



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Tree Disease and Biosecurity
Issues: Woodland Trust Briefing

12 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mr Patrick Cregg	Woodland Trust
Mr Steve Mulligan	Woodland Trust

The Chairperson: We now have an oral briefing from the Woodland Trust on tree disease. I welcome Patrick Cregg, director, and Steve Mulligan, government affairs officer, to the table. You are very welcome to the Committee. Patrick, please lead off with a brief presentation and then we will go to questions.

Mr Patrick Cregg (Woodland Trust): Thank you, Chair, and my thanks to your colleagues and your staff for facilitating this today, because I think it is a very important topic. I have been in this business for 40 years, and I cannot remember a tree-related issue being referred to COBRA as an issue of national importance. I thank the Committee for according it the same importance here in Northern Ireland.

I will avoid repeating what my colleagues from the National Trust have said, all of which I agreed with, with the exception of one comment by Mr McCurley about the over-60s. *[Laughter.]* As somebody who is fast approaching 60, there is still life in the old dog yet. I have my colleague Steve Mulligan with me today. Steve divides his time between this House and the Palace of Westminster, so I hope that he can bring a UK perspective to what we are talking about. To keep it brief, I will hand over to Steve, who will give an overview, then I will come in with possible solutions. Unlike the National Trust, I made the mistake of putting my recommendations at the end of the paper.

The Chairperson: I have not read them. *[Laughter.]* I am only joking.

Mr Cregg: They are on pages 4 and 5, if you wish to miss out pages 1 to 3.

Mr Steve Mulligan (Woodland Trust): I am going to try to pull out the messages. If we can get anything from this sad situation, it is that there are lessons to be learned that really allow us to test

plant health structures, not just in Northern Ireland but in the UK and EU. I think that you will all agree with me that the stakeholders who have presented so far have shown that the systems that currently exist have really been found wanting. I totally agree with what the Chair said earlier about the correlation between plants and the meat trade.

To return to the issue that our predecessors brought up about the provenance of plants, that has unfortunately meant that a lot of landowners have spread the disease unwittingly, which is very sad. When you start to dig through the EU legislation, you see that it is not actually that the industry has been bad. It has been acting within a legal framework that enables it to do that. We must not lose sight of that. We are not slamming the industry. We must look for positive resolutions, and Patrick is going to come to that.

The EU regulations are a mess. Even with the protection that was introduced in November, we still know that border checks are not carried out properly and there is no standard surveillance across EU countries. Countries are allowed to use different methods and different inspection processes. There is also the surprise factor: when an organism is new, there is no regulation there to deal with it. With all those issues, it is hardly surprising that things continue to get through. As we know, there is going to be a big review of these issues in March. The Committee could use its pressure to speak to the Minister about her input to that process to make sure that the lessons that we pick up through this inquiry are fed through to that review.

We would like to make a few comments, looking at Northern Ireland on a domestic level, which we expand on a bit in our written evidence. We applaud the Minister and her prioritisation of ash dieback, and the rapid response of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Forest Service in undertaking surveillance activity. However, similar to the National Trust, we think that stakeholder involvement could have been improved. There are two issues. First, they could have used our resources, staff and volunteers, and, secondly, they could have involved us in developing the plans and making sure that we tested some of that as the process went on.

The other key issue that we would like to highlight is the fact that the response could have been a lot more proactive. It has been entirely reactive. I think that we can learn an important lesson by looking at what happened in Europe and how the disease spread there. Action was too late and things did not really become a priority until the disease had set in. By that time, the opportunities to look for proper resolutions had well passed. We are certainly concerned about that.

I know that, back in November, the Committee was concerned that there had not been a risk assessment, and we certainly share that concern. If we are to move on from that, the all-Ireland control plan is a real opportunity, which I think we need to get behind. I was pleased to hear back in January that work, or at least discussions, had already started. We want to see actual work on the ground, and that work getting signed off very quickly. That is a very important element, particularly for disease modelling.

We know of 24 cases that have come through and are linked to exports, but what we do not know is how far that has spread into the natural environment. I think that the control plan would enable us to start to at least plan for that process. It also needs to — hopefully it will be used to do this — engage landowners and stakeholders much better in the process. We would certainly like to see that. Finally, I think that it would help with disease resilience, which is a very important area. We certainly believe that an important part of resilience is planting, making sure that you have the right sort of trees in the right places and having that diversity of plants. I really want to emphasise that we would like to be involved in the control plan and provide input to that process.

Mr Cregg: From our point of view, the request is simple. We have a three-point plan. That three-point plan is for a partnership among the Woodland Trust, the National Trust, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, with Owen Paterson buying into it at a UK level, the Forestry Commission, and the Food and Environment Research Agency. We have actually put together a bid for the three-point plan of £2.5 million, which has gone to European funders. The National Trust and the Woodland Trust are putting in some of their own money to get that kick-started. The intention is that we will engage a wider consortium of people to deal with and look at the issue.

The dominant species in Northern Ireland is ash. When you leave this Building and drive to your constituency, Chairman, you will see that every country lane and roadway is covered by ash. Therefore, Forest Service and DARD will need help with surveying. We need to engage with organisations such as ours, the National Trust and all those other voluntary organisations that are only too willing to help with the survey work.

Importantly, it is also an opportunity to engage the public and to make people aware of trees — not just the bad things such as the fact that trees are dying, but the beauty of trees and all the things that John mentioned during the previous session. There is an opportunity to create an awareness of the importance of trees to our landscape and our lives, and to involve them as citizen scientists who can go around the countryside surveying trees. I know that that question has been posed to Forest Service in this room and that it was dismissed. We, as an organisation, have experience of engaging with the public, and, over the past number of years, ordinary people have identified 5,000 ancient trees in the Province by going onto farms, with the permission of farmers and landowners, and surveying. It can be done.

We have covered growing, and we are very keen to promote the nursery industry, not just in Northern Ireland but across the island of Ireland and, indeed, in Great Britain. As a result of the outbreak, we changed our policies. In future, all our planting will be contract growing. We will contract a supplier to grow the nursery stock for us. That gives suppliers the security of knowing that the seeds that they collect today and which will leave their nursery as trees in three years' time will have a ready market. That is a step forward.

Perhaps Departments' tenders could be more prescriptive about where the stock comes from, and they could, perhaps, start contract growing. The Department for Regional Development did that some years ago on the Toome bypass.

We should not regard ourselves as having all the knowledge, whether here in Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland or the islands of Britain and Ireland. Later in the year, we aim to bring together expertise from across Europe for a conference that will look at the whole issue of tree disease and the threats that it poses, not just to our lives but to the lives of wildlife in the countryside.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Patrick and Steve, for your presentation. I commend you on your report for the review, which is very helpful and extremely easy to read. There are no problems there, even though we had to go to the back of the report to find your recommendations. *[Laughter.]* I suppose that, in a situation such as this, when we have already had a presentation by the National Trust, you would expect me to ask the same questions and probably get the same answers. It seems unfair not to ask you the same questions so please excuse any repetition, but it is good that we get your view on these issues. Why is there not a productive enough nursery industry in Northern Ireland? Why have we been so dependent on importing?

Mr Cregg: We have all been guilty of that. I hold my hands up on behalf of my organisation, in that we have always tended to go for price alone. We were also deceived, in that what we thought was of local provenance was, in fact, anything but local. That spurred us on to look at what we do and why we do it. As we move forward, price will not be the ruling factor when we buy materials. In the past, materials came from clearing houses in the Netherlands and could have had their origins in Turkey or along the Mediterranean. Local suppliers just could not compete.

We need to look at our procurement procedures and policies. We need to give the nurserymen a fighting chance, and that is probably best done by us having contract growing, whereby we can anticipate what our requirements will be three or four years down the line.

The Chairperson: Will you give us more detail on contract growing? Is that the best practice model that we should all look towards?

Mr Cregg: We are doing that now. We are looking for a possible supplier in Northern Ireland. We have a good idea of what our needs are. In the past 15 years, we have planted about one million trees in the Province, so we know that we will need about 750,000 trees, year on year.

The Chairperson: Obviously, commercial interests are involved, but what is the mechanism and what can be expected from contract growing in the long term? It would be very useful if you could provide the Committee with that information, Patrick. In your submission, you are damning about some aspects of the ash dieback crisis, and you demonstrate that the current systems did not work:

"There are no clear protocols ... ensuring appropriate stakeholder involvement in outbreak management teams, and a certain lack of accountability and clarity over lines of responsibility."

You say that you:

"remain concerned that plans to proactively tackle tree disease are weak and share concerns, previously highlighted by the Committee, that Forest Service has not completed a Risk Assessment on the impact of Ash Dieback".

That is the past. Moving forward, credit was given for the fact that we have assessed or surveyed over 800 sites. You will have heard me refer to the more strategic level and ask when the control plan will be produced. Are you able and willing to help the Department to survey those sites in a second wave when leaves appear in the spring? I know that you are, but it is good for that to be emphasised again. If the Department asked you tomorrow to help, would you be ready to do that, Patrick?

Mr Cregg: I will preface my answer by saying that, sometimes, there is a degree of preciousness from Departments in Northern Ireland about who should or should not get involved and who can or cannot help. That may just be my opinion, but I have been around for a long time. The Woodland Trust has a significant track record of achievement, and when we offer our help, I think that it behoves Departments to explore exactly how that could help them. It is not about me; it is about the 8,500 members whom I represent. I have the privilege of sitting here today only because 8,500 people living across the countryside pay an annual subscription to pay my salary to fight on behalf of trees. I represent them, and I come to government and tell Departments that we can help. Sometimes, that help is spurned. However, in answer to your question, Chair, that offer is still on the table.

The Chairperson: Why was the Department quite willing to accept your help in the past with the ancient woodland inventory but seems reluctant to do so this time? Is it because of the media? Can you put your finger on it?

Mr Cregg: The Woodland Trust, with the help of the Environment Agency and the Heritage Lottery fund, spent £750,000 creating the ancient woodland inventory. When we first proffered the idea of creating an ancient woodland inventory for Northern Ireland, we were told that there was no such thing as ancient woodland in Northern Ireland. It is now written into all government documents, so we proved them wrong. When we talked about doing that initially, we were dismissed. However, because we are an independent charity that is here to deliver what our members want and what is best for the Province, we decided to progress it anyway, irrespective of the cynics of this world, and we were proved right.

I think that we all have a role to play. Even if I did not represent the Woodland Trust, I have a role to play in the future of this country, whether on tree disease or educating my children and grandchildren. Offers of help should not be spurned.

The Chairperson: I mentioned the input of the Forest Service at a strategic level in the all-Ireland ash dieback control plan. How important is that plan, and why have you not seen it? How concerned are you that you have not seen it?

Mr Mulligan: I mentioned that in my presentation. It is a massive missing piece of the jigsaw that we need. So much hangs on that plan, not only its ability to bring in stakeholders like us but in two other really important areas. Those areas are research and looking forward, particularly in relation to understanding the disease. A disease modelling tool must be part of that, as must the ability to learn lessons that will inform the processes going forward. So I think that the plan needs to be there, and it needs to be signed off as soon as possible.

The Chairperson: Do you have any rationale for why we still await that plan?

Mr Mulligan: No, we have nothing at all on that.

It would be interesting to ask where the resources have gone. In preparing for this review, we looked through the business planning documents of the Department and the Forest Service. It is very difficult to unpick from their documents what money exists specifically for tackling plant and tree health. Put politely, it is almost invisible.

The Chairperson: You would imagine that, once the disease was on the ground here, the Department would have started to enact the plan or, at least, work one up. Of course, the Department could say that the plan was to survey over 800 sites, which is fair. However, it then talked about the need to

have in place an all-Ireland control plan, but, months later, we have not seen it. That is bound to be of major concern to you.

Mr Cregg: We talk of consultations and stakeholder involvement, but it needs to be deeper than that. There is a group called the outbreak management team, which I think is solely in the Forest Service. I respectfully suggest that, for that team to be meaningful, it needs to extend beyond Forest Service officials. Many people, whether in the conservation sector, the commercial sector, the mills or premier woodlands of this world, could have made a useful contribution to that group rather than being seen as just stakeholders.

The Chairperson: Before I go to members, I want to ask you about the grant for the re-establishment of woodland. During the presentation from the Assembly's Research and Information Service, it was suggested that, under EU law, it may be possible to claim money from Europe. In the aftermath of the recent outbreak, how important will that be, not only to your organisation but for all woodland cover?

Mr Cregg: I keep saying that now is the time to plant trees. Despite all the bad press about larch a few years ago and about ash today, we need more trees in the landscape, and we need to redress the balance. We are bottom of the ladder — I think that Malta is the only country in the European Union with less tree cover. Malta has 1% cover, and we are hovering somewhere between 7% and 8%. Those figures are soon to be released. Now is the time to plant trees and put in place an incentive for doing so. If you create incentives, you will get a greater uptake. That has been shown in Wales, where the incentives are much higher than in Northern Ireland. Farmers have to make a living, so it has to be financially viable for them to plant trees. Planting trees is not a waste of good farmland, and it could be used for firewood, or whatever. However, we need the incentives. It will not cost an awful lot. The incentive for farmers to plant trees is currently £2,400 per hectare; I suggest that we pay them £5,000 per hectare. That would not put a great strain on the Finance Minister's Budget.

Mr Byrne: Thank you for your paper and leaflet. We are picking up much the same story from you as we did from the National Trust.

Do scientists work for you or are they contracted to you? How much scientific expertise do you have?

Mr Cregg: The organisation has 300 staff, ranging from conservationists and scientists to the commercial people who run our fundraising. We have a broad spectrum of disciplines, including scientists.

Mr Byrne: I want to pursue the £2.5 million bid you made to the EU LIFE fund. Was that bid overly modest or can you do something meaningful with £2.5 million?

Mr Cregg: We can do something very meaningful with it. We will not spend that money, but, along with the other partners in the group, we will be the agents who secure it. The universities could be employed to do some of the research. It is not that £2.5 million will come into our coffers.

Mr Byrne: Finally, you talked about the Department and the Forest Service being precious. I wonder whether that is through arrogance or indifference.

Mr Cregg: I do not think that it is indifference. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dobson: That is a very good answer.

Mr Byrne: Do you hope to have a more meaningful role in future? I asked the previous group this question: have you made any policy submissions to enlighten them?

Mr Cregg: We have. A number of years ago, we created a vision for woodland for Northern Ireland. A lot of what was included in that vision was, thanks to the previous Committee, under the chairmanship of your predecessor, Ian Paisley Jnr, reflected in the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010. That brought us from being bottom of the pile in forestry legislation in Europe to the top of the pile and the gold standard. Forestry legislation in Northern Ireland now reflects the wider benefits of forests, not just Sitka spruce.

Mrs Dobson: I think that the Committee Clerk just fell off her chair because of the very truthful answer given to the Deputy Chair.

Thank you, Patrick and Steve, for your briefing. I have previously praised your very good press releases on ash dieback. I would like to hear your views on the Department's reaction to presenting information on the issue to the public. I think that I already know the answer, but I take it that your opinion is that you were not properly consulted by the Department. How could the Department have improved the way in which it involved organisations such as yours?

Mr Cregg: We came to the fore because of ash dieback. We received considerably more calls from members of the public than the Department did. We tested the Department's hotline in November, and we still await a response. That makes me think that —

Mr Byrne: That is the indifference again.

The Chairperson: Maybe the hotline is not so hot.

Mr Cregg: We do not want to alarm members of the public. Significant numbers of people rang to ask me whether an ash tree in their back garden might be diseased. My advice to them is that it is highly unlikely that it is diseased, but, in the fullness of time, if it is, they will know. I appreciate that the Department's officials cannot run round to my house to check the ash tree in my back garden. With our three-point plan, I am trying to create awareness among the public of the joys of trees and the threats to trees.

Mrs Dobson: So you have received many more enquiries than was mentioned earlier, which were 27 by telephone and 15 e-mails?

Mr Cregg: Very much so.

Mrs Dobson: Patrick, are you concerned that your vision of doubling native woodland cover is in serious jeopardy because of the lack of appropriate systems and procedures to tackle tree pests and diseases? We previously discussed, as you know, the failure of DARD to meet its Programme for Government (PFG) targets on woodland planting. Do you feel that the lack of commitment in the current PFG shows that DARD views this as a low priority?

Mr Cregg: For the benefit of your colleagues, 270 hectares of woodland were created last year. The target set by the Minister this year is 200 hectares. Rather than increasing our ambitions, we seem to be lessening them. I am at my wits end' as to how we will ever get somebody to raise the bar. I would have thought that, if you had achieved 270 hectares last year, you would say to your officials that they should make it 400 hectares next year rather than reducing it all the time.

I worked out the other day that to double woodland cover between now and 2050, we would need to create 1,500 hectares of woodland a year and not lose anything through ash dieback or any of the other fellings that are taking place. It is a mammoth task, but it was set by the Executive here at Stormont, and those of you in this room agreed the targets. It behoves whoever is charged with delivering them to get on with it.

Mrs Dobson: That was a very frank and good answer. Thank you very much.

Mr Irwin: I am sorry that I was not here for your presentation. As a farmer, I am aware of the reasons why some farmers are reluctant to plant more trees. The targets have been reduced big time by the Department in the past couple of years, and, as a Committee, we probably should have kept more pressure on in that regard. However, I believe that farmers will have to be encouraged, especially on marginal lands. If we get another year or two like last year, farmers might be more willing if the conditions were right and they were encouraged.

Mr McMullan: What role do you see councils playing?

Mr Cregg: In tackling ash disease or increasing tree planting?

Mr McMullan: Tree planting. I do not see any mention of it in your submission, but I know that you have a very active programme with councils.

Mr Cregg: District councils and Departments have vast tracts of land that are quite expensive to maintain. In fact, many are maintained as mown grass only because that grass is there. If you go out now, you will see the men getting their lawnmowers ready and waiting for the grass to grow so that they can cut it. We say that that land could be better used for planting trees. There are a number of examples of where councils have done that: Carrickfergus Borough Council and Ballymena Borough Council have done some planting with the Woodland Trust, as has Derry City Council. So there are lots of opportunities. Only last week, we, in partnership with Northern Ireland Water, planted trees on seven hectares of land. Northern Ireland Water had been cutting that land as grass, so it was costing it money to maintain. The land has now been converted to forest. Councils can make savings by planting more trees. Councils also have a resource of expertise through their biodiversity officers, and they could be engaged more on the whole question of policing the ash dieback issue.

Mr McMullan: With the review of public administration (RPA) looming within the next year or two, now could be the time to revisit councils. If you were to go councils now and give them a plan that included a definite way of saving money, that would sit favourably with them. What about councils in the South of Ireland?

Mr Cregg: Some have been involved with an organisation called the Native Woodland Trust, which was formed in the Republic of Ireland and works closely with us. We share information and some commercial contacts with it, and it attracts money to do the work. It has been working with some councils, but it is very much in its infancy. Its first project was on the south coast in conjunction with Waterford City Council.

Mr McMullan: Could we open up that market? We talk about an all-Ireland approach and fortress Ireland, which is very successful for the industry. We seem to have all agreed that an all-Ireland approach is the most practical. I do not see that mentioned in your submission at all. We talk about trees that are truly UK-grown and UK tree nurseries, but can we not open that up into an all-Ireland approach so that we get the message on trees out more widely?

Mr Cregg: As an organisation based here, our first preference is to buy trees local to Northern Ireland. If they are not available, our second preference is trees from the Republic of Ireland, and they come from County Wicklow, I think. If they are not available in County Wicklow, our third preference is the south-west coast of Scotland. That is the kind of provenance that we look at, which means that the trees are as close as possible to those that we have here. That is the route we take.

Mr McMullan: I would like you to revisit the issue with the councils. You have a very good programme on tree planting, and I congratulate you on that. RPA provides an opportunity to show councils that there are savings to be made.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentation, gentlemen, and for answering our questions. You were very succinct. This is a very important review for the Committee, so it is good having somebody of your standing and expertise here to give evidence. I am sure that you will look in on the review as we move ahead in the coming weeks.

Mr Cregg: Thank you, Chair.