Countryfile' had to walk away because the herd was being slaughtered as the result of TB. What William said is right: it is not fair on the badger population either to have those infected animals throughout the country.

The Chairperson: Has your organisation looked at whether a suitable vaccination is available and whether it is, in your eyes, practicable?

Mr Taylor: Our chairman said that vaccination is all good and well-intentioned. It is OK to go out and vaccinate cattle, because DARD has a databank with tag numbers and everything. You can start a vaccination scheme for Northern Ireland for the cattle side, and you can start and finish it if the finance is there to do it, and if it is deemed to be wise to do so. However, how are you going to achieve that on the badger side? You have a number of problems. First, if you do not go ahead with a cull, you will be trying to determine between badgers that are infected and those that are not, and you will have to vaccinate them all. You are still left with the problem of the animals with TB, for which the vaccination serves no purpose. You would have to carry out the vaccination successfully so that every badger were done, and, without a cull, we think that vaccination would be meaningless.

Mr McAuley: The sheet of paper that I just handed to the Committee shows the thinking of the professor in Wales. He did not believe that vaccination was the answer to the problem because infected animals could still be there even after they had been vaccinated.

The Chairperson: We will get that copied for members now.

We have heard from experts who say that TB is a very complex disease and that there are many strains, even in our small Province. They can pop up anywhere and everywhere, and sometimes that in itself is a mystery. Sometimes the testing is not all that accurate, and sometimes the disease can stay in an animal without that showing up through testing. When you look at all the complications around the disease, how much weight are you attaching to transmission from wildlife?

Mr Taylor: First, the Isle of Man does not have any badgers, and it has no TB. The only example in its history that it can point to was in the north of the island where there was a minor incident of avian TB — the bird type — and that was as a result of a skirmish with one animal, and that was it. Secondly, Scotland and the north of England have badgers, but they have no TB problems, other than something imported, which has perhaps dragged those areas into something. Obviously, Scotland's badgers are without TB.

The Chairperson: What do you put Scotland's success down to? A lot of people would say that it is to do with topography, geography and the sparse areas in which cattle roam.

Mr Taylor: Probably the main factor that has been a help to Scotland is the fact that testing on farms all around Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales identified where the TB areas are and stopped those cattle moving northwards. Apart from that, Scotland has been really lucky to get off as lightly as it has. The disease has not spread through the badger population and has not reached there yet. For all that we know, all of that may be in front of Scotland if things do not happen.

The Chairperson: Finally, how much more can the farming community and industry do on biosecurity? Could farmers be incentivised by wrapping biosecurity up in a farm modernisation scheme or something of that nature so that you help them to go through with the changes? That would go some way to preventing or eradicating the disease on farms.

Mr Taylor: You have to bear in mind that, until a cull of infected badgers takes place, the farmer is really working with one arm tied behind his back. He is doing his best. The only thing that has come to light is that if there is a problem, it is when a reactor animal is identified, as, in many instances, it stays too long on the farm before it is removed by DARD. That is not a good thing. With any disease, swift action brings things to an end. The English situation says it all: it has taken no action, and look where it is.

Mr McAuley: Sometimes, our own Department leaves a lot to be desired. Obviously, we are not at liberty today to go into how it is handling various aspects. As William rightly pointed out, animals are being left on farms. The big problem is that we seem to be testing and testing yet going nowhere. We are scared that, sooner rather than later, the farmer on the ground will be asked to pay for testing. Any of you who are farmers will know that, at the minute, the last thing that you need is another cost appearing on the farm. It has been hinted at by various people in government that, eventually, it will stop the payment. By all means, if we see something moving in the right direction, there is not a problem. However, we have been at this for long enough now. In many ways, the Department's response, from our point of view, leaves a lot to be desired.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you very much for your presentation. We seem to see research followed by research on the issue, with little focus from DARD on producing an effective eradication strategy. What is your opinion on the research that DARD has carried out? Do you believe that tackling TB has become over-complex because of that research?

Mr Taylor: Can we call a spade a spade?

Mrs Dobson: I think that you have already. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Taylor: When we read the research, it is not hard to see who is coming at it from a genuine perspective and who is not. The professor in Wales resigned over the head of what he saw as a common-sense issue. He knows what the problem is and how it should be dealt with. It is what he went to veterinary college to learn about. That is where he got his education. Brussels is telling us that we have to eradicate the disease, and a badger cull will be part of making that happen.

There are those who say they are experts who come at it from another angle and stall progress, as they have been with DEFRA in England. I think that they have been winding up successive Governments in England to keep the stories in that vein because of the votes issue. At the end of the day, it is not hard to separate the wheat from the chaff in the reports that have been done. I am afraid that those who do not favour a badger cull have ulterior motives.

Mrs Dobson: There is no point in asking you, if you were the Agriculture Minister tomorrow, what you would do, because I think that I already know what your answer would be.

Mr Taylor: That is why we want all MLAs from all parties to get behind us. That is the only way that we see of getting progress on this issue. Northern Ireland is unique in not having any opposition parties in Stormont; everybody who came into government agreed to try to make it work. You guys could do a lot to show England and Wales the way forward, and the results would speak for themselves in a year or two, provided you guys pull together and put a badger cull into operation as a first step.

Mrs Dobson: Do you believe — as we on the Committee do and the Audit Office has urged — that DARD should set a target Northern Ireland to become TB free and work towards that target?

Mr Taylor: The answer to that is really to think where you will be if you do not do something. We would like to go on record that we would come back in 12 months and say, "We told you so; there's the statistics". We will come back the following year and say, "We did tell that it will jump species again". We are on a slippery slope here, and it is time for politicians to step up. You know where we are coming from. If all you guys would agree to pull together on this issue, nobody will lose votes. You have a strong hand to play with badger supporters: all you have got to do is turn to them and say, "Are you happy to see animals suffering? Because we are not". You have got to take the lead as professional politicians.

Mrs Dobson: Do you agree that private vets are dealing with the consequences of DARD's failure to get to grips with TB, and that farmers are left to deal with it? Do you lay responsibility for that with DARD?

Mr McAuley: The private vets are doing their job on farms. They are having to test cattle. Many farms are being subjected, as mine was at the end of March, to an unnecessary TB test because of an animal that was sold. Even though I completed a clear TB test a month after an animal left the herd, DARD's rules and regulations meant that my animals had to be tested again. I was 99% sure that the test would be clear, and it was. You said something about DARD meeting targets: we have no confidence in DARD meeting any targets, because it does not seem capable of meeting targets.

Mrs Dobson: I declare an interest as a farmer, and I know exactly what you mean about continuous testing. DARD often ignores suggestions from private vets that would reduce expensive overlaps between them and DARD, such as using lay testers. Do you feel that DARD should work more closely with private vets to deliver cost savings to the industry and, ultimately, to the taxpayer?

Mr Taylor: We would much prefer the implementation the badger cull, which would solve the whole lot of the issues.

Mr McAuley: Let us get to grips with the problem here. We keep talking about a cull and vaccination, but nothing happens. The thing continues. We have spoken about a lady who caught TB. People across the water have caught TB. How long will it be before some farmer or someone working with livestock here catches it? That scenario is even worse than TB being in the animals.

Mrs D Kelly: Thanks for your presentation. To follow on from some of Jo-Anne's points, do you think that the Department is committed to eradicating this disease? You obviously have very severe doubts about that. If the Department is not committed, why not?

Mr Taylor: This all goes back to farming, with very few exceptions, being in financial crisis. The truth is that the veterinary profession is awfully glad of the TB money that keeps them in business. In fairness, if we remove that money, how will we keep vets in business in the countryside? It is obvious that farmers cannot afford to pay them what is needed to sustain the large animal veterinary practices. To answer your question, Dolores, that influence coming through from DARD from the veterinary side concerns us. That is not spoken about. We are here today to speak, and that is exactly what we are doing. We are using parliamentary privilege, shall we say, to try to tell the truth, if that is possible. However, you asked us the question and I hope I have answered it. Maybe I have not.

Mrs D Kelly: I want to share with you a response I just received to a question I tabled to the Minister in relation to the cost of compensation payments for bovine TB infection in the 2011-12 financial year. I have been told that £12.9 million was the total compensation payment for animals removed for the control of bovine tuberculosis infection in that financial year. I want to ask the Department — I hope the Committee will support me in this — to provide a full and detailed breakdown of how those costs

were incurred and to whom payments were made. The way the answer reads suggests that the £12.9 million was paid exclusively to farmers.

Mr Taylor: I was just going to say that to you. I think that is what that refers to, so the cost of paying private vets and whoever else to do the testing, etc, is another story that you have not received just yet.

Mr McAuley: Dolores, the document 'Reply to secondary DARD consultation on compensation for TB/Brucellosis' states:

"DARD recognises that the involvement of wildlife, mainly badgers must be addressed if eradication is to be achieved."

We then have to ask why DARD is not implementing that. That is why we are so negative on DARD because we are not seeing any positive results coming from the Department.

Mrs D Kelly: I hope that you will be reassured that this Committee has prioritised the bovine TB inquiry because we are not convinced that the Department, in not setting itself targets, is committed to the eradication of the disease.

Mr Irwin: Thank you for your presentation. I declare an interest, being a farmer myself, and I am only too aware of the problem of TB. There is absolutely no doubt that badgers and wildlife are a major part of the problem. I know we have statistics from the Department that say, I think, only 16% of infection comes from badgers. In my eyes, that may be initially the case. Once an animal is infected, however, the disease then transfers to other animals.

I got a phone call only this morning from a man in Northern Ireland, although not in my constituency, who had a major breakdown. He had not bought any animals in a good number of years except from one herd, which is still TB free. He ensures that that is the case and that is why he buys them in. In one herd, he lost 96, with another 181 down this week. He has a forestry area behind him and it looks as though wildlife exclusively is causing the problem.

The Department, a number of years ago, promised that a wildlife survey would be done. To my knowledge, that was never done. Do you not believe that the Department has dragged its heels on that and that a wildlife survey should have been done, especially in instances where large numbers of animals have gone down and there is forestry behind them? It seems almost criminal on the part of the Department that it is not investigating that much more deeply. Do you agree?

Mr McAuley: William, I will comment on that and give another example. As I mentioned to William earlier today, I have two neighbours who, within the past five or six years, built two new houses. In both cases, planning permission was granted but when the sites were inspected, work was halted because there were badger setts and they were disturbing the badgers. It cost both gentlemen in excess of £500 to employ staff to come from Queen's University to issue a piece of paper to say the badgers were OK. They could then continue building their houses. Obviously, the badgers were being well looked after.

By the same token, the badgers regularly cross the road by one of the houses and you regularly see dead badgers lying on the road. No provision is made for the badger crossing the road, which was one of the points one of those gentlemen made to me. He said that he regularly went down to the end of the lane and there was a dead badger on the road. Nobody was worried about the badgers crossing the road, where a pipe, for example, could have been put under the road. Yet and with all, he said that simply because he was building a house and driving past a badger sett on a regular basis, it cost him a lot of money. He is a farmer, and his other words were: "I wish the Department was as concerned about the problem we have with TB and badgers as they were about the badger sett that was sitting beside my house."

Mr Irwin: I think many farmers feel that those who are highly involved with wildlife do not seem to have any problems with good animals being slaughtered but they have a problem with infected badgers being killed. This seems crazy to farmers.

Mr Taylor: William, I take it that you are referring to deer as the problem with the farmer who you mentioned.

Mr Irwin: Deer may be a problem there, too.

Mr Taylor: What we find hard to accept is that Northern Ireland is free of snakes and of X, Y and Z animals. How did we get to a situation where we have deer roaming free in Northern Ireland without DARD doing something about it years ago? I am sure that most here can remember a time when there were no deer in Northern Ireland that were not in captivity. So that has been allowed to slip, and we are starting to reap the consequences. DARD needs to explain how deer came to be running about. We have our own answers to some of these things: people have been very careless to let deer out in the first place. However, DARD needs to explain how it allowed that to happen. As you point out, William, DARD needs to get to grips with the deer issue and get something done about it.

Mr Buchanan: I agree with you folk that the Department has really dragged its heels on this. It has not brought forward a strategy or a way to deal with or tackle it. It should have done so. Therefore, DARD is at fault and, weighed in the balance, it is found wanting on this particular issue. There is no getting away from it.

However, you talk of a cull of badgers right across Northern Ireland: in other words to get rid of the badgers completely.

Mr Taylor: No. Sorry. We referred to infected badgers. We were careful to use that word.

Mr Buchanan: If we look at the figures, we find that badgers are responsible for 16% of the TB in cattle. If we do that cull completely, we will still have a large percentage of cattle that is liable to be infected by TB.

Mr Taylor: William Irwin pointed out correctly that we should try to reach a day when all the cattle of Northern Ireland are free of TB, if it is achievable. Say we kept all the cattle in Northern Ireland inside for 12 months and eventually got all the herds clean. It is always very noticeable when the cattle are inside in the wintertime, then, all of a sudden, there are clean tests in the spring. However, the minute they go out to grass, things start to go belly up. We could have all the cattle of Northern Ireland clear-tested because we kept them in for 12 months, in houses where badgers do not have access to contaminate them to the same extent, but if we then put them out to grass again and we still had infected badgers, we would be back to square one. We have to take this by the scruff of the neck, and deal with the cause of the problem.

Mr Buchanan: I absolutely agree with you, but I heard an example the other day of a farmer who had cattle in and four new calves were born. They had never been out, but when they were tested, they were infected with TB. Obviously, there is something else causing this as well.

Mr Taylor: I should point out that there are badgers which come in to feed in the same place as livestock. We are talking about isolation, if we are to achieve what I was trying to explain. In certain instances, badgers come in and feed, so it is not impossible that that is what has happened.

The Chairperson: In answer to Tom's question, you said that you would cull only diseased badgers, as opposed to conducting a complete cull. Has your organisation any idea of how that can be achieved? Obviously, there will have to be trapping, testing and everything else that goes along with it. It will not be done through free shooting.

Mr Taylor: No. We are not advocating that. We are saying that it should be done as it was done with brucellosis; where one animal is down, you slaughter the herd because it is such a deadly disease. DARD obviously knows where the hotspots are, where TB recurs again and again. We have to go into those areas and take out the badgers in the vicinity. We do not have a choice. Bear in mind that badger numbers in Northern Ireland are not way down at the levels they used to be; they have increased significantly. So, you are going to have to have a cull of infected badgers. What we mean by that is a cull of badgers in the hotspot areas. A second cull to mop-up what you have missed would be inevitable.

The Chairperson: Do you have a fear that using that method would disperse the badger population to other areas, which would then spread the disease in the badger community? How would you get around that? We talked about a Northern Ireland Province-wide cull of infected badgers. What are

the practicalities of culling diseased badgers only while preventing the dispersal of the badger population to other areas?

Mr Taylor: I understand where you are coming from. The English experience has highlighted an issue that arises when you just target one cull area. Remember, if you have cull areas back to back in certain hotspot areas, you will automatically be creating a shield around them. That is why I said that there will probably be a need for a second cull. Anything that happens to escape to the periphery may cause you a problem at a later date.

There is argument about badgers moving and escaping because of the upset that happens when the culling takes place, but with a wee bit of professionalism a lot of that could be avoided. Do it professionally, and do not let us hear talk of farmers being involved in this. The job of a farmer is farming: we want to see professional people carrying this out. That has to be made very clear and be done on a methodical basis with the DARD evidence of where the areas are and what needs to be done.

The Chairperson: You raise a very good point about the use of experts. However, it is very clear that what is being proposed in England is farmer led. Do you endorse that way forward?

Mr Taylor: No, absolutely not. That will not work in England, and it would not work here. Farmers do not have the time to do it properly. Farmers doing something on an ad hoc basis when they get a bit of time is not the way a professional cull will work. We saw what happened initially with foot-and-mouth disease. Tony Blair really did not know how to handle such a catastrophe, and it was not until the army guy they called in took charge that the situation started to move forward. This is a job for the professionals.

Mr McAuley: The other aspect is that if we want the statistics and figures of what we are going to gain from the exercise to stand up, doing it willy-nilly will not prove anything. This has to be done properly. The issue is too important and too big to the industry to not be dealt with properly. We cannot keep on, and DARD cannot keep on, saying, "We will look at this, we will look at that and we will look at the other thing", and not seeming to get anywhere.

Mr McMullan: Thanks for your presentation. Would you say that the English model was wrong?

Mr Taylor: Do you mean the cull exercise that happened in England?

Mr McMullan: Yes.

Mr Taylor: Yes, I would, from the point of view that it is misleading. When you read into the results, the cull was effective in the area designated. The problem seemed to be that they did not use professional people, which led to some of the badgers escaping outside the circle. That is why the results do not stack up; it caused infection outside the cull area. However, you must appreciate that, within the cull area, it was a success. That is why we are making the point that the cull has to be done right across Northern Ireland, where it is required, to take out the infected badgers. It must be a professional cull.

Mr McMullan: You are asking for a cull right across the Six Counties?

Mr Taylor: Yes, where applicable.

Mr McAuley: In infected areas where there is high incidence of bovine TB, Oliver; not just willy-nilly throughout the countryside where people feel like it. The Department could go on one of its grandstand runs some day and decide to do something silly like that, but that is not what we are looking to do. This thing has to be done properly, because the findings have to be correct and have to stand up to scrutiny.

Mr McMullan: Whose findings on a hotspot would you believe, if it is not the Department running out about the countryside? Who would you believe if a report is put in front of you?

Mr Taylor: You must go back to what I referred to. Remember the story in the Isle of Man, where there is no badgers and no TB, and remember Scotland and the north of England, where badgers do

not have TB and, therefore, there is no TB issue with cattle. You have to keep going back to that to see why that is working, and the point that always comes back at you is that the badgers are causing the ongoing re-infection.

Mr McMullan: Badgers in Scotland are not causing it.

Mr Taylor: That is because they do not have TB.

Mr McMullan: Is that not a scientific answer?

Mr Taylor: If the badgers do not have TB, they cannot spread it.

Mr McMullan: Why do they not have TB? That is your next question.

Mr Taylor: Diseases have to start somewhere, and unless you deal with them, you will not —

Mr McMullan: I go back to my original question: who do you believe if a report was put in front of you that says that there is a hotspot in a certain place? Do you believe the reports on roadkill and all that?

Mr Taylor: We have no reason —

Mr McMullan: I am not homing in on that.

Mr Taylor: We have no reason to doubt the information that DARD has put forward. The farmers who talk to DARD say that they are in a hotspot area and that they and their neighbours have TB issues.

Mr McMullan: Would you believe the Department if it put a report in front of you that identified a hotspot?

Mr McAuley: Yes, Oliver, provided that it is carried out properly.

Mr McMullan: Could you explain that wee thing about the veterinary influence? I am a wee bit perturbed about that. What are we getting at here?

Mr Taylor: The bottom line is that there is a financial crisis in the countryside. Let us face it: the supermarkets have been screwing us over for years, and the only thing that makes money for a farmer nowadays is something that the world market is short of, which, at the minute, is grain and oil seeds, and even lamb is slipping out of that equation. So, the supermarkets can screw down on any other commodities that are virtually well supplied in Europe. They have left farmers in a position now where they avoid big veterinary bills, if they can possibly manage it. If the vets were to take the TB testing issue out, the large animal practices in the countryside could not exist; they would not have the income to be able to stay there. Therefore, we think that the veterinary profession in Northern Ireland in DARD puts the thing forward but pulls back at the same time.

Mr McMullan: What are we saying? Can we be more explicit —

Mr Taylor: I am saying that it is difficult for the vets to shoot themselves in the foot.

Mr McMullan: We seem to have a problem shooting anything here at the minute. What exactly are you saying here? Are we saying that the veterinary —

Mr Taylor: I am saying that I want Bert Houston to come out tomorrow morning and say, "Right, Agriculture Committee, we back what you want. We want this TB thing cleared up, and we want a badger cull." That is the place to start, and common sense and the scientific evidence tells us that. It is all there to back us up, and if we do not do it shortly, as William and others have pointed out, the deer issue will overtake it. Given the current evidence on the deer side, it is time that DARD started deer roadkill tests around the country to see just how widespread TB in deer is.

Mr McMullan: Would you believe a DARD report on the testing of deer?

Mr Taylor: I do not see any reason why not.

Mr McMullan: When DARD did the report on deer, it found that the study in Northern Ireland shows that incidences of TB in deer are small.

Mr Taylor: How long ago was that, Oliver?

Mr McMullan: It does not give a date here, so I take it that it is within the past year or two.

Mr Taylor: Watch the date, because, from our information, the TB in deer has only started to get out of control within the past year or two. If the report is older than that, that is concerning. However, you made the point that there is TB in deer.

Mr McMullan: They say that it is in only a small percentage, maybe 21% or 22%.

Mr McAuley: It is still there.

Mr McMullan: Fair enough.

The Chairperson: By way of information, the officials said that they had culled deer.

Mr McMullan: We have not even got round to discussing foxes, moles or anything else yet.

Mr McAuley: We do not have moles here.

Mr McMullan: Well, we have foxes here. To cut a long story short, we have listened to presentations from scientific people, and every one of them is against a cull. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) — were representatives from AFBI here?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr McMullan: AFBI is against a cull. Queen's University is against a cull.

The Chairperson: I do not think that we can say that they are all against a cull.

Mr McMullan: If you look at the reports, you will see they say that a cull is not the answer. That is another way of putting it.

Mr McAuley: So what is their solution to the problem?

Mr McMullan: Their solution is scientific. This is where it gets very confusing. We are looking for the Department to say that TB will be eradicated by a certain date.

Mr Taylor: The people you are referring to who are not in favour of a cull have had their way now for decades, and it has not worked. What we are saying is that, at the minute, the problem is very serious because, across the water, the disease is jumping species, and that has started to happen here now. So, if you as responsible MLAs want to help Northern Ireland's food exports on the way and prevent human beings from getting bovine TB, you need to start with a badger cull. Get it under control and sort it out, so that we do not have a badger in Northern Ireland with TB, and keep your eye on deer and foxes. In the meantime, we need an update on the incidence of TB in deer. If it is in rogue deer at all, it is a problem. If it is there at all, it is a problem. Remember, it is not in deer in Scotland, and Scotland has a lot of deer.

Mr McMullan: Scotland seems to have a lot of something. There is nothing and anything in Scotland, from what I can see.

Mr McAuley: The Department in Scotland works more closely with farmers on the ground than our Department. I had another dealing with it recently and referred the thing back to Scotland. However, I am not going to start on that here. I can assure you that I wish I were in Scotland. I had to take the

issue pretty far to get it resolved here. I wish I were in Scotland when I hear about the way its Department looks at things and works closely with farmers; it does not seem to work against farmers.

We need only look at the shambles our Department made of single farm payments. That carries on from year to year; it is a disgrace. We will go down the same road with this if we are not careful. This problem could ruin our agrifood sector. Bear in mind that it is the sector that everyone is now being told will lead the economy out of recession. However, it will not do so if we do not have an agrifood sector and a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development that are fit for purpose.

Mr McMullan: The last thing is what would happen if a cull were to take place. The first thing you would have is a court case. Somebody would take a court case.

Mr Taylor: Well, let us go to court and do our stuff if we have to.

Mr McMullan: Do you think that you would win that court case?

Mrs D Kelly: Chair, can we move on?

Mr Clarke: Hypothetical.

Mr McMullan: Sorry; are you getting bored down there?

The Chairperson: We are going to move on. That is hypothetical to a degree.

Mr Clarke: We are bored of you.

Mr McMullan: You need to look at yourself.

The Chairperson: Members, we are here to listen to a presentation and ask questions; not to ask questions of each other.

Mr McAuley: What would happen if we had a cull and found that badgers were infected with TB? Surely we are duty bound to act if an animal is not well. If your dog is not well at home, you take it to the vet, and if the animal cannot be cured, it is put down. We have animals with TB running through the countryside, and it is not right that that is allowed in a species that is not well. We must treat them like we would a sick animal.

Mr Taylor: May I just make one small point about the agrifood sector? Eighty per cent of our goods are exported. Only a year or two back, Holland put the brakes on calf exports from England to Holland because TB-infected calves got through the net. That is worth remembering.

Mr Swann: I am sorry that I missed your presentation. We have taken a lot of evidence on badger culls and their successes in England, Wales and Scotland, but some of the most telling evidence — I do not know whether you have seen it yet, gentlemen — comes from the four-areas trial down South, which showed that an effective badger cull reduced bovine TB by up to 60% in areas that were naturally geographically enclosed. That is the Republic of Ireland's science to show that a badger cull is a step forward. It is not a complete solution to the removal of TB, but it is something that we should definitely be considering and is something that the Department should consider carefully.

There was talk about farmers being used to cull and remove badgers. I agree with what you said, because we have heard about a farmer in England who indicated that he was willing to do that. He then was subject to attack and abuse from the pro-badger lobby, so the last thing that we want to do is put our farmers not only under the threat of TB but under the threat of physical violence.

Everyone has said that removing reactors from cattle is one of the biggest problems in the herd in Northern Ireland. I asked DARD officials about that the week before last, and they told us that they were meeting their targets and were 93% within the EU target of 30-day removal, but they had all sorts of ways of measuring that 93%. Do you have any evidence from your members about how the delay in removing reactors is causing farmers stress because they have to look for additional housing and feed to cope with the pressures that are caused there, not to mention the risk of cross-infection if their cattle are not properly segregated?

Mr Taylor: Would you like us to make some of that information available to you?

Mr Swann: Yes, even anecdotally.

Mr Taylor: Lyle Mackey, who could not be here today, made the point that he had a neighbour who was recently abused about the length of time that sick animals were left on his farm before they were taken away, so we will come back to you on that, Robin.

Mr Swann: There is another issue not directly connected with TB. This inquiry came about as a result of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) inquiry into the cost of TB. Two proposals were put in front of this Committee on farmers being compensated for the loss of animals: the first was a table valuation, which we rejected; and the second, which may be out to consultation, is a capped value. The Department seems to have it in its head that putting those economic measures in place will do away with what it classes as fraudulent claims. The Department seems to be of the opinion that a number of farmers are using TB as a money-making exercise. One of its officials who appeared before the Committee more or less stated that and was taken to task. Do you see any way forward?

Mr Taylor: Brian Walker's point on DARD and its fraud issue is that it uses the word "fraud" to cover its own weaknesses or to cover up whatever it wants covered up at times, or so it would appear. For those of you who do not know him, Brian Walker is a solicitor from Portadown, and he is also a farmer.

Mrs D Kelly: I know him all right. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Taylor: His name goes before him. Brian made the point that, if there is all this fraud, how come there are no court cases in the farming community by way of evidence? The evidence is not there to back up what DARD says about fraud. The concerning aspect is the cost of TB, and the fact is that what the farmer is trying to get for his animal is being reduced and reduced. Derek Torrens's valuation as of yesterday proves that valuation has got to the point now where it is not realistic, so the farmer is yet again trying to carry a cost in the countryside while beating his head against a brick wall to try to keep money coming in to keep his farm afloat.

More importantly, Brussels has said that having a TB eradication policy is a duty of GB and Northern Ireland. As I understand it, Brussels backs that up with 35% of the compensation money, but, the way that things are going, that will be cut. I think that that is the intention from Brussels, because it is asking for evidence to show what you are doing to eradicate it. If you are not coming up with proper answers to eradicate the disease, that is a concern.

Mr Swann: A bigger concern, William, was finding out that DARD did not begin to draw down that money until 2009. Its eradication programme was not strenuous enough to enable it to draw down the European money to help, so it has been getting it for only the past three years. Your point is very valid. The link is tenuous at the minute.

Mr Clarke: I also apologise for being late and missing your presentation. I listened to someone speaking for quite some time earlier who asked you whether you would believe scientific evidence, and you said that you would. Tests have found 21% of the deer population to have been infected. How do you judge that figure?

Mr Taylor: As I said, the deer situation is a moving target, if you will excuse the pun. It is not that many years ago since there were no deer running around Northern Ireland. A few broke out all of a sudden, and, of course, now they are breeding.

Mr Clarke: What do you think of the fact that 21% of another animal is carrying TB?

Mr Taylor: It is a disgrace.

Mr Clarke: That is what I thought you would say.

DARD has spent millions. All that we have heard during this inquiry is that millions are being spent on strategy after strategy after strategy. What have you seen delivered by those millions over the past number of years?

Mr Taylor: Nothing.

Mr Clarke: That is also what I thought you would say.

You can probably detect that I am in favour of a cull, whether that be Province-wide cull or targeted. It is easy for people to suggest that it will not work. I do not know how they can suggest that it will not work until it is attempted. We could pick any hotspot in Northern Ireland and have a targeted cull there. As we discussed two weeks ago, as far as I can see, the next time that the matter will be really debated by the Department is 2015. Dear knows how many more millions will have been spent by then. If a cull were started soon, we could have a measurement by 2015 of whether it works. I do not know whether you share my viewpoint, but the problem that I see with the strategy is that, by 2015, all that we will have is another viewpoint rather than anything having been commenced to tackle the problem.

We can listen to all the scientific evidence that we wish. However, unless the scientific people, to whom some people in this room attach an awful lot of weight, come up with a proposal to eradicate TB, it will be more wasted money. How do you feel about that?

Mr Taylor: We have said all along that, when you listen to them, you really need to know professionals' backgrounds and where they are coming from. Are they from the badger lobby? What is pulling their strings? It used to be the case that, when you listened to somebody from a scientific background, you did not have to worry whether there was corporate influence or animal-lover influence. All those things come into play now, which must make life impossible for you guys, who are trying to do your job effectively.

You hit the nail on the head. We have had years of inaction. We have listened to all these people, and nothing has changed. In fact, things are getting worse, in that TB has now jumped species. The bottom line is that to take no action is unforgivable.

Mr Clarke: I tend to agree with you. I read in your presentation about deer and other animals. DARD needs to be seeking them out actively and carrying out more tests. Regardless of whether the survey was last year or two years ago — the author of the question does not even know when the survey was carried out, so it could be from five years ago — 21% is 21% too many.

Mr Taylor: It is.

Mr Clarke: It is a worrying development for Northern Ireland that the disease is jumping from species to species. The sooner that that is tackled, the better. Committee members have differing opinions on culling badgers. I am not an environmentalist particularly, but I do not wish to see the destruction of animals any more than most of the affected farmers do. However, it may be needed for protection.

We take tours in this Building. We take people into the Senate Chamber and talk about the three great industries that we had in Northern Ireland in 1923: agriculture; shipbuilding; and the linen industry. The farming industry is the only one that we have left. If the Department does not tackle the issue, we can scrub that one off the ceiling as well. We will have nothing left in Northern Ireland. All that we seem to be doing is to be pouring millions and millions of pounds into more surveys and inquiries rather than tackling the issue. It may turn out that a cull will be carried out and it will not prove to be beneficial. However, DARD could then score culling off the list and say that it has tried it, but it has not worked and has made no difference.

In England, there was a cull. When I came into the room, it was being suggested that it was effective, but there may have been a spread. However, I may have picked that up wrong. It does not necessarily mean that it was effective. It could mean that everything in the area was not culled. That is how it looks to me.

Mr Taylor: That is why we insisted on professionals doing the job. We do not know whether England used professionals or whether the people used needed then to learn something that they had missed, and that is fair enough.

To return to your point, we said that there should be a cull across Northern Ireland, targeting the TB hotspots, so that there is no escape.

Mr McAuley: I am not sure whether you were present at the time, Trevor, but I said that a top scientist in Wales resigned over the U-turn by the Welsh Administration when they decided to vaccinate rather than cull. He felt strongly enough about that to resign, because he saw flaws with vaccination, and he wanted to see a cull in affected areas.

I hear different people talking, and I think that I need to stress again that we want to see only infected areas, or hotspots, in Northern Ireland being targeted. Initially, that may have come across wrong. I think that people had picked up from what we said that we want to see the whole countryside being targeted, but TB does not cover the whole countryside. We need to see action in infected areas, and, as you rightly said, Trevor, we need to see the results in order to know where we stand.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much for your presentation and for your answers to our questions.

Mr Taylor: May we just say one thing on a lighter note?

The Chairperson: Are you going to tell us a joke?

Mr Taylor: We will see how you take it.

We like your determination. The questions that we have been asked have said a lot, and we hope that you succeed between all of you. However, the downside is that if you do not succeed, we will tell the farming community at the next election to vote for whichever party supports a badger cull. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much.