

**From the Office of the Minister  
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Department of  
**Agriculture and  
Rural Development**

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Paul, a chara

## **COMMITTEE REVIEW OF PLANT HEALTH AND TREE DISEASE**

Thank you for your letter of 26 June 2013 in which you enclosed the position paper agreed by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee following its Review of Plant Health and Tree Disease. You have requested a written response to the Committee on the key issues outlined in the paper at paragraphs 13, 14, 27, 28, 29, 30, 40, 46 and 59.

I welcome the Committee's recognition of this important subject and the Review it has conducted. I am aware that the Committee has gathered evidence from a broad spectrum of stakeholder representatives and other interested parties.

I can assure you that the Committee's position paper has been fully considered and the attached paper represents my Department's considered response to the key issues that the Committee has outlined.

I do trust that this is helpful to you.

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**MICHELLE O'NEILL MLA**  
**Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

## **ASSEMBLY AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE'S POSITION PAPER FOLLOWING ITS REVIEW OF PLANT HEALTH AND TREE DISEASE**

### **Department of Agriculture and Rural Development response to the key issues outlined by the Committee in its position paper**

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development ('the Department') welcomes the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development ('the Committee') Position Paper on Plant Health and Tree Disease following its review.

The Department notes that the Committee agreed to review the approach and policies of DARD and Forest Service on plant health and biosecurity with specific reference to tree disease by examining:

- the legislative background on plant health and tree diseases at EU, national and regional level;
- the roles and responsibilities of DARD and Forest Service, regarding prevention, monitoring and tackling tree diseases (including resources available and their deployment);
- the contingency plans for tackling tree disease in the north of Ireland in general and ash dieback in particular;
- the relationships between DARD and Forest Service and other relevant stakeholders in the public, private sector including NGOs;
- what planning and policies are in place to identify and prevent future tree diseases in the north of Ireland; and
- biosecurity at north of Ireland ports and airports.

DARD notes in particular the position the Committee has taken on the key issues arising out of its review.

The Department is committed to enhancing plant health on an all Ireland basis. DARD seeks to do this by implementing, with the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM), the All-Island Plant Health and Pesticides strategic work programme, including maintaining Protected Zone status for harmful organisms; developing contingency plans on pests and diseases; and co-operating on Pest Risk Analysis (PRA). There is on-going co-operation with DAFM on the proposed new EU plant health legislative regime and in dealing with the *Chalara fraxinea* outbreak and with regard to *P. Ramorum*. There is also on-going close liaison with Defra in relation to plant health and tree diseases matters.

The Department welcomes the opportunity to comment on the key issues outlined in the Position Paper at paragraphs 13, 14, 27, 28, 29, 30, 40, 46 and 59.

### **Paragraph 13**

**The Committee therefore calls upon the Minister to explain why she has delayed bringing forward legislation similar to that of DEFRA around the pre-notification of intra EU imports of certain species of plants. The Committee advises the Minister to bring forward pre-notification of intra EU imports of certain species of plants as soon as possible.**

The Department notes and accepts the Committee's advice. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) continues to work closely with the industry to monitor and check imports to prevent the introduction and spread of a wide range of plant pests and diseases, pursuant to the existing legislation which grants wide ranging powers to inspect, detain and destroy infected plant material.

DARD has been considering if it would be beneficial to introduce additional controls here and what the appropriate mechanism would be for doing so. This includes consideration of both regulatory controls and any alternatives. Any new measures would have to be cost effective, practical and acceptable in our circumstances. In advance of the planting season this autumn, the Department has put in place arrangements at the ports to gather information about the movement of specific plant and tree species into the north and to help in planning follow-up inspections. The Department also plans to strengthen these arrangements by introducing pre-notification legislation for intra EU imports of 4 tree species that present a particular risk to the island. These are ash, oak, sweet chestnut and plane trees. The Department is planning to bring the draft legislation forward for ARD Committee scrutiny as soon as possible.

### **Paragraph 14**

**The Committee therefore advises the Minister and her Officials to engage with Europe, via DEFRA, the Commission, as well as with the MEPs to ensure that the new legislation coming from Brussels takes account of plant health needs and tree disease issues relevant to Northern Ireland.**

The Department notes and accepts the Committee's advice. DARD officials will continue to seek to strongly represent our policy position throughout the EU policy development process in relation to the review of the plant health regime to ensure that local needs and priorities are addressed. Officials engage closely with counterparts in Defra, Scotland and Wales and in DAFM in Dublin on plant health matters. The Department will continue to liaise closely with Defra and with counterparts in Dublin on the EU Plant Health law to advocate our policy position as the proposals are developed.

DARD also has direct links to Brussels through the Office of the Executive. The role of the two DARD staff based in Brussels is to assist DARD to contribute to EU policy development and implementation on agriculture, fisheries and veterinary matters. These staff maintain close contacts with our MEPs and representatives of the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, also with key Defra/UKREP staff, Scottish/Welsh counterparts and Irish Permanent Representatives. They

monitor the development of EU policies relevant to the north and provide information to the Minister and Department.

## Paragraph 27

**The Committee is concerned that the horizon scanning and planning for tree disease and plant health threats is inadequate. It advises the Minister to create stronger links with DEFRA particularly around horizon scanning and early warning systems to ensure her officials can adequately plan and respond to future pest and diseases not only trees but in plant health.**

The Department notes and accepts the Committee's advice. While horizon scanning is clearly important in helping to minimise the risks presented by new and emerging plant pests and diseases, it has limitations, especially where pests and disease arise that are new to science as is the case with *Phytophthora ramorum* and *Chalara fraxinea*. The best strategy is to maintain a high level of intelligence among both the administrative and research communities so that we are aware of emerging issues. Trade controls also help to prevent infected material spreading to the north.

DARD officials will continue to engage closely with counterparts in Britain and the south in a range of co-ordinated activities, including the assessment of new and emerging plant health risks, to have as much early warning as possible to help minimise the risks presented by new and emerging plant pests and diseases. Horizon scanning forms an integral part of the working relationship between the Department and our counterparts across these islands. It is also important that biosecurity measures across these islands are robust.

AFBI provides the Department with scientific support. Scientists in AFBI examine the samples submitted by DARD Inspectors for diagnosis and identification of pests and diseases. AFBI also provides expert advice on epidemiology and disease and pest management strategies. DARD will also continue to invest in targeted research and development to build the evidence base to underpin plant health policy objectives, including horizon scanning to identify new plant disease threats and to monitor emerging risks.

DARD will continue to work collaboratively with DAFM to implement the All-Island Plant Health and Pesticides strategic work programme, including maintaining Protected Zone status for harmful organisms; developing contingency plans to deal with pests and diseases; and co-operating on Pest Risk Analysis with a view to further strengthening our horizon scanning capability.

## Paragraph 28

**While DARD has indicated that it does intend to bring a reconstitution scheme forward, the Committee advises the Minister to provide costings and details of any such a scheme to it as soon as possible**

The Department notes and accepts the Committee's advice. On 26 June 2013, the Minister announced grant support for woodland owners of recently planted ash trees affected by Chalara ash dieback to replant their woodland with alternative tree species.

This scheme is operated by DARD's Forest Service and the key considerations are listed below:

- The grant aid will be paid at 50% of approved costs to support eligible operations, which include: preparation of the grant application and replanting plan; ground preparation; replacement plants; planting; protection of young trees; and vegetation control.
- The scheme will require the replanting of at least three tree species to build resilience to the growing risk of tree diseases in the woodland.
- Replanting must be carried out in the first planting season following the removal of ash.
- The minimum woodland area is 1 hectare per application
- The grant will be paid upon condition of competitively tendered and approved costs for the project and verification by inspection and production of receipts.
- The maximum payment is £3,000 per project and woodland owners may apply for more than one project.

DARD's Forest Service is also continuing to offer support to remove and dispose of ash from affected private woodland sites.

## Paragraph 29

**The Committee is content that there is awareness of the need to ensure succession planning for plant health specialists but would advise the Minister to ensure that this aspect is included in the business planning for the Department and the ask AFBI to ensure that it is included in its Business Planning.**

The Department notes and accepts the Committee's advice. The Department ensures succession planning is considered when reviewing its business planning. DARD, Forest Service and AFBI use forward planning to ensure there are adequate trained personnel in place to deal with plant health matters.

AFBI has a statutory obligation to deliver the programme of work assigned to it by DARD, including the Department's plant health scientific requirements. This requirement is outlined in AFBI's founding legislation, the Agriculture (NI)

Order 2004. In addition, the Memorandum of Understanding between both organisations requires AFBI to use all reasonable endeavours to deliver the agreed programme of work for DARD on time and in accordance with applicable regulatory standards and operational instructions. Furthermore, a key performance indicator within AFBI's 2013/14 business plan is to "Develop and submit to DARD a plan which identifies succession planning issues / challenges and how these will be addressed". This plan will focus on AFBI's ability to deliver the Assigned Work Programme and respond to DARD's evolving requirements over the next five years.

The Department has availed of additional resources in Forest Service to deal with the recent tree disease incidences. These additional resources have been valuable particularly because of the specialist skills and resources available to Forest Service. This has complemented the existing resources focused on plant health in DARD.

Recognising that the threat of plant disease and pests appears to be increasing, the Department intends to increase the scale of resources devoted to plant health. The Department plans to allocate responsibility for all plant health matters to the Chief Executive of the Forest Service. This will ensure that policy and implementation are led by a senior civil servant with an appropriate professional qualification. This initiative is still at the planning stage.

DARD will continue to review its emergency response capability needs on an annual basis. DARD's need for scientific expertise and testing are specified in the Assigned Work Programme with AFBI, which has a statutory obligation to deliver the programme of work assigned to it by DARD.

### **Paragraph 30**

**With the spring and the leafing of trees in 2013, there has been a massive increase in Chalara infections and the Committee wish to seek assurances from the Minister that DARD/Forest Service can continue to absorb the resource demand (both financial, systems and human) of removing and destroying infected trees. The Committee advises the Minister that it wishes to see a formal resource plan in place as soon as possible. This resource plan should also address the issue of communications and service level agreements between AFBI and DARD and Forest Service regarding the level of testing and other assistance which may be required for future tree or plant health disease outbreaks.**

The Department has seen no evidence of a massive increase in Chalara infections in 2013. Surveillance during spring and summer 2013 to 28 August found only 8 new infections and no evidence that the disease is circulating in the wider environment. The Department agrees that there is a need to continue surveillance because current scientific understanding suggests that the conditions for spread in the wider environment probably exist on the island of Ireland, but the evidence for wider spread has not been found.

The Department notes and accepts the Committee's advice on resource planning. Both DARD and Forest Service continue to respond to the emerging tree diseases by reprioritising some of their existing work. In

addition, temporary resource has been put in place to assist in the ongoing response.

Recognising that the threat of plant disease and pests appears to be increasing, the Department intends to increase the scale of resources devoted to plant health. The Department plans to allocate responsibility for all plant health matters to the Chief Executive of the Forest Service. This will ensure that policy and implementation are led by a senior civil servant with an appropriate professional qualification. Planning is underway to establish this new structure.

The Department will also continue to develop existing working relationships with counterparts in DAFM and seek new opportunities that support and enhance our existing capacity and capability, for example in areas such as laboratory expertise and testing.

In relation to AFBI, on an annual basis DARD reviews its emergency response capability needs and determines whether AFBI, as DARD's main service provider, can respond to meet these needs. This process involves the identification of threats where an emergency response would be required and includes plant diseases and pests. The review process requires AFBI to assess and, where necessary, optimise its ability to respond to an incident involving these threats by giving consideration to: the availability of scientific expertise and, sufficient trained staff; whether sufficient arrangements are in place to train additional staff from other areas if required during an incident; and the availability of appropriate laboratory facilities.

DARD has an agreed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in place with AFBI on working together in emergency situations. This MoU acknowledges the understanding that already exists between AFBI and DARD. AFBI is committed to providing DARD with a science based emergency response capability. This understanding implicitly recognises that:

- DARD is significantly dependent on AFBI in this regard; and that
- to maintain such a response capability means that AFBI needs to be able to maintain a suitable level of scientific capacity which in turn is strongly influenced by the scale and nature of the programme of work from DARD.

The Department's need for specialist expertise and testing is specified in the Assigned Work Programme for AFBI. This complements the Department's Plant Health Contingency Plan.

#### **Paragraph 40**

**The Committee calls upon the Minister to finalise the draft Chalara Control Plan and to ensure that adequate consideration is given to a "plan B", so that in the event that Chalara cannot be contained and eradicated that an alternative strategy is ready and prepared.**

The Department notes and accepts the Committee's advice. The All Ireland Chalara Control Strategy was jointly launched on 9 July 2013 by DARD and

DAFM Ministers. The control strategy is comprehensive and covers many elements including joint approaches with the south on eradication, research into breeding for resistance, engaging with the public and other stakeholders and advice for woodland owners. The Strategy is adaptable to changing circumstances and will be kept under review based on on-going surveillance and the development of scientific knowledge of this complex disease. Regarding consideration to a "plan B", such a plan must of necessity react to circumstances and, in all probability, is likely to draw heavily upon the experience gained in Britain and continental Europe. It will be consistent with any action planned in the south of Ireland.

The fact that Ireland is an island separated by water from sources of known infection in Britain and continental Europe means that there may be some scope to prevent the disease from becoming established here; or to slow down that process. The effectiveness of this approach is likely to depend on maintaining isolation in disease terms within the island of Ireland, detecting and eradicating any foci of disease before transmission to trees in the wider environment takes place. The potential for longer term airborne incursions of spores from other infected areas will also be taken into account.

Chalara ash dieback is a complex disease and our current knowledge and understanding of it is incomplete. Therefore scientists on the island of Ireland will continue to collaborate with scientists in Britain and Europe to get a better understanding about how this disease is likely to spread in the future and how best to treat infection if it is discovered here.

The actions set out in this Control Strategy will be kept under constant review based on information about the extent of Chalara ash dieback on the island of Ireland and the development of scientific knowledge. Similarly, DARD's and DAFM's respective surveillance plans will be kept under constant review.

#### **Paragraph 46**

**The Committee has expressed its disappointment about the level and extent of engagement with stakeholders to date. It advises the Minister to begin to develop methods in which the skills, resources and expertise of stakeholders can be fully integrated into not only the surveillance aspects but the planning and testing aspects of tree disease and controls.**

The Department notes the Committee's advice and will consider the scope to integrate the skills, resources and expertise of stakeholders into the planning and testing aspects of tree disease and controls. DARD officials have regular meetings and contact with stakeholders who are affected as a result of plant health issues. These meetings include updates on pest and disease recognition to help both professionals and other stakeholders to report suspected cases.

DARD has established a group of stakeholders, which has met on four occasions to date to give advice and, in conjunction with officials, develop policy recommendations in response to Chalara ash dieback. This group includes representatives of farmers, landowners, the forestry and horticulture sectors, environmental organisations, and local government. This group has



contributed to the development of the Chalara Control Strategy and will continue to work with us as policy on Chalara ash dieback evolves.

In addition to information available from a dedicated Plant and Tree Health link on the DARD Website, a plant health helpline number and email address are in place to deal with specific enquiries. A high level of engagement with stakeholders has taken place to achieve the effective implementation of the control plans that are in place. Co-operation and support from stakeholders has helped ensure fast and effective identification and removal of diseased material. Stakeholders are aware that the Department has a fast map system within its GIS technology in place to advise the up to date position on the diseases. DARD is working in partnership with stakeholders, for example, Forest Service is engaging regularly with the National Trust and has provided the Trust with GPS equipment to record suspect trees so that it can report those to DARD.

There is a statutory requirement to report suspected notifiable plant health problems to DARD. Confirmation involves official samples taken by an authorised inspector, and processed by an officially designated laboratory. The ability to recognise quarantine pests and diseases is a specialist skill and inspectors receive specialist training in this area.

#### **Paragraph 59**

**The Committee advises the Minister, in conjunction with other relevant Ministers, to consider ways in which long term support and assistance can be given to the nursery trade to enable local tree stock to be grown, including by investigating how current procurement practises can be adjusted to assist local growers for example, the breakage of large contracts into lots or sufficient advance notice to allow suppliers to form consortia.**

The Department notes the Committee's advice. The Department supports the nursery trade through provision of training courses, technology transfer demonstrations and industry events held at CAFRE. In particular there have been efforts in recent years to promote training in tree production such as seed propagation and new tree production technologies such as accelerated tree production techniques. These techniques, which have been successfully used in other countries are available to the local industry and would aid in the production of local tree stock.

In relation to procurement practices, procurement must be carried out in accordance with EU Regulations. This has been separately confirmed to the Committee by DFP's Central Procurement Directorate.

The Department would support efforts by local growers to work together in a way which would allow them to compete for larger contracts. Individual growers may access advice from DARD's Supply Chain Development Branch in this regard. The nursery trade can also access support for rural business development through the existing Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 and similar support is proposed in the draft Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

Nevertheless, the Department recognises that trade in plants depends on both price and quality, and the difficulties that local producers will face on both counts in competition with very efficient competitors in Europe. The Department recognises that this was a factor in the decision of the Forest Service first in attempting to improve the economy of supply by consolidating all of its nursery production on a single site at Castlederg, and subsequently its decision to close that facility in 2006 in favour of a long term contract. That contract is currently held with Coillte in the south.