



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Severe Weather:  
National Sheep Association Briefing

16 April 2013

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

### Severe Weather: National Sheep Association Briefing

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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 William Irwin  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Ian Milne  
Mr Robin Swann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Edward Adamson	National Sheep Association
Mr John Blaney	National Sheep Association
Mr Maurice McHenry	National Sheep Association
Mr Campbell Tweed	National Sheep Association

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Mr Maurice McHenry, the chairman of the National Sheep Association (NSA), Mr Edward Adamson, the association's secretary and Mr John Blaney and Mr Campbell Tweed, who are members of the association. It is good to see you all again to discuss a very important and serious topic. We would rather not have had you up here to talk about this issue, but we are in the depths of a crisis, and we need to see how we can go forward.

**Mr Maurice McHenry (National Sheep Association):** I hope that you do not mind me calling you Paul.

**The Chairperson:** No, you are OK. We know each other well, Maurice.

**Mr McHenry:** Paul, thank you very much for inviting us. We know several members of the Committee, including Oliver. I am a hill sheep farmer who did not suffer, but there are two gentlemen, one on either side of me, who did.

I will draw a line in the sand and say that we cannot change what happened in the past, but we are looking to see what we can do in the future. It is not a question of recriminations because it was a storm that no one could predict. In fact, I will be honest: as a hill farmer, I was not aware of it until I went to Greenmount on the Monday. I did not realise how bad it was or that these people on either side of me were suffering. I had snow up on the hill, but my sheep were housed.

We know that we are seeking to help those farmers who are in difficulty. We know that whatever system of assistance we come up with, it must meet European legislation. It must also be transparent and seen as fair to all concerned.

I will not take up the Committee's time by having to listen to me. I will hand over to the vice-chairman of the association, John Blaney, and then Campbell Tweed.

**The Chairperson:** I apologise, John; I did not know that you were vice-chairman of the association.

**Mr John Blaney (National Sheep Association):** Not to worry, Paul.

Bear with me while I take you back three weeks to set the scene. At that time, some hill farmers were busy lambing sheep with their early lambing flocks. Usually, they have a later lambing flock as well, and those were still on the hills. Some hill farmers, including me, were not lambing at the time. My sheep were two to three weeks off lambing, which has turned out to be a godsend. As everyone knows by now, the snow hit on the Friday morning, and we had 36 hours of drifting snowfall. My son-in-law and I tried to get up to the hill that Friday, but the blizzard conditions were crazy. We could see nothing and do nothing, and, anyway, sheep will not face into the storm; they will go with the storm.

On the Saturday morning, we tried to get up to the hill again. There were huge snowdrifts everywhere and drifting snow. It was dangerous to go much further, so we came back. The snow ceased with us at about 2.00 pm, but, for the rest of the afternoon, the snow just drifted and drifted. It was the same throughout Saturday night.

It was really Sunday morning before we could establish the extent of the problem. From Glenanne Road, I can look across to the hill area, so I scanned what I could with binoculars, but I could account for only 90 of 400 sheep on the surface, so it was a bit of a worry. That afternoon, three of us ventured on to the hill to try to find sheep. We did find sheep, and we took out about 40 or 50 sheep that day, but it is hard to get across to people how exhausting it is tramping through soft snow. Maybe your left foot goes three inches into the snow and your right foot goes in right up to the thigh, so you are left to crawl on your hands and knees across the snowdrift to try to get upright. It really is exhausting.

That weekend, most areas of Northern Ireland had no or minimal lying snow, and people could not believe that other areas were totally swamped. Another problem was that the electricity was off and telephones were down. In our area, we had no radio, no television and no way of communicating with one other, never mind people outside the area. Only through the action of MLAs and others who have contacts with the media did we gradually start to get information out to the public. I thank them because, had they not done so, aid would have been much slower. I thank the Minister, MLAs and, indeed, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) staff, who worked extremely hard trying to get food drops to sheep. In our case, we had a food drop on the Wednesday. After four or five days' starvation, the animals were totally ravenous. I was fortunate in that, on the Thursday afternoon, I had left feed up to the hill because I knew that, with drifting, I would not get there by any means of travel, whether by tractor, quad or whatever. However, after two days of feeding on sheep nuts, with no access to water, sheep stop eating. The silage dropped to them was a godsend and probably saved thousands. The silage was dropped on the hillside because that was the only clear ground, and we were able to bag it and take it down to sheep trapped way down at the river. It kept them going for the first three or four days.

Once the storm was over, we could start to see the extent of the problem. Sheds had collapsed, and sheep were buried and still trapped. Many had simply wandered over the fences because they had been covered by snowdrifts. The sheep just travelled in front of the storm. They strayed all over the place, and some have still not been found. I want to get across to the Committee that some people are still looking for animals. Swift action by the farmers and their neighbours on the Sunday helped to uncover many sheep, and many of those taken out early survived.

Unfortunately, the rescue continued for days and weeks afterwards, and the longer the sheep were buried, the less chance they had of survival. Many of the sheep that were totally buried have not been found yet. In fact, I went up to the hill yesterday, and we still have two huge snowdrifts that we could not possibly get through to pick up the carcasses. We also found that bodies of sheep are starting to be uncovered as the drifts thaw. Another problem is that the thaw is the slowest I have ever witnessed, and there have been three weeks of bitter, biting wind. As I am sure Campbell can verify, sheep that were half-buried when we got to them on the Sunday morning were already dead. They just froze on the surface because it was so cold. We broke icicles off the ears and horns of those that

were buried and took big lumps of snow off their wool, and so on. Three weeks on, there has been no growth yet, and all farmers are suffering as a result.

What do we know now? We know that thousands of sheep, some cattle and some poultry have died, and some dairy cows were not milked for several days because there was no electricity to milk them. Some milk that was taken from the cows could not even be collected because people had no access to allow them to take the milk away. A considerable number of sheds collapsed under the weight of the snow, and many main roads and all side roads were blocked for the weekend. The Minister and her DARD staff organised a food drop, which was crucial at that time. I thank the Minister and all the DARD staff because I know that the Forest Service had their soft-track vehicles out, and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) was busy arranging the collection of feed and organising the helicopters. I thank the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the helicopter crews for their skill in getting feed to very difficult places. I also thank the many farmers who offered feed — that was very important — and the many non-farming neighbours who offered to help.

The hardship scheme is now in place, and the collection of the animals and carcasses from farms is extremely important. There is nothing as depressing for farmers as having to walk past dead animals lying in their farmyard or fields day after day. It has been impossible to gather animals on the more remote and extensive hills, partly because of lack of access through snowdrifts and partly because some have not yet been found. We have to wait for the thaw to continue. The other problem is that we are now three weeks on, and some of the bodies have started to decompose. If you ask farmers to attach a dead animal to the back of a quad and tow it a mile over rough terrain, it is very unlikely that, by that stage, there will be much left. Similarly, some dead animals are in very inaccessible places, and you would be putting your life at risk by trying to tow them out. So would it be possible to put personnel into those remote areas to verify that the animals are dead? I know that there is an environmental issue, but I cannot see how farmers will have the time or resources to collect all these dead animals at the moment because they are all lambing. That may be an issue. We appreciate that the hardship scheme is an EU scheme and that the criteria to qualify must be verifiable and must satisfy the EU.

I will now take you through the list of bullet points that we provided to the Committee, and the first one is the collapsed sheds. Many people thought that they were insured but have discovered that they are not. Maybe DARD could devise a scheme that could provide some assistance to farmers to try to restore some of them. I know of one farmer who has lost three.

Some boundary fences were damaged purely by the weight of the snow. For those of you not familiar with the effects of snowdrifts in hill areas, their sheer weight can drive fence posts and the wire straight down into the ground, so, effectively, there is no longer a fence there. Those fences will have to be replaced in the next few months, so perhaps a scheme could be devised to offer some assistance in replacing them. Also, some roadside fences were damaged by the snow clearance, and there may be an argument as to who is responsible for that and who foots the bill.

As a further consequence of a long period without food, sheep that have had four or five days of starvation will abort their lambs to save themselves. It is the fight for survival, and that has been the case, so many farmers not only lost sheep but brought out sheep that are now aborting lambs.

We are very pleased that the derogation on minimum stocking rates for the less favoured areas (LFAs) for next year has been recognised, and we thank everyone for that.

On the sourcing of replacements, many hill sheep are hefted and born on the hillside itself, and they return to the place where they were reared. To try to have an even spread of grazing across the hill, a farmer will keep the females of particular ewes so that they will return to the same area on the hill. Sheep that are bought in do not have that same sense, so they all stay at the back of the fence and try to get back in again. It takes time to breed up again, and that will be a problem for many hill farmers. The other problem is that, when purchasing livestock for our hill, we find that we can buy sheep only from the north of us. In the past — say 30 years ago — we would have bought sheep from Donegal, which always did well here. We can buy sheep from the Sperrins, but we cannot buy sheep from Glenarm or further down the coast, because they will just not do with us. That more limited choice of animals to purchase will be a problem.

The animals that we managed to get out ate everything that they could see, and rushes were an important part of their diet. Heather is also a very important part of a sheep's diet, not just at that time of the year. In fact, research by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) shows that it is a very important part of a sheep's diet throughout the year. We find that, when spells of snow hit, sheep will

eat rushes and heather, and, if they get access to whins, they will eat those as well, which helps to maintain them. Therefore, I am looking at countryside management, single farm payments and the drive to remove all rushes and whins and cut heather. Perhaps we need to consider striking a balance between animal welfare and satisfying the EU, because I do not think that it understands the problem. The British Isles has, I think, 70% of the heather throughout the world; the rest of it must be in the Falklands.

The cost and availability of fodder has been an issue for all farmers this year.

One other issue that I would like to raise is that of bracken control on these hills. Land with bracken on it is not eligible for a single farm payment and, therefore, not eligible for LFA aid. If a farmer has 50 or 60 acres of hillside covered in bracken, he could lose that land, but we have a derogation for the use of Asulox for one more year. Perhaps I should go further. The new countryside management scheme states that farmers cannot use any insecticide or pesticide, so there seems to be a conflict of interest there. Perhaps, as we have the derogation for one year, there might be some way of allowing farmers to spray the bracken on those areas. The older schemes allowed spot spraying with a back sprayer. It would take a long time to spot spray 50 or 60 acres of bracken, so maybe we could look, if it were possible, at allowing people to spray by helicopter, at least this year.

That is really all that I want to say. I will hand over to Campbell, who may want to add something.

**Mr Campbell Tweed (National Sheep Association):** Thank you, Chairman. The photographs being passed round were copied by my wife, so it is her selection. They show the situation last weekend and on the previous weekend, after the heavy snowfall. The first photograph has a country road in the middle of it, and it was taken on the Sunday, before we got the road cleared. Further down the road, we stopped digging on the Saturday when the snow was higher than the top of our loading shovel. Thankfully, at the behest of Roads Service, a large quarry machine came in on the Sunday and opened up access so that we were able, eventually, to get back to feeding the stock. The photographs showing the sheep were taken on Sunday past. We have only just got access to those sheep and have now gathered them up.

Photographs taken the previous weekend show roadside fences. We have about 600 metres of seriously damaged roadside fence. I am led to believe, and I certainly hope, that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) will deal with that. We will have the fence mended and, hopefully, we can recover the cost. Until the fence is repaired, we have areas of ground that we cannot stock. In my experience, the snow in our immediate area was worse than that of 1963. We do not normally get very heavy falls of snow from the east — snow from the east is normally light — and the drifting was just unbelievable.

So where are we now? We have lost over 100 sheep, and it took us another four days after gaining access to them to get them properly on to the diet. We have been lambing for a few days now, and we are dealing with the consequences. We are doing reasonably well, considering. The other consequence that we will have to deal with for some time is that of the financial after-effects. I heard a previous delegation to the Committee talk about how the banks are behaving. The banks do not appear to realistically address the situation that a lot of businesses are in. Perhaps their credit departments should be sent out to shovel snow for a while — they might take a different view.

I think that the best prospect, although not an immediate one, is this: if we were in England, Scotland or Wales, the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (AMC) would be available to us. It lends up to 60% of the value of a property. At present, that lending is available at about 3% for 25 years, which differs considerably from what is available currently in this country. It so happens that about eight years ago I was approached in England about the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation coming over to operate in Northern Ireland. I was asked to set up a few meetings and so on. I spoke to a few people and expected to hear more. The next time I saw the individual who asked me about it, he said that they had checked out a few legal issues, and there were one or two legal obstacles to the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation operating in Northern Ireland, although it was keen to do so. I do not know what those legal snags are, but I would love the Assembly to address that matter. We would be pushing at an open door as far as the AMC is concerned, and it would be an opportunity, dare I say it, to shake up what appears to be a comfortable status quo for the individuals with whom we are dealing at present.

We are dealing with a lot of physical problems, and obviously there will be difficulties in the financial aftermath. I am absolutely certain that, although we had to deal with typical circumstances in our own situation, many people had a much more difficult time than us and are still living with that.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much for your presentation, gentlemen. You used the time well to get right to the heart of the matter.

My experience of the crisis started on the Friday. On the Friday and Saturday, the issues were blocked roads and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) getting the power back on. I was out on the Saturday and visited farms, and I quickly realised how useless I was standing beside the farmer and sympathising with him. I decided to go in-house and spent the entire weekend on the phone and on the computer

The crisis evolved very quickly from being about blocked roads and power shortages to health and animal welfare. By the Saturday night, we knew the extent of the problem. I quickly decided that we needed people on the ground and called for the Territorial Army (TA) to be mobilised. The Minister then asked for air support, which was an absolute godsend. As John said, there is no doubt about that.

I was very much focused on the crisis and what I had to do to apply pressure on the Department and the officials to get through it. The second phase was the carcass collection scheme. The third element will be the focus on the hardship fund and on what we can do now and in the future.

There are still massive snowdrifts in north and east Antrim. It is the same in south Down. Should the carcass collection scheme be extended beyond 19 April?

**Mr McHenry:** Yes. Although we are all County Antrim men, I should have said that we consulted Ian Buchanan from the Sperrins and Seamus Maginn from the Mourne, so we are representing the whole lot. It is fairly obvious that the scheme should be extended. Edward and Campbell have been saying to me that we will not be able to identify all the dead animals and have highlighted the problem of taking out dead animals after a month. We need to find a way of doing something about that.

**The Chairperson:** The Forest Service and its track machines were very much to the fore in getting over land quickly. Is it still the case that there could be a job for Forest Service personnel to help to locate and move dead stock to a position where it can be picked up?

**Mr Tweed:** In some instances, that could be co-ordinated through the DARD helpline. If it were possible, and the scheme was needed only in specific areas, something could be done for people who are in that situation.

**The Chairperson:** The ingredients of time and fairness need to be included in the hardship fund mix. Has your association come up with a fair way forward? I know that I am putting the onus on you, but it is just to know. We are hearing from individual farmers that it would be better — logistically, procedurally and to be timely — to provide every farm holding with a blanket sum of money. Others would disagree and say that the volume of dead stock would quantify a farmer's loss. Again, there are many complications with that, such as aborted lambs, stock that cannot be found and ewes that might have drifted onto other farms, from where they might have been collected. There are all sorts of complications. How do you see the situation progressing?

**Mr McHenry:** You highlighted what I regard as a difficulty. We have never come up with a straightforward answer stating, "This is the way forward". I would like to hear more on that from John and Campbell, who have suffered.

**Mr Blaney:** We have the same difficulty as DARD in trying to establish how many sheep are actually dead, particularly on those extensive and more remote hills. It will probably be May before we get the full extent, but that may not be what you want. You may want to expedite the hardship scheme much more quickly than that. It is certainly very difficult to get the full picture. The two reasons for that are that some sheep cannot be found, and some farmers are so secretive that they would not tell their wives how many they have lost.

**Mr McHenry:** From a fairness point of view, you would probably have to go with ewes rather than include lambs. With respect, to include lambs would leave it too open and vague. We are talking about being transparent, and I think that transparency would be better achieved by basing the scheme on ewes. However, as John said, allow time.

**Mr Tweed:** A lot depends on where people were in their production cycle when the snow hit. A guy who works for me a bit did not lose many ewes but did lose a lot of lambs over that weekend, which will cost him much of his income this year. So it is only reasonable that the Department makes its best effort to match funds to people's losses. In many cases, it will, hopefully, be only a significant percentage of it.

**Mr McHenry:** We are certainly not trying to put pressure on DARD, Paul. However, we all have confidence that DARD is fair. The NSA would say that we are clear that DARD has always been supportive. We would be happy if DARD officials looked on the ground and came back to the Minister and to you with what they think is a possible and fully transparent scheme. I think that farmers will go with that.

**The Chairperson:** I am sure that members have relevant questions, but I have two final questions. I have tried to take you through a process about what the future may bring — even beyond a hardship fund — in the rebuilding of stock and sheds. What impact has the severe weather event had on the mental state of our farming community? How deeply throughout your membership do you feel a sense of this event having had a massive impact on farmers' mental health? Also, we have a farm modernisation scheme, of which many farmers would say that they have not or could not have availed themselves but would now look towards something such as that to help to rebuild their snow-damaged sheds and buildings. Could that scheme help with rebuilding stock and buildings?

**Mr McHenry:** Edward may wish to say something about the mental health side.

**Mr Edward Adamson (National Sheep Association):** I sheep farm on the coast at Carrickfergus and was very fortunate that the snow went sideways on past my land and stopped at the hills, so I was lucky. You asked about the impact on farmers' mental health. I am sure that you are aware of the age structure of farmers. A lot of them are probably out there on their own. John said that some might not tell the wife about the actual calamity that they are in. It is a problem, and I honestly do not know how you get around it. I know that you are probably not able to give financial aid, but that would probably help those farmers. I do not know how you get people to talk if they do not want to talk. Farmers are, by nature, independent individuals. It is a big problem.

You mentioned the farm modernisation scheme. I had thought of that scheme because there is money there. The problem is that some of those who need help with sheds and fences now had already applied for bits of machinery and reached their limit. That rules them out, which is unfortunate. It seemed like a good idea when I first thought of it, but, thinking deeper, I am not sure that it would work. Putting up sheep sheds and fencing and having proper grazing management sounds like modernisation, but can we get it to those who need it?

**Mr Tweed:** Another aspect of the mental health issue is that most farmers are quite resilient. Once I saw a few ewes doing better than expected and a few lambs on the ground going along with the ewes, I got a great lift. The other side is that people need to feel that they are valued and that they are getting fair treatment. Over and above what the Department will do and what comes in the future, it is basically about how the banks behave. Adding financial stress to the physical stress will be too much for a lot of people.

**The Chairperson:** You talk about the banks, and I appreciate that point. How are you finding the insurance companies? Your list of bullet points states that many farmers may not be insured to make repairs. What is the mind and mood of the insurance companies? Have they paid out to date? Are they looking at ways of clawing back and not —

**Mr Blaney:** Some people to whom I have spoken whose sheds were damaged thought that those sheds were insured for storm damage but have discovered that that is not the case. I know of one gentleman who thought that all his sheds were insured but was then told that the sheds on the out-farm were not insured, which is a bit concerning. It is not that that man is not educated, because he is.

**Mr Adamson:** We had a storm quite a number of years ago. The next townland to me is probably in Scotland. There are not many hedges or much shelter. We had that problem before and reviewed our insurance. This time, we did not have snow, but we did loose roofs; the wooden runners were literally torn off. Those sheds are covered now, but I had specifically made sure that they are covered because of past experience, which others may or may not have had.

**Mr McHenry:** Insurance people usually look for the small print. If it is not there, you are had. A lot of the insurance companies have offered insurance for fire damage but not storm damage. Many farmers are shocked because they thought that they were covered.

**Mr Adamson:** Certain structures are not eligible for storm damage insurance.

**Mrs Dobson:** Thank you for the very moving presentation. I visited Kilcoo in south Down during the bad weather and spoke to farmers who had lost sheep and whose sheds had collapsed. Seven sheds were down within a one-mile radius. I witnessed some amazing acts of community spirit. There were very harrowing scenes, but everyone was looking out for one another. Prior to this evidence session, the Committee had an informal briefing from the south Down hill farmers group. Campbell, you summed it up quite well when you said that people need to feel valued, and they need hope. That ties in with the mental health issues that Edward referred to. Farmers need to see some light at the end of the tunnel that there is a way out of this and that they can go on with their farming. I am a farmer's wife, and I know that farming life is everything. As I said, I witnessed some harrowing scenes, and the farmers had little concern for themselves. They had no heating or electricity, but their only concern was their animals lying dead in the fields.

I spoke to farmers on that Tuesday, and they told me that they had had very little contact from DARD. Have any of your members expressed similar concerns? One farmer told me that DARD comes out only to get you but not to help you. That is a direct quote. That is how he perceived it on that hill in Kilcoo.

The Chair talked about insurance. None of the farmers whose sheds had collapsed found that they were covered for the replacement of the sheds, which is very worrying. Have you been working with the Ulster Farmers' Union to discuss the insurance implications for the sector? It has been such a bitter blow, and farmers do not know how they are going to rebuild everything. Have any of your members told you that they are leaving farming altogether?

You mentioned the sourcing of replacements, which will be expensive. Will your association play an active part in helping farmers to find suitable stock? I think that John said that sheep from Glenarm would not be suitable for south Down. Perhaps your involvement could lead to economies of scale, which could bring down the individual prices of replacements. Together, farmers would be stronger — like a group buying scheme — and, with your help, could bring prices down. Have you explored that?

**Mr Blaney:** No. One issue is that we are all sheep farmers, so we are all involved in lambing at present and have not had time to get out there. It has also been very difficult to get information from other farmers because they are so busy with lambing. Farmers attend to the living first and tidy up the dead afterwards, which has been the case. The crisis could not have come at a worse time of year for hill farmers and sheep farmers because this is their busiest time. Lambing is a stressful time for sheep farmers. There is a lot of stress in houses in which people are short of sleep and tempers are getting very frayed. So from our point of view, it has been hard to get information. Speaking for myself, I have been very busy, and I am sure that it has been the same for others.

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you envisage taking that forward?

**Mr Blaney:** It is a good suggestion. Maybe I did not put this point across clearly enough, but the problem is that the number of pure-bred blackface sheep is very limited. The pool of sheep that will be available will be even smaller this year.

**Mrs Dobson:** So there will be a massive problem with restocking.

**Mr Blaney:** Yes, and farmers will be in financial competition with one another to try to purchase those sheep.

**Mr Tweed:** Can I respond about the DARD enquiries and the local council? On the Saturday, I had phone calls from council staff and a bit of contact with staff on the ground. On the Sunday, I had a phone call that was made on behalf of the permanent secretary to find out what was happening in the area. I had a subsequent call on the Monday from a member of staff who works in DARD Direct but used to work in the Ballyclare office. He asked about the situation on the ground, what DARD could do, what we needed and so on.



**Mr Blaney:** I met the permanent secretary on the Tuesday afternoon so that he could get a feel for the issues.

**Mr McHenry:** There was nothing specific in north Antrim. To be fair, Jo-Anne, I have not heard a single complaint about DARD. I am supportive of DARD and CAFRE; they do brilliant work. What actually happens — it has been alluded to — is that countryside management is seen as inspectorial; people come onto farms who have no understanding of farms. A whole area is being tarred with the same brush because people imagine that that is representative of DARD. It is a small section that is very Europe-oriented: "We do not like heather; we do not like rushes; you must get that out."

**Mrs Dobson:** I appreciate that. I am simply relaying what happened in south Down —

**Mr McHenry:** I am saying that that is one little branch, which is not typical of DARD. As John and Campbell said, without prompting, and as is my feeling, by and large DARD and CAFRE have been very good on the ground. If farmers have had a certain experience in the past, that will be at the back of their minds. Unfortunately, they tar the whole organisation with the same brush, but it is only a small section that has been giving farmers bother. It comes from European overlords putting their rules down.

**Mrs Dobson:** The final part of my question was about the insurance implications.

**Mr McHenry:** As I said to Paul, the problem is that insurers will look at the small print — I am going back to check mine — to see whether storm damage is included. It is only when people look for a claim, whether for a car accident or anything else, that they find that those fellas go looking for the small print: "Did you have that written in?" I think that Campbell, who is a former president of the Ulster Farmers' Union, would agree with that. Storm damage has to be written into the policy. The Minister has spoken about the issue. If you want to put pressure on them, good luck to you.

**Mrs Dobson:** Farmers told me that the insurance applied only to newer buildings. They could not get storm damage insurance, anyway, for a lot of the older buildings.

**Mr Adamson:** Yes, insurance companies will not take on certain buildings. You can understand that they have to draw a line somewhere.

**Mr McHenry:** It is like a car that is unroadworthy; they will not insure it, and that is being truthful. A little bit of that is going on. It is a difficult one, Jo-Anne. I know where you are coming from.

**Mr Adamson:** It was a piece of information that they did not have. When they insured their buildings, they thought that they were covered. I am aware of it because I went through this situation a few years ago. It was only because of that experience that I know about it. For some farmers, this is their first claim.

**Mrs Dobson:** Has that realisation further exasperated the situation?

**Mr Adamson:** Yes. Where will the farmers get the money to fix those sheds?

**Mr McHenry:** I will go back to Campbell's point because perhaps he has come up with something that you may want to follow up. It is about the availability of money and getting somebody to rattle the status quo and the cartel that is not willing to loan money and is using the opportunity to come down with a heavy fist. Campbell certainly knows his stuff. In England, Scotland and Wales, for example, farmers can get 60% to 65% of the value of a holding at 3% for 25 years. That would really scatter our existing banks and make them take a different approach. What is coming across is that the banks, even more than the insurance companies, must be very flexible and understand that it is going to take not one year but a number of years for some of those people to recover.

**Mr Irwin:** Thank you for your presentation. I am a farmer, and I know the trials and troubles of everyday farming without having to face what you have had to face. The £6,000 hardship payment is a small amount of money. I put that point to the Minister last week. The proposal from the Department is that the cost of lifting dead stock will be taken out of that payment, which seems grossly unfair. I want to hear your opinion on that.

It is difficult to quantify the real losses on each individual farm, given that sheep could have aborted and so on. Would it not be simpler to have one payment to each farmer? That would also have its problems, but it will be very difficult to quantify different payments to individual farmers. It could take months on end to resolve that. What is your view on that?

**Mr McHenry:** Maybe both you men feel compromised. *[Inaudible.]*

**Mr Tweed:** I hope that, when negotiations on the payment for the disposal of the fallen stock are done, the Department drives a hard bargain so that what is taken out of the de minimis payment, if that is the way it goes, is minimised.

**Mr Adamson:** I worry. One man could have lost 10 sheep; John has told me of cases in which someone has lost 300 sheep. If those two men get the same payment, are you going to turn farmer against farmer? I know that it is difficult to do it pro rata. Will £6,000 even make a dent to the guy who has lost 300 sheep?

**Mr Irwin:** Absolutely not. The guy who lost 10 sheep could have 30 or 40 aborted. It is going to be very difficult to quantify.

**Mr Adamson:** That is possible. A lot of unknowns are still to come. The lamb could die inside her, and the whole thing could be dead by the end of this month.

**Mr Blaney:** If I were asked to administer the hardship payment, I know that it would be extremely difficult. We still do not know the extent of the deaths. Of course, you have the fraudsters who are busy trying to angle their way in. It might have to come down to a simple payment to whoever.

**Mr Tweed:** Something that could be look at on ahead is what is done about the less-favoured area compensatory amount in the next scheme. We are in a situation whereby what is being paid per hectare is nowhere near the European limit. There is a considerable ceiling that could be approached. I have no idea whether that can be done on any kind of regional basis, but it is certainly a vehicle that could be used.

**Mr Swann:** Thanks, gentlemen, for your presentation. I know some of your faces. You touched briefly on mental well-being. As the Chair declared, Campbell and I sat on the board of Rural Support. Is there enough backup in the Department or the agencies that have day-to-day dealings with farmers to be able to identify people who are in need? John, you referred to farmers who will not tell their own wife how many sheep are dead. That is a common occurrence across the farming community in Northern Ireland; a farmer will keep that pressure to himself before he will tell his wife or family. Have we educated our contact services enough? That mental pressure on our agriculture industry has been there for a long time.

**Mr McHenry:** Health and well-being checks are being offered at marts and so on. Perhaps we could use those more in the next two, three or four months. In north Antrim, there are the Armoy and Ballymena marts, but it could be done throughout Northern Ireland. The agencies and experts go in and maybe tease it out with farmers who might be willing to talk and then share their problems with their wife. Despite what people think, farming is very lonely. I remember a fella who had a hell of a good farm, but he left farming. He went into the building trade because he said that farming was the loneliest job that you can do. You are on your own. That was in the good times. At the minute, I accept that there is tremendous pressure. It may be that we need to go to marts and so on and have clearly identified organisations there to talk to farmers.

**Mr Tweed:** One of our biggest problems — Maurice and John mentioned it — is that people are not inclined to talk. It is really the make-up of a lot of people here; they can be hurting like hell inside, but they do not want to let anybody know. In a lot of cases, people tend to feel that they are carrying a burden like nobody else.

**Mr McHenry:** May I say at this point that we think of Kieran and his son-in-law. We appreciate very much that people are carrying burdens and do not share or talk or tell. It is not unique to farmers, but Robin is right; for farmers, it is a very lonely thing. We need agencies to get out there and make themselves available. You brought up a very good point. Mental health issues need to be tackled.

**Mr Swann:** Even across north Antrim, side roads are still hedge-high with snow and have not been cleared because of the slow thaw. As dead stock starts to thaw, will there be a problem with vermin and disease control if we let out sheep and replacement lambs? John, you talked about not removing those sheep. Is there a danger there as well?

**Mr Blaney:** Half of the sheep have already been devoured. The Sunday after the snow, I saw a flock of 42 grey crows. We have ravens as well. The side of the sheep that was on the surface was already gone. We also have foxes and badgers, so nature takes its course.

**Mr Swann:** Campbell, you mentioned the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation. How long ago was that?

**Mr Tweed:** I was approached about eight years ago. I do not know what the legislative hitch was, but there was a legislative difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and that was the barrier to entry at that time.

**Mr Swann:** Changes were made following the Presbyterian Mutual Society affair, with the Financial Services Authority coming in, so there may be something that could be done to have that avenue reopened very easily. I will give you a shout.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentation. I sympathise with you, and I know the position that you are in. I know John and have visited Campbell at his place, so I know that their stories are quite true.

We need to put to bed the issue of whether the Department did enough because it is no longer useful to talk about that. We all know now that the Department did what it could and when it was supposed to have done it. Let us move forward to see how we can help the industry to recover.

The banks announced a fund of £10 million. Have the banks been in touch with farmers about the administration of that fund?

**Mr Blaney:** They certainly have not been in touch with the National Sheep Association. Edward?

**Mr Adamson:** No, I have had no contact from them. Maybe Campbell has had contact with the Ulster Bank.

**Mr Tweed:** All I can say is that any contact so far has been theoretical. In my experience, there has been no delivery. Beyond that, I do not know.

**Mr Adamson:** I think that only one bank is involved.

**Mr McMullan:** Yes, the Ulster Bank.

**Mr Adamson:** I have heard nothing from the Ulster Bank or from anybody who has been offered help by it.

**Mr Tweed:** I was talking to my accountant, who said that the real problem is that an awful lot of what farmers are dealing with is long term, and many banks work to short-term horizons.

**Mr McMullan:** I appreciate that, but you have not heard from the bank at all, so it will be interesting to see what way it plans to administer that money.

There has been a lot of talk about the farm modernisation scheme. As far as I can remember, it did not deal with, or include funding for, sheds. You were right, Edward, about most farms having used up their entitlements to that.

**Mr Adamson:** Yes, they have already reached their ceiling.

**Mr McMullan:** The farm modernisation scheme can give false hope because when you look into its workings —

**Mr Adamson:** At first, it sounded like a good idea, but when you get down to the nitty-gritty, you need to put something else in place.

**Mr McMullan:** That is correct.

**Mr Blaney:** I spoke to a man badly affected by the recent storm, and he said that he applied to three different tranches of the scheme and was not successful in any of them. He does not hold out an awful lot of hope for a successful outcome.

**Mr Adamson:** He still has not got any money from the scheme, and those who were successful cannot reapply.

**Mr McHenry:** My feeling is that most people in the affected areas have not got much out of the farm modernisation scheme. I do not think, Oliver, that too many of them have. However, I do not think it will be a big issue because the Department has the postcodes of the areas that were badly affected, so it will be easy to identify the farmers. A high percentage could benefit from the farm modernisation scheme if we could arrange that the money could be given to building, possibly fences, including internal fences, which will also have been destroyed.

**Mr Tweed:** We had some fences taken out by an avalanche, believe it or not.

**Mr Adamson:** It would be fairer if another scheme were devised to make money available to help.

**Mr McMullan:** What about carcass collection? The Minister has extended the scheme until 19 April and stated that she will revisit that deadline if need be, so the door is not closed on that.

**Mr Adamson:** That sounds reasonable.

**Mr McMullan:** We have to get that message out as well: the door will not close on the 19 April deadline. The Minister said that she will revisit it, if need be, prior to then.

Do your members know about the stocking density levels? Farmers are very worried about that. That message has to go out to farmers, too. They can now claim, in exceptional circumstances, for a drop in stocking levels. That claim form comes out tomorrow, on 17 April, but it has to be filled in by 15 May. If not, there will be no comeback. I think that it will take a bit of pressure off some of your members who have lost stocking density.

**Mr Adamson:** It will take a bit of the mental pressure off, too.

**Mr McMullan:** If I may move on quickly to the mental health issue raised earlier today by a group of farmers from the Down area, and you have also mentioned it. Other Departments should not be waiting to step in because all Departments have signed up to the rural White Paper action plan. Rather than waiting to be asked, they should be ready to move in on the back of that. That includes moving on mental health issues and providing help to families and to any ongoing projects. A lot of work is going on through programmes such as the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) project. That could now be extended to farming families. I totally agree with you that farmers are a breed of people who do not show their feelings. I know that farmers in my area, the glens, do not show their feelings too much, so I understand where you are coming from. However, this is vital. Let me say again that, from today, Departments should not wait; they should step into the breach now because all have signed up to the rural White Paper action plan. That is all that I have to say on that.

Let me turn to insurance cover. As a businessman, I have always said that no insurance company should take you on without telling you what you are not covered for. People are paying for something that they think they have. Always bear that in mind when you renew your policy. It is no good taking money off people and refusing to pay out when something goes wrong. That is what insurance companies are for, and, if they have not told people exactly what they are insured for, that is hardly fair on those paying the premiums.

**Mr Byrne:** First, I apologise that I had to leave the Committee to attend Question Time. I welcome the presentation by the NSA. Obviously, we are hearing a mixed bag of views and commentary. Earlier today, we heard from four farmers from the Mourne area, and their experience was harder edged. I am trying to work out how helpful or otherwise DARD was on the ground. Some of you guys received

phone calls from the permanent secretary, so you must have felt privileged and welcomed that. Was that the experience of all farmers?

**Mr Tweed:** In my situation, the phone call was really intended to get a handle on what circumstances were like in general; it was not specific to us as individuals. The permanent secretary wanted to know what conditions were like on the ground, what the situation was, what we were really dealing with and how bad it was. That was the tenor of the conversation.

**Mr Byrne:** Was there enough support on the ground, on a farm-to-farm basis? Have officials been liaising directly with individual farmers and helping them to account for their losses?

**Mr McHenry:** I do not know about individual losses. There was certainly liaison to get the feed and so on that John and Campbell were looking for. The opportunity was there for farmers to liaise using DARD's helpline. I know that food was dropped. In my opinion, quite a lot of food was dropped in north and east Antrim because a Chinook helicopter was up for two or three days.

On the Wednesday after the event, when I tried to get to Torr Head and Cushendun, I saw a jeep that looked as though it had been cut out of an ice cream. It was difficult to drive up there, and it was difficult for officials to get there. As you said, Paul, the only way to get feed in was to use the Chinook. I would like to think that, in the long term, DARD officials would be willing to give advice. However, other than getting food to the stock, I do not see what more they could have done. Maybe I am being naive.

**Mr Blaney:** The big problem is — I cannot re-emphasise this enough — that people were lambing sheep, so their priority was to get as many of the sheep that were alive landed safely on the ground and get shelter for them. It was very difficult. One man in the Torr Head area told me that it took him two hours to move 15 ewes and twin lambs a distance of about 300 yards. He had another batch of sheep about 2 miles down the road that he did not get to for three days. That was the reality of the situation.

**Mr Byrne:** I appreciate that. It was an unprecedented storm in those areas.

Further to that, has the National Sheep Association come to a conclusion yet about whether it wants an emergency aid package or a hybrid of emergency aid and some sort of compensatory allowance for the actual losses?

**Mr McHenry:** We are bound by what EU legislation allows.

**Mr Byrne:** Have you guys come to a conclusion about what you would like?

**Mr McHenry:** You heard John say that giving equal compensation to the man who lost 10 sheep and the man who lost 300 would appear tough.

**Mr Blaney:** May I qualify that?

**Mr McHenry:** Go ahead.

**Mr Blaney:** There are some people who lost 10 sheep, but they had only 30, and there are others who lost 200 sheep, but they had 2,000. If you want to go by percentage loss, that is a different ball game.

**Mr Adamson:** I think that there needs to be a hybrid approach. Something immediate is needed to get things moving, but there is a longer-term element. A few of the things on our list cannot be fixed tomorrow. Sheep have gone from those hills, and it will be two or three years before they are all replaced. Also, there will not be many out fixing roofs right away because of cash flow problems. There are longer-term things, and it will take a bit of time to get back to square one.

**Mr Byrne:** I appreciate that.

Does the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation work in a similar way to what was the Agricultural Credit Corporation (ACC) in the Republic?

**Mr Tweed:** I suspect so, but I do not really know. As far as I am aware, the ACC in the South was taken over by Rabobank.

**Mr Byrne:** That is right.

**Mr Tweed:** The Agricultural Mortgage Corporation in England was taken over by Lloyds Bank, which is a clearing bank that does not currently operate in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Byrne:** A Northern Ireland bank, the Ulster Bank, announced a £10 million special aid fund. How is that working?

**Mr Tweed:** None of us has any experience of receiving any of that.

**Mr Byrne:** Is it an illusion then?

**Mr McHenry:** The bank certainly has not contacted the National Sheep Association. Whether it has contacted other organisations, we do not know.

**Mr Byrne:** How many farmers are members of your organisation?

**Mr McHenry:** Nearly 200.

**Mr McAleer:** Thank you for coming. This session has been very insightful and given us a sharp understanding of some of the difficulties experienced.

Mr Byrne covered some of what I was going to ask, but I want to go back to the hardship fund. DARD said that over 611 farms had already benefited from collection, which indicates the numbers on the scheme. The Minister is on the record as saying last week that she would give more details of the scheme and how it will apply as soon as possible. I understand that this is a hardship scheme and not a compensation scheme as such. Am I picking up from you that we should, perhaps, make representations to the Minister to try to get information out as soon as possible about how the hardship scheme will be implemented? Would that be helpful?

**Mr McHenry:** Yes, farmers need to know how the hardship scheme will be implemented as soon as that becomes clear. I have a feeling that you are toying with ideas of how to do this because it is not clear. It is not easy to come up with a hardship scheme. Certainly, when you come up with it, it must be widely publicised so that the general public know about it as well as the farmers who are affected.

**Mr McAleer:** I picked up from last week's debate that the option of de minimis aid, as opposed to other options, was the quickest and most efficient way to implement it. It may still be available in the future through EU channels. Is that correct?

**Mr Tweed:** May I just reflect on the last weather aid scheme? I was the individual who kicked the whole thing off with Bríd Rogers, when she was Minister. Taking cases through Europe and then coming up with satisfactory results at this end proved to be a difficult process for both the Department and the industry. That route had its own problems. This is one of those situations in which there are no easy answers. However, the important thing is that people do not have their hopes dashed. It is one thing for people to get a bit of help on the way up, but, if people were to discover that what they were getting was a fraction of what they thought was coming, that would be the worst of all worlds.

**Mr McMullan:** It is worth mentioning that the Minister has already looked at the European Union solidarity fund. That is why the scheme is being rolled out now as a matter of urgency. As you know, it could take a long time to get through the endless paperwork required by Europe. Even then, you are not guaranteed any money. The Minister has looked at all options.

An issue not yet mentioned, and which I think should be considered when this is all over, is the breakdown in communication. There was no telephone connection. The mobile phone network was totally down. In this day and age of global communication, it is wonderful that people were able to communicate at all without modern technology.

**Mr McHenry:** I would like to make one point, Paul. Joe asked a good question about members. We have almost 200. We could not have foreseen the snow. We held a series of events on feeding sheep and getting ready for lambing. About 600 people came to five meetings held all over Northern Ireland: the Mourne, the Sperrins and the glens of Antrim. We had meetings on anthelmintic worming and resistance to worming, and, again, 600 or 700 people came to those. They were all organised by Edward. Two years ago, you came to our sheep event, Paul.

**The Chairperson:** I did.

**Mr McHenry:** About 2,000 people come to that event. You do not have to be a member to avail yourself of the benefits of the National Sheep Association. I should say that clearly. We are having a sheep event on 1 July 2013 at Ballymena mart and will send you all a formal invitation. You will get a chance to meet sheep farmers who have been affected by this event, and others. You will all be very welcome. You will see the National Sheep Association at its best and find out what it does. You will get a better idea of who we are from our wider membership than from just the four of us here.

**The Chairperson:** Maurice, thank you very much for your presentation. Gentlemen, thank you all. DARD officials will give evidence now, and you are quite entitled to stay for that. I know that time is pressing on, but the offer is there anyway.

**Mr McHenry:** I think that some of us want to stay. I will stay for a little while, but will have to leave because my wife is picking me up.