



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Tree Disease and Biosecurity
Issues: National Trust Briefing

12 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Review of Tree Disease and Biosecurity Issues: National Trust Briefing

12 February 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr William Irwin
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Oliver McMullan

Witnesses:

Mr John Baird	National Trust
Mr Frank Devlin	National Trust
Mr Ian McCurley	National Trust
Ms Heather Thompson	National Trust

The Chairperson: I welcome to the table Heather Thompson, regional director of the National Trust; John Baird, head of consultancy; Ian McCurley, consultancy manager and forestry adviser; and Frank Devlin, maintenance manager. I hope that I got everybody's name right. I apologise if I have got any wrong. You are very welcome to the Committee. I will give you a few moments to get settled in. Heather, are you starting off for us?

Ms Heather Thompson (National Trust): I will start off, but then I will hand over to my colleagues. I will introduce what our roles are within the organisation, so that you understand and are able to direct questions appropriately. I am regional director for the National Trust; Ian McCurley is our forestry expert; John Baird is our head of conservation in Northern Ireland; and Frank Devlin is our countryside manager up on the north coast, where we had an outbreak of ash dieback at the end of last year.

We know that you are short of time, so we intend to go through some of the key areas that we would like to draw to your attention, and which were outlined in the paper that has been circulated, and to give you a little bit of our experience of what happened when we dealt with ash dieback up at Runkerry. Hopefully, that will cover most of the issues that you wanted to cover today. We will answer questions at the end.

Mr Ian McCurley (National Trust): As Heather said, we circulated a paper, and we are not going to go through all the issues in it. The paper contains key recommendations, which we will refer to, and the rest of it is about the issues and questions posed under the terms of reference of the Committee's review.

Plants have been traded for centuries. If we did not have the international plant trade, we would not have such special places as Mount Stewart or Rowallane. They simply would not be here. People went out and brought plants back; it has always gone on. However, there are new challenges facing us, and they threaten these unique and special places.

It has become apparent and clear that we need an efficient system of plant passports and controls that are standardised and fully traceable. The international demand in the trade of plants is enormous. People want new exotic plants; they want bigger plants; they want instant landscapes. People are planting big standard trees, and that is an issue. Although the trade is good, it comes at a cost. Since 2000, more than double the number of tree diseases have entered the UK than entered in the whole of the past century. I think that that fact falls in line with the statement in the previous presentation that there had been a 71% increase in trade since 1999. As the trade grows, we are importing more material into the country, and we are importing more diseases. I thought that that was an interesting figure: we have had 11 significant diseases in the past 12 years.

The trust views plant disease and plant health as a major threat to the very existence of our gardens, woodlands and ecosystems. We are lucky to have such brilliant gardens in the UK. The UK probably has the best collection of ancient and veteran trees across the whole of Europe. The Europeans would kill to have them, and we have them in this country. All these plant diseases continue to threaten that resource. It is a very important resource for landscape, biodiversity and culture. So, this is a major threat, as far as we are concerned.

The purpose of today is to take you through some of the key recommendations in our paper and the terms of reference of the Committee's review, to cover what happened at local level, and to answer some questions as we go.

Our key recommendations are on the front page of the written submission. The first recommendation relates to the fact that we feel that there needs to be an investment to develop the local nursery capacity. At the minute, we import huge numbers of trees — I have heard estimates of 80% or 90% — the majority of which are coming from continental Europe. The scale is massive. Those imports are conifer and broadleaf, and, as we heard earlier, the majority of our woodlands are conifer. We feel that there is an opportunity to develop the local economy and local nurseries so that they can provide and become self-sustainable for the growing of broadleaf trees. We think that is hugely important.

There may be mechanisms for funding, through the rural development programme or European money, but we see the growing of our own broadleaf trees in Ireland as essential, and they should be planted on site. That way, you are guaranteed that you will have trees of local provenance. I use the word "provenance" because that is important. Provenance refers to where the seed was collected. However, what has been happening is that the seeds may have been collected in Antrim, for example, and then sent off to Holland and grown to a certain stage, and then sent on to Belgium. They do a whole tour of Europe. We think that we are getting UK stock, but we are not. We are getting trees that have travelled all over Europe, collecting disease. A really big thing is to somehow develop this business to support broadleaf woodland in Ireland, as a whole.

It is a big task, because we have to understand what the supply is and what the demand is. You could probably get the supply quite quickly, because you could look at the major nurseries in Ireland and see where their capacity is. The demand is tougher, because it takes a lot of long-term planning. When we are doing a road scheme, and we need a million trees, we need to be given three to five years' notice of that requirement, not one year's notice. If you get one year's notice, you will get trees from the continent. There is, therefore, something about the long-term planning on major schemes and how we support that. It is very important.

The second recommendation is that we believe that we need to significantly strengthen the importation protocols and extend what the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs brought in on 17 January — the pre-arrival notification. We need to translate that here in Northern Ireland and use it, because our authorities need to be able to get to the ports and airports to inspect the material with enough notice. Within that notification, there are specified trees. Those trees are specified on the basis of risk. We need to adopt that procedure, and we need to do it quickly for our biosecurity. We also have to look at plant passporting and to extend that across the board. There are high-risk plants and low-risk plants, but we have to consider the risks to our natural environment and landscape if we do not protect them. Plant passporting should be a more efficient system, and it needs to be across the board.

Recommendation 3 is that we need to improve inspection controls in collaboration with our international suppliers and partners to ensure that all relevant plant materials are being inspected. The international plant trade is massive. There are plants coming from everywhere. If plants are sent from China to the UK, they could come through Rotterdam, for instance, because it is a major port. We rely on the authorities in the EU point of origin to inspect those plants. There is no standardised system of checks, so you might get a variation of checks from port to port. It is really important that we get a standardised system in place to make sure that we carry out the right checks. Furthermore, the amount of material that gets checked is very low. In some cases, it is 2%, and we need to consider how we can bump that up to make sure that we are not importing more diseases. That is a massive area of work, and the previous presentation referred to it. I would be very interested to see what recommendations come out of that.

Recommendation 4 is that the plant passport scheme should extend to all plants that are moved about. The scheme needs to identify not only where the seed was collected but where the trees have been grown and which nurseries have handled them. Those trees might have travelled around five nurseries — that is what goes on. Nobody is informed of that travel or that handling of trees. We then bring them into the country and end up with Chalara or other diseases. So, there is a really important area of work in strengthening the plant passport system. If we did that in unison with strengthening our local business in trees and broadleaved production, the onus would be less on the plant passport system.

Recommendation 5 is that there needs to be proactive planning for plant disease. There are diseases all over Europe, all over America and all over the world. We need to be horizon scanning and risk assessing on the basis of what is out there.

Chalara is not new. It has been in Europe since 1992. It has been moving westwards in a very systematic pattern with a similar range of symptoms across woodlands all over Europe. We should be looking forward, seeing what is coming our way and trying to defend against it. In 2012, we were still importing trees from Europe into Ireland, as we in the National Trust found out. We were not aware of that, because we had specified UK-provenance trees, and no one had told us that those trees had travelled around Europe. There is a really big issue about that. On the research end, we need to look forward and see what is coming our way as the trade increases. More and more Phytophthoras are being discovered; they have discovered four more in Sweden. As we research more, we will find more diseases, but we need to plan for them.

The other thing is the movement of hard landscaping materials. The previous presentation referred to wooden bark and standard trees. Phytophthoras are spores that are found in soils and bark. If we keep transporting them, but they are not passported or looked into, we will have a major issue. We are bringing in material that we are not watching. Over the past few years, *Phytophthora ramorum*, *Phytophthora kernoviae* and *Phytophthora lateralis* have become rampant and have knocked out large amounts of larch, rhododendron and native woodland. It is a huge risk, and we really need to get our finger on it.

Recommendation 5 relates to stakeholder engagement. Engagement with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on Chalara has been really good. The Department has acted swiftly. It has used enforcement notices and destroyed trees. That has all been positive action. The idea is that, if you destroy the trees, the inoculum level in the country is low, and we have the ability to try to control it. We have an opportunity that, to be honest, Great Britain has largely lost. The last I read, Great Britain had 166 outbreaks in the natural environment. Those outbreaks are among mature, sporulating canopy trees that are much more effective in spreading the disease. Those habitats are also much more important. They are well developed and have ancient and semi-mature trees. We are in a better place, and we need to maximise that opportunity. The Department has done absolutely the right thing in using enforced destruction notices. It needs to continue with that. That is what we need to do to protect our environment. If mature trees are infected, the inoculum level will be higher, and there is more ability to spread and destroy more habitats, woodlands and landscape.

The stakeholder engagement has been really good. There is also an opportunity to mobilise resources from the partners in the stakeholders groups. All the NGOs — the National Trust, the Woodland Trust — are all about protecting the environment and the landscape; that is hugely important to us. The stakeholder group has been really good and a lot of information has been disseminated, but we want to work out how resources can be mobilised and how we can bring them to the table and protect our environment.

Finally, recommendation 6 is about the development of an all-Ireland approach. We talk about fortress Ireland, and the cross-border approach that the Department has taken is absolutely the right one. These diseases do not respect borders; they just blow everywhere. We have seen that with *Phytophthora ramorum*. That disease was mainly around north-east Antrim and the east of the country, and we are now finding it in south Armagh. Those diseases are jumping about, and we really have to be aware of that.

In Ireland, we have a unique opportunity. We need to develop the all-Ireland control plan that outlines the key responsibilities and to make sure that we are monitoring the natural environment. The Forest Service has done great work and has inspected about 800 sites, which is significantly higher than in GB. It mobilised its teams, put its professional grade foresters out there, and they have been surveying. It has been a fantastic piece of work to understand the spread of the disease and where it is, but we need to understand whether we have the disease in the wider environment and in our mature woodlands and designated sites for conservation. That will require another period of monitoring, and I would like to see the plan for that and how we are going to do it. It will take a lot of time and resource, but an opportunity exists there.

Another piece of work needs to be done to risk zone the country. Many of our most important sites for conservation and woodland sites are ash, and many of those are in the west of the country in Fermanagh. That area is mainly limestone, and ash grows really well on limestone. Those are really important sites for conservation. For example, Crom estate and the Marble Arch caves are part of the limestone area, and that whole area is a fantastic woodland resource. We really want to protect that area, but we need to understand the risk zone and the conservation value of that area versus north-east Antrim. A risk-mapping process needs to be done so that we can put our resources adequately into key areas.

So, those are the key recommendations from the paper. I think that the main ones are to keep pushing the enforced destruction, to work within fortress Ireland and to look at how we can lead research with the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the Food and Environment Research Agency. We are ahead of the game and have a time lag. What we do with that time is a key thing. We have an opportunity to lead in that area and protect the resource.

Frank will now brief the Committee on how we responded when the Department issued the statutory plant health notice at Runkerry.

Mr Frank Devlin (National Trust): Our response to the situation was very swift, as was the Department's. That was crucial. Our awareness level had been heightened with *Phytophthora* and a few other issues, such as fireblight at Downhill, that we have had recently on the north coast. Our response was swift, but we had dealt with similar situations in the trust. We reacted very quickly. As soon as we got the information, we moved into the field the next day and started to extract the trees that had been planted.

The site is a 3.5 hectare site on Runkerry headland. It was planted in 2012 with mixed species of trees. We removed 2,500 ash from that and dealt with them very quickly that afternoon. They were burnt, and any remains were buried two meters deep. That is crucial. It is also fortunate that the trees were so small. They were only about 12 to 18 inches long and less than the width of your finger. That helped us immensely, in that we did not have a lot of debris to get rid of. Therefore, we feel that the risk was minimised on the site. We were also quite lucky in that Runkerry is an exposed area and there are not a lot of other trees in the vicinity, and very few ash in particular, so the fast response was crucial for clearing that up. As far as I can see, the Department has moved very quickly in other instances, and that exercise needs to be maintained.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, everyone, for your presentation. First of all, I commend you for your paper. It was very easy to read and very good. The key recommendations are on the front page, which is always very useful. We have just come from a joint meeting on the meat industry, and the parallels between it and our review are astonishing — travel throughout Europe, checks and balances and everything else like that. The weakness in that sphere is, I am sure, the same as in this one, and that is what we import into Northern Ireland. In the meat industry, we are exporting 70% of what we make or bring in to process, but on this we are importing 80% or 90%, so there seems to be a greater risk to tree health or plant health.

Your first key recommendation is about investing in the development of a local nursery. When I speak to stakeholders — foresters and woodland people — they all say the same about seed. They all ask why they cannot get their own seed and grow it from the start. It seems to be — this will be brought

out in our review — that the Department has maybe discouraged that. Is that too strong a word, or is that a word that you would use?

Ms Thompson: I will kick off and then hand over to Ian. There have been exercises where native seed has been collected. The Toome bypass is one example of that, where there was a very clear decision to go for native, indigenous trees for that planting scheme. One of the difficulties in the procurement system is that, if you are trying to gather a large number of trees and the nurseries are small — there are a number of smaller nurseries that are capable of growing native trees — and if the procurement does not allow for supply in small batches but wants it all in one go, there really is not much of a choice in where you can go for that. One of the things that we have been talking about is whether there is some way of supporting an industry and helping that connection through the industry.

Mr McCurley: That is one of the issues. There is no opportunity for smaller growers to have some sort of co-operative system. In Wales, there is an organisation called Coed Cymru, which allows smaller wood processors access to bigger machines and resources in sawmills so that they can process products. The economy grows, people get work, and they supply their own wood material. It is about the scale of the plant business and about planning. If a bypass is being planned, we know that it is coming down the line for quite some time, but landscaping almost feels like an afterthought. That is where we need to get into the planning system, so that it is understood that, if you need a million trees, you should start thinking three years in advance.

The Chairperson: Of course, this is a long-term industry. Trees have a long life span and everything else. Is there an appetite from the industry for nurseries to go down that route of growing their own as opposed to importing? Surely the return from bringing in imports is quicker as regards their cash flow and everything else. Is putting the emphasis on encouraging them to grow their own seed a long-term project that the industry will need to be supported in?

Mr McCurley: We would have to consider supporting it somehow, Chair. Whether that be through money from the rural development programme, there has to be some help to kick it off. I think that there is a piece of work to be done before that, which is to understand the available production supply that can be done in Ireland as a whole, and then to think of the longer-term plan.

We have planting figures. In one of the annexes, we have the figures from 2004 until now for the Forest Service and private woodlands. We can make an assumption based on those figures, the targets that the Forest Service set and what the performance has been. You can draw a picture together. I think that there is a business there. If there is a business there, people will develop what they have or start new businesses. They need to have some sense that there is demand and also that, in schemes such as the Toome bypass or the A5, orders will be considered at the planning stage, rather than at the delivery, putting-tarmac-on-the-road stage. So, there is an issue about planning ahead.

I know that we are out of the property boom. However, during it, big trees and standard trees were ordered, and landscapes appeared overnight. Those landscapes carry soil, which carries spores, which carry Phytophthora and all those things. We have to tighten down on this business.

The figure of 80% or 90% relates to all trees that are imported. I do not know what the figures are when you separate them into broadleaf and conifers. I do not imagine that they are 60% and 40%; they could be 70% and 30%. I am not completely clear. I just want to clarify that, but the figure is much higher than it could or should be. We have to think about mechanisms for changing that.

The Chairperson: OK. Our review is of tree disease and, I suppose, where we are at, as a state and its Department, and where we hope to get to in order to ensure that we future-proof ourselves. So, it is not all about ash dieback, although that disease is very much in our face and is what we see happening at present, and, therefore, questions will be asked about it.

You said that you welcomed DARD's approach and the fact that it went through 800 sites testing and checking for that disease. You said that intelligence flowed at stakeholder meetings. However, you are critical of the fact that the Department has not used your staff, particularly on your own sites, even though you have offered your teams, who could have reduced the burden on the Department and could still. This is a very important point. The Department has tested 800 sites, but, surely, come spring, all those sites will have to be tested again. Is there still an opportunity, now that we are in a better position than GB, for the Department to use your army of volunteers, even? In your opinion,

can the Department use your know-how and intelligence on the issue and your mobilisation to help with a second tranche of inspections? Why has the Department resisted that so far?

Mr McCurley: I am not sure that "resisted" is the word that I would use. Those landscapes and habitats are so important to us as an organisation. That is why we are here: to look after special places. That is our raison d'être, for everybody. We are completely committed to that. The information flow has been brilliant. However, there is an issue about the mobilisation of resources. Some of our sites have staff. I am training our staff. It has been the most well-publicised disease that we have ever known. I am going out and training staff. We are doing our own surveys. However, if there were a standard format by which we could feed our information through to the Department, that would kill two birds with one stone. The trust has 60,000 members and the ability to communicate with many people. So, there is an issue about unpicking that and working out where and how we can assist. If it protects the landscape and biodiversity, we will do that.

The Chairperson: How important is the proposed all-Ireland control plan? Why have you not seen it yet?

Mr McCurley: It is vital from our point of view, because we are ahead of the game. That said, we have not discovered it in the wider environment, so inoculum levels are low. I think we have a very big opportunity to control and keep the disease at bay. It is important that we see an all-Ireland plan that specifies resources, who is surveying where and what the surveillance plan is.

The Chairperson: What is your view on why it has not been published or, indeed, why it is not in existence yet?

Mr McCurley: I am not sure if I have a view on that. Forest Service has a plan to look at some of the Northern Ireland sites this year. That was shared at the most recent stakeholder meeting. I know that the Republic of Ireland is involved in the operational elements and the incident management team, so they are communicating, but I have not seen any plans from the Republic. I have looked on the websites, but I have not seen that information. At this stage, I am not aware that there is an all-Ireland control plan. The point that we are putting across is that there should be one, because we are an island and these diseases will jump over boundaries.

The Chairperson: You will answer this question as you see fit, and I am not trying to plant anything, pardon the pun, but is it fair to say that, since DARD has done such a good job in mobilisation and in seeing out the 800 sites, it has been concentrating on mobilisation instead of strategically planning an all-Ireland control plan? If it had used your army of volunteers, it could have thought more strategically about this. Is that a fair assumption?

Mr McCurley: A job of work needed to be done at the time. The Department needed to inspect those sites to ensure that the inoculum levels were kept low and that the surveys of traces of infected material were done. That needed to happen. It might be a possibility that you go forward, run it and get the end result. However, the opportunity has not been lost, because, as you say, we are going to be back, looking for this next season. AFBI should be doing research on the areas that have been removed to see whether there is any residual sporelation in that area. The door is not closed with regard to the disease and resources coming to the table. I am sure that there are other key partners out there, such as the Environment Agency (NIEA). We can pull together and try to keep Ireland disease free. I think that that is the key point that we need to remember.

The Chairperson: I have one more question before I go to members. It is on the establishment of a grant scheme. How vital is it to woodland cover, woodland bodies and organisations such as the National Trust that they be given financial support to reforest these areas?

Mr John Baird (National Trust): I will pick up on that one to give Ian a break. You would expect us to say that that is vital.

The Chairperson: Only if it is true, and if you have enough money.

Mr Baird: I think the evidence speaks for itself. If we are the least forested area in the UK and the least forested area in Europe, that says something. There is something not quite right with us not having more trees. Why is that? There is also the issue of the difference between south of the border and north of the border in compensation if disease is found. It is very helpful and necessary to get

trees replanted, but the lack of compensation is a disincentive to a landowner flagging up that he has a problem in the first place. He may wait until it is too late, by which stage the disease will have spread far wider than it would if it had been nipped in the bud. If he knows he is going to be compensated, he is probably more likely to catch it early. That is quite an important tool that could be used.

I have no doubt that we need to look at how we can increase our planting. This is, potentially, a really good opportunity, if we take forward the fortress Ireland idea. If we take the fact that we have got disease-free, pest-free trees, we can grow our own to meet our own demand and even end up being an exporter from an area that is certified as being disease and pest free. There is a potential opportunity there.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, John.

Mr Byrne: With respect to your opening comment, Chairman, I welcome the presentation. It was excellent. It was very succinct and clear and, for simple-minded MLAs, it is good to see recommendations on page 1. *[Laughter.]* I am trying to detect the relationship that you have with DARD and the Forest Service. I know that you have co-operated fairly well in relation to ash dieback. However, I suspect that, prior to that, there was a less than collaborative approach. What can be done to try to encourage collaboration between you guys and your volunteers, on one hand, and the Department and the Forest Service on the other?

Have you any comment to make about the Forest Service? Some 40 years ago, it ran a very active planting programme, but, in recent times, that has not been the case. In fact, the whole move seems to have been towards privatising the Forest Service, trading it off, and cutting trees but not replanting.

Lastly, what have you to say about getting involved in the creation of a nursery for seedlings? It requires a bit of work to get a nursery going to the point where it can sustain itself into the future. Obviously, joined-up government with the Department for Regional Development will be crucial in relation to pre-ordering plants when it comes to major infrastructural road schemes.

Mr Baird: That is quite a multifaceted question. I will do my best to answer it.

Mr Byrne: I was thinking on the hoof. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Baird: I will try to answer on the hoof. First of all, our relationship with DARD and Forest Service, like all things over the years, has waxed and waned depending on issues, personnel and all the rest of it. I have to say that, at the minute, it is pretty good on the whole. We have regular meetings with the head of Forest Service, to which we bring a range of issues. We see Forest Service as an organisation that, in many ways, has goals that sit with some of our own very comfortably. Indeed, we share ownership of a number of different sites, or we are neighbours. So we have a lot of potential issues in common and on which we can work with the Forest Service.

With respect to Forest Service's activity in recent years, and in relation to planting, that is probably a question best directed to it. From the point of view of an outsider looking in, it seems to be that the resources available to Forest Service, as an organisation, have been steadily reduced over the years and decades, and it is very obvious that, looking back some 10 or 20 years, the number of people that it has on the ground, the number of offices and its proactivity has steadily declined. It is almost as though it is just cutting back and cutting back until only a small core of management is left. However, that is just an observation and you would really need to direct your concerns on that to Forest Service.

With respect to the future and the way forward, an industry trying to re-establish native plantations will need some help. We have done it in a small way for some specialised things like apple trees. We have discovered a particular orchard that seems to have a unique variety. To try to keep that biosecurity and biodiversity going, we have tried to propagate in those particular areas on some of our estates. Some of our estates lend themselves to propagation by virtue of the fact that they have large, undeveloped walled gardens. Crom is one of those estates. Whether that is something that we want to take the lead on and develop is another issue. Potentially, that is not our core business, but it is something that we may take a role in trying to help with.

Ms Thompson: Native tree nurseries have gone out of business because there has not been the required demand. If the demand is there, I would say that there will be people who will be more than prepared and who have the knowledge and expertise to grow the trees here in Northern Ireland.

However, the issue then arises of how you do the planning that Ian McCurley has talked about for the long term and pre-ordering. Is there some kind of mechanism whereby, if you are doing a pre-order, you can help the nursery at that stage? Is there some kind of funding or procurement mechanism to help them with seed collection? That is the most labour-intensive part, apart from growing the trees. Is there some way of helping that to happen — some co-operative system? I do not know, but there is definitely an opportunity. It is a very difficult business to be in. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) offers courses, so there are people who are training in horticulture. How do you help them to expand and develop their business opportunity so that they can come to this kind of market? There are a number of opportunities, but a strategic and cohesive approach is needed if that is what we feel is the right way forward for Northern Ireland.

Mr Byrne: Those answers are really helpful. Have you ever made any policy paper submissions to DARD or Forest Service in the past on the future of the tree or plant business in Northern Ireland?

Ms Thompson: On the development of nurseries? No.

Mr Byrne: The development of the whole forestry and tree industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Baird: I am not aware of us submitting a formal paper, as such, in recent times. We have been in negotiation and discussion with them on a number of issues.

Mr Byrne: There may be an opportunity to do that at this juncture.

Mr Baird: There may well be; yes.

Mr Irwin: Thank you very much for your presentation. As others have said, your recommendations on the front page are useful. There are some very practical and sensible recommendations, and developing local nursery capacity seems logical, given that there are so many imports.

Recommendation 5 is to:

"Proactively plan for plant disease as opposed to relying on reactive control."

Is that not exactly what is happening with ash dieback? I have asked the Department that question. We were all aware of the dangers, yet there was no ban on imports until it was found here. Was that not a mistake by the Department? Should planning not have been in place earlier?

Mr Baird: We do not want to be in the position of criticising. It is more a case of scanning the horizon, as Ian said. If a disease is in one place in Europe in 1992 and, in 1993, has moved 100 kilometres, you would like to think that it would not take a lot of imagination to work out that it is coming your way and that we perhaps need to do a bit more to prepare for it. That is just one disease. We had a meeting with NIEA a day or two ago, and, as I understand it, it has 135 diseases on its radar. There are issues about how NIEA, DARD and all the organisations join up and share that information. Organisations such as ours can bring, apart from anything else, eyes and ears on the ground. So there is the forward-planning aspect, but it is also about how we work best together.

Mr Irwin: Although there may be many diseases — I am not aware of all of them by any means — I would have thought that ash dieback was one of the most serious diseases, given that some countries across Europe have lost 90% of their ash. I would have thought that it was important to be more proactive.

Mrs Dobson: I apologise for missing your presentation; I was speaking in the Chamber. I agree that your briefing paper has been very useful and very easy to understand. How do you rate the Department's response to ash dieback in allowing members of the public to report incidences and receive help if they have a concern?

Mr McCurley: I think that the Department has been pretty clear on how to respond. There was a website and a reporting phone line, and there is quite a lot of press about the disease. The Department has done what has needed to be done. There will be a bigger job of work in the future on how we keep creating woodland in the least-wooded country in Europe, because we do not want people who are thinking about converting low-biodiversity farmland into woodland to think that woodlands are too risky. The Department must communicate the message that woodlands are not

risky but are absolutely necessary for carbon storage, renewable resources and biodiversity. How do we get that message out there when a farmer in the fields may be thinking of creating woodland and then thinks, "What is the next disease? What tree can I not plant?" The Department's reporting has worked well, but we need to follow up and assure people that planting trees is not a natural disaster — that they are useful and do grow.

Mrs Dobson: In a written answer, the Minister told me that there were only 27 enquiries to the telephone helpline and 15 e-mails, at a cost of £1,300. I wanted to gauge your opinion on that. Do you feel that those figures prove that its efforts were not enough? It seems fairly low.

Mr McCurley: That does seem low. I work in the industry, so I know whom to phone. If I have an issue, I will phone John Finlay or Ian Irwin and speak to people who are directly involved or senior civil servants. From my point of view, they have all responded well. As a member of the public, I would be biased because I am involved in the tree industry. There has been so much information that I have been involved in personally that I am not sure I could say, as a member of the public, how I thought it went.

Mrs Dobson: As you say, you are involved. However, given the information around it, the response appears to be quite low — 27 enquiries and 15 e-mails.

Mr McCurley: It does appear quite low whenever you consider the media interest. The BBC and the 'Belfast Telegraph' ran major stories, and there are mobile apps that allow you to upload photographs to websites, etc.

Mrs Dobson: If those are the figures when it is quite prominent in the media, then it is quite fearful, looking further ahead.

Mr McCurley: That is a fair point.

Mr McMullan: With regard to Europe, I have to agree with my Chair — *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Will that be in the Hansard report? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McMullan: You do not know how much that hurts me. *[Laughter.]*

The similarities with what we were talking about this morning are remarkable. I think that it has gone past the stage of whether he or they did enough here to tackle the problem. The problem is here. However, the problem was in Europe for quite a while before it appeared here. That leads me to think that Europe needs to get its house in order a little bit with regard to its controls. If we send seed back to be grown in Europe, and it is infected when we get it back, there has to be something wrong. If we know that, why are we still importing? The other question is this: are imports driven by cost? If they are, people will keep taking the same chances. That is something that the industry has to ask itself, rather than trying to place the blame on who planted what, whether we answered the phone enough, and all of that. If we are sending the stuff out there and it is coming back infected, and the importers and exporters know that, there is something seriously wrong with that side of the market, and that is what needs to be tackled. Does your organisation grow many trees?

Mr McCurley: Not in big numbers.

Ms Thompson: Our policy is to plant native trees. When we were issuing those orders for local or native seed — we have a policy for how we source our seed — we were unaware that those were going elsewhere before they came back to us, which is part of the issue. That has to do with the transparency of the process. Are these local seeds and are they from the areas in line with our policy, which is for local and UK provenance? That would be as far as we would go. The assumption was made that they were being grown in UK nurseries.

Mr McMullan: The whole thing was done on the assumption that it was assumed that it was being done, without actually checking that it was done. So the fault lies there.

Ms Thompson: When we say "native", that is our understanding.

Mr McCurley: The plant passporting system works on the basis of provenance; it does not detail where the trees have gone. A lot of those in the industry are really surprised at that — just like meat traceability. They are travelling all over the country.

Mr McMullan: We lost about 70,000 horses this morning.

Mr McCurley: You hit on a point about the fact that we continue to import. The Committee should seek clarification on that point. After speaking to Alan McCartney, my understanding is that, at the minute, we can be considered a pest-free zone, because we are containing the disease. It is not in the wider environment. If we are considered a pest-free zone, we should and we can put heavier temporary measures on imports. I think that, because we are a pest-free zone, we can control imports with a temporary system outside some of the EU protocols, because it is quite difficult to control within the EU. I am not an expert on that, but it is an area on which it would be worth seeking clarification. If we have more control in our own devolved Administration, we should use it to protect our environment.

Mr McMullan: I am glad to hear you say that, because it needs to start from there. To point the finger at home will not solve the problem.

Mr McCurley: Our paper states that the Polish forest service stopped buying trees from Polish nurseries eight years ago while still sending infected trees over here.

Mr McMullan: That is quite right. Is it true that we are still dealing with diseases for which we do not even have a cure? Are there not new diseases that we are finding every so often, making your job harder?

Mr McCurley: Yes. I used to plant trees, which was nice. I do not do that much any more; I look for disease. In Sweden, they have just discovered four more Phytophthoras. The more that science evolves and the more that we send biomass and other materials around the world, the more we import.

The diseases are probably in balance in their own countries. They have reached a natural equilibrium but when they get here into a new environment, they grow rampant. That is the key point about the horizon scan; we need to understand the hot lands and the impacts. That international research collaboration is important because it is about following up and looking forward to the future. That is a key point.

Mr McMullan: You made a point about the young people who are learning at CAFRE. Would that be something for them to take on board?

Mr McCurley: Absolutely. I am 40 years old and I go to meetings of the Society of Irish Plant Pathologists where no one is younger than me and everyone else is in their 60s. Plant pathology is not a big subject any more, and there are very few institutions that teach it. There is a shortage in that field. CAFRE should try to put horticulture units into its education programmes so that plant health is pushed up. If students are going through courses, surely, with all these issues, we could be ramping up awareness and looking at pathology, because not many people are doing it.

The Chairperson: That was a very good question, Oliver. I must give you a wee bit of credit back.

Mr Byrne: This North Antrim thing is growing, Chairman. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Should we treat trees as a crop? We do not eat trees, but we can certainly use them. They are useful as fuel but you would not think of them as a crop. This could echo right through CAP reform and enhance what a tree is and make them more attractive to plant. Should we treat trees as a crop and incentivise that for our farmers?

Mr Baird: We could do that. Some foresters already view trees as a crop, albeit not an annual crop because they might take 30, 40 or 50 years to mature. The first contributor today, from the Assembly's Research and Library Service, talked about the value of the industry. If I picked it up right, I think that the figure that was quoted was £2.2 billion.

The value of woodland forestry trees is based on more than the timber that they produce. It is about climate change, carbon storage, soaking up flood water, the beauty that they provide as part of the

landscape and the opportunities that they provide for recreation and tourism. The multiplier, I would say, conservatively, is many times that of the pure wood and timber value. Given all the value that that can bring and the threat to it, and, putting it in commercial terms, the amount of resource that we might want to consider putting into the protection and promotion of that asset, the sums suddenly start to change.

It would seem that — I know that the Woodland Trust are here and that they have their own views on this — there is something wrong in Northern Ireland that we do not see planting trees as a good or a viable thing. I was commenting to some of our colleagues when the trust planted some land with trees recently. We heard comments from local farmers asking why we were destroying that good agricultural land by planting trees on it. I think that perhaps a perception and attitude change needs to happen to see that as being a good thing, a good crop and a good multipurpose tool for the environment and society.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your answers and your presentation today. It has been very useful. It is a review that we are looking into, and this is something that we want to get to the bottom of. We want to make sure that, in the future, the Department, the Forest Service and the estate itself are fit for purpose in order to, first of all, prevent diseases coming in, and to make sure that we can combat them when they do come. Thank you very much.