



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Tree Disease and Plant Health:
DARD Briefing

10 December 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Frew (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr William Irwin
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Ian Milne
Mr Robin Swann

Witnesses:

Dr Alistair McCracken	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
Mr Malcolm Beatty	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Jim Crummie	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Stuart Morwood	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome Malcolm Beatty, the chief executive of the Forest Service; Stuart Morwood, the director of woodland development; Alistair McCracken, a principal scientific officer in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI); and Jim Crummie, an agricultural inspector. You are very welcome, as always. Members will have had a chance to read your briefing paper, but, as it is a very important issue, I will allow you up to 10 minutes to present to the Committee. I remind members to keep questions clear, concise and short. That will enable us to have more time to go round again. We have been given photographs to look at as we go along.

Mr Malcolm Beatty (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thank you very much, Chairman. I will introduce my team. Jim Crummie is new to this Committee, as well as to the plant health bit. Jim is part of the team that is going to join us in Forest Service as we bring the two plant health organisations together. Alistair McCracken is the man who keeps me right. He is a "glass half full" man; I am "glass half empty" when it comes to disease. Stuart rescues me at every opportunity on policy. That is the team.

Previously, you urged us to consider what plan B might look like, so we thought that we would share this with you. These are photographs from our colleagues in the South, on the Leitrim site, where they have found ash disease circulating in the wider environment. This is the aftermath of the clearing operation that they have done there. They have gone in and ploughed 250 metres to 300 metres from the source of infection and taken all hedgerows out. That is a very appropriate thing to do at this stage of the disease. We will get into that later on; that is the sort of thing that we have been talking about here. However, the main bits are to do with the debate, and that is what we are here for. Thank you, Chairman.

The Chairperson: OK. You have no presentation?

Mr Beatty: That is the presentation.

The Chairperson: You are happy enough to go on? OK. You will know that this is something that the Committee has been very much involved in, and that it has prioritised tree disease. It started this time last year, I think, and has progressed. Of course, there was a debate in the Chamber, and a review and a report out of that, which you responded to. In your response, you accepted all the recommendations. You did that across the board, with everything. If you were a sceptical man, you would say, "We'll just agree to everything here and hope it goes away". How would you counter that opinion?

Mr Beatty: Obviously, I am here to represent my Minister. The Minister accepted them; the Minister said that we are going to do those things. Of course, we are going to do that. Has everything happened on day one? No, obviously not. There is quite a lot of organisation to be done, and maybe that is the first thing to focus on. The permanent secretary announced that he wanted to reorganise the Department and to bring plant health into forestry. I think that that gives us a good base on which to do all of the other things. Jim's team will be joining me. We will also become responsible for the policy unit. That means that we will get a coordinated view of plant health, and we are in a better position to address these issues. That is the background, and that is pretty much where we are at the moment. Other things are ongoing, but we thought that once we got that nucleus together, it would give us quite a big resource. I think that we should be able to address all of the issues. The Committee's recommendations were sensible. Why would we not do them? It is now a timetable to get those things done.

The Chairperson: Yes. Again, I know that time takes time. It takes time to gather people together into a committee forum or some sort of task force in order to get some things done. A lot of the words that you used are words that officials would use in order to buy time or delay. Do we now plan for a plan? Do we now look at strategy? Do we now look at research? Where do we go from here? Where are all of the doing words? Where are the action words?

Mr Beatty: Jim is tasked with doing the project plan, so his brief is giving us the project initiation document (PID) to take us through the project and implementing that project, which is to bring the organisation together. That will put us in a position to deal with the day job. The second bit of that is to create some strength for Stuart on the policy side to start thinking about where we are going on the way through. We cannot do anything unless we get the resource in the right place. That is why we are where we are today.

I should add that the intention is that Jim and Stuart, in his policy role, will report to me very early in the new year. We will not wait until the next business year. There is an impetus, if you like, to get momentum here, and that is part of that.

The Chairperson: How has the setting-up and changing of resource impacted on the resource of the Department? For a long time, we have been looking for a financial subsequence, or a reaction even, from the Department, but that has not come, even with all the work that you have done through plan A to try to eradicate the disease. What impact will that have on resource, and why have we seen nothing come through yet?

Mr Beatty: I will update you on what dealing with the disease has cost us so far and then tell you what the future is. These are estimates compiled from asking staff what percentage of their time they spend on the task. Obviously, there is a bit of guesstimating involved. Our best estimate is that we have spent almost £600,000 in two years. That is since this time last year, which bridges two financial years. In round terms, two thirds of that cost has been picked up by Forest Service and one third by the Agri-Food inspection Branch (AFIB). In Forest Service, the one for which I have the most detail, something like 40 people are involved. It is a huge effort, spread over many people. However, perhaps half a dozen people picked up the lion's share of that. Stuart will have spent around half his time on the two three diseases, and there is a cost to that. Between a fifth and a third of the afforestation and plant health branch's time will have gone on that area of work. The consequence of that is that we have not done as much policy work as we wanted to on afforestation. That is an early casualty. The schemes are still going, and the development of "Where next?" is one of the problems.

There are other bits. We are working on the geographic information system (GIS) quite a lot. That is the administrative background. That has been the bulk of our bit. The rest of that expenditure is really

about the doing, so one of my foresters spent two thirds of the year on it: two thirds last year and one third this year. That involves managing the teams that are going out to help people remove the trees. Other staff have had to work a bit harder to cover for that. Their main job was setting contracts and supervising contracts, so people are sharing that load. Out of that half dozen, half a man year has been spent. People have been able to manage their work at the margins, and that is how it has got done. That is why people in forest parks have not seen a huge impact on things, but it cannot keep going like that.

On Jim's side, slightly fewer staff are involved, but there are still five to six staff involved across the two years, and that has had the impact of three man years last year and two man years this year, which will probably rise to three by the end of the year. That would mean fewer inspections in some areas and a little more risk. That is probably the fairest way in which to say that. Overall, those are not huge numbers, but they are important to small organisations. Looking forward and falling out of the work that Jim's colleagues did in the interim, the permanent secretary has already said that, if we want to do this properly, it will need in the order of another half a million pounds of resource spent every year. That is to be spent not on disease control but planning, working through that, and all the policy stuff that is in the paper. That is where we have to get to next year, so Jim's job, having got the concepts, is to scale it out and ask, "Where are these posts? What are they doing? Where do they work to? What is the outcome of all of that?" That is very much what his project is about. We are now at the stage of the PID. We have had a few meetings, and we will be meeting again next week to add some beef to the business plan. We will start talking it through with our trade union colleagues and make it happen.

The Chairperson: You mention both levels there. There is the policy high end. You said that it is two thirds the Department and one third AFIB. Even at the forester's end, it was two thirds last year and a third this year. You are talking in percentages, so that is great. Although you have said that you have been able to work through margins and get the work routines sorted out, that still must have a massive impact. The question that I ask is this: while that forester was spending two thirds of his time last year assisting the Department eradicating the disease, what should he have been doing?

Mr Beatty: He was part of a team that lets contracts. Other team members would have picked up that work. He has a few foresters who work to him, so they started to pick up more of that load. The kinds of jobs and contracts that they supervise are rhododendron cutting, planting and things that industrial staff would have done for us in the past. You can cope with one person being out of the thing. Had two or three people been out of it, it would have been more challenging. This has been about coping and making the best of it that you can.

I think what you were getting at is this: if the Department had given us extra money, could I have used that? The answer is probably not. I need very experienced senior foresters and very experienced senior inspectors such as Stuart and Jim. Half a million pounds or whatever amount of money will not give me any more of those. I have to either grow those in the organisation or recruit at the bottom end to fill the positions. Money will probably not help in the middle of a crisis unless it is to do a very basic job, such as tree inspection. AFIB certainly did that. It took on temporary staff to help with that. We did not need to do that because we were not doing so much of that. Money itself does not help. However, it helps in the longer term, in giving you resilience so that when the next crisis comes you are better able to prepare for it.

The Chairperson: I was not getting at the financial aspects. It is as much to do with operational matters, man hours and people's time as it is to do with finance. However, in the operational sense, that itself comes at a cost.

You said that you cannot do this on your own, which leads me on to my next question. One of the spines of the Committee's recommendations was stakeholder involvement. The Committee was concerned at the lack of meaningful and real engagement from DARD and Forest Service. Although stakeholders acknowledge the work that you are doing, they have always said that they could have helped and assisted in a much greater sense. We now hear that a one-day all-island conference on ash dieback will be held in April 2014. With all due respect, that is not really what we meant by stakeholder engagement.

Mr Beatty: I understand that.

The Chairperson: Where is the stakeholder engagement? How can you deploy the expertise of the stakeholders and the people out there who are — let us be respectful to them — specialists in their field to help and enhance the work that Forest Service and DARD are doing?

Mr Beatty: There are two aspects to that. One is that the conference itself is relevant to that. The course of the two diseases has been very challenging in scientific terms. Alistair will speak a bit more to that. There was so much that we did not know. We know a little bit more now. The conference is about imparting that knowledge. At the end of it, we will ask, "What are we going to do with the disease over the coming year?". That knowledge transfer at the conference will be very much part of the stakeholder engagement. You say that people have expertise in the area. However, we had as much expertise, and we have a lot more now. It is the business of transferring that expertise.

Dr Alistair McCracken (Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute): The focus of the conference will be very much on where the science is at that moment in time. We are aiming to bring in scientific expertise, particularly from the Continent, where they have experience of the disease. That will be very much the focus of the conference.

Mr Beatty: On the wider bit and how you engage that —

The Chairperson: Sorry to interrupt, but is April 2014 the right time to be having that debate?

Dr McCracken: It is as good a time as any, as it is at the start of the season. Science is always an ongoing, rolling thing, so you never actually get to an end point. Then probably is the right time. There will be a discussion before the fungus starts to sporulate for the summer. If things need to be researched or inspections need to be done, that discussion can be had at that stage. We can assess whether we need to change what we look for in the incoming summer, so it is actually quite a good time to have the conference.

The Chairperson: Sorry, Malcolm. I interrupted you there.

Mr Beatty: The second part of that is that 'Going for Growth' contains a very clear recommendation about developing plant health policy. I met one of the leaders of that recently, and his request to me was to create a stakeholder forum akin to that for animal diseases. I plan to run that in the spring, probably before the conference. We are trying to create a forum where stakeholders can come and meet us. That is very much around the policy end and the actions. It is still not getting to what you are getting at, which, I think, is how you engage on the nuts and bolts of disease. I will come to that bit now.

We wrestled all last year with how to make that happen. There are two bits to it. One is what the professionals in the field have and the other is what the citizens in the field have. Those are two distinct things. We had contact with the professionals, and they made some contribution. It is for them to say whether they could have made more or not. They were certainly invited. I am not going to say any more about that. They were invited, and we valued their help.

The biggest challenge is identifying where the disease is. That is about observation. If people have plants on their farm, in their garden, or wherever, we rely on observation. However, the diseases are very subtle and not easily diagnosed. Therefore, there is always a balance to be struck between getting the information, putting it through some sort of triage process and then sending somebody out to look at the situation. That is where the discussion in GB is at the moment, and our North/South discussions are on the same page. We want to create some sort of reporting forum. We think that it should be done on an all-Ireland basis, but we fully intend to draw on the lessons learned and models developed in GB. For example, there is Tree Alert. Stuart, perhaps you can say something about that.

Mr Stuart Morwood (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Tree Alert is a GB Forestry Commission system. It is web-based and primarily aimed at the forestry industry. It enables individuals to report in. Those reports are then fed through to an agency of the Forestry Commission called Forest Research, which triages those, and then the inspectors take over the necessary inspection.

Mr Beatty: The reporting end — the first bit — is where people who are not the Department can help a lot. When it comes to dealing with the actual issue, that is the Department's work. We have the authority to do that under law. Nobody else has. There is a distinction there.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your answers. Sorry, just on that, I should have explained that this map shows larch disease.

Mr Beatty: Ash disease.

The Chairperson: Sorry, is that —

Mr Morwood: No, the Chairman is right.

The Chairperson: Sorry, the map, not photographs.

Mr Beatty: The map shows larch disease, yes. Sorry, I thought you were talking about photographs.

Mr Irwin: I apologise for not being here for your entire presentation. I see that ash dieback has been identified at 87 different sites in Northern Ireland. Given that, at this time of year, I imagine that ash dieback would be more difficult to identify, as there is not the same growth of trees, it does not look good in your view for spring and summer. It is quite obvious that the disease has a bit of a grip here.

Mr Beatty: Those 87 sites are all made up of trees that were introduced into the country. None of those sites is has disease spreading to the wider environment.

Mr Irwin: None of them? OK.

Mr Beatty: I mentioned earlier about the glass being half full. The glass-half-full version is that we have got on top of the disease now, we have a good chance, and we have eradicated it, as there are no spores left to circulate. The glass-half-empty version is that we were too late. We do not know that, but it is certainly true that, although the disease is at a low level throughout Ireland, it is certainly worth doing a lot, even just to keep the volume of spores at a low level to allow the part of the ash population that has resisted to develop and exhibit that resistance. That would be one way of doing that.

Mr Irwin: In the main, the disease has been in saplings. Are you saying that the older trees have a certain amount of resistance?

Mr Beatty: No, you allow the older trees to produce new seed, and the new seedlings, which are resistant, are the ones that will survive. You are better to test that at low levels of inoculation, says he, turning to his science adviser. *[Laughter.]*

Dr McCracken: Yes, to some extent. The level of resistance in any ash population is quite small, but it is really important at this point to keep the inoculum level as low as we possibly can, because, before a disease will become an epidemic, it has to reach a certain level. Therefore, even if the disease is present — the pathogen is present — if you can keep it at that very low level, it will not become the epidemic that it otherwise might.

Mr Buchanan: To follow on from that, what progress has been made on the reduction of plants imported to Northern Ireland? A lot of the difficulty seemed to lie with imported plants. The Committee raised concerns about the plants that were coming in and causing the problems.

Mr Beatty: One of the first things that we did, which the Committee approved, was to bring in legislation to control the movement of young ash plants.

Mr Morwood: The emergency legislation regulated the import of young ash plants, and they could not be brought into the country unless they came from an area that was free from Chalara ash dieback. Since that emergency legislation came into place, there have been no imports of ash, because the plant health authorities of the countries that used to send ash to us were not prepared to give the trees that status.

Mr Buchanan: You are satisfied that no diseased trees are coming in or being exported to here.

Mr Morwood: There are no ash trees coming into the country at present, as they would have done prior to the outbreak.

Mr Buchanan: Does that apply to ash only?

Mr Morwood: That applies to ash. The emergency legislation was specifically aimed at ash trees.

Mr Beatty: We discovered that there were two really distinct trades. The first was the trade in forest trees, which has certainly stopped completely, because nobody will take the risk of planting trees that would fail, as they would not then get their grant. The second major market was very much at the amenity horticulture end — the trees for towns, roundabouts and roadsides — and that was a much bigger trade than we thought. That also stopped, not because of grant aid, but because it is prohibited.

Mr Jim Crummie (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): To reinforce that point, we introduced an administrative process through which all plant imports are monitored. Shipping manifests are populated on to a TRIM system, and the inspectors prioritise their inspection programmes using that intelligence and information on what has been landed and moved to various premises, such as nurseries that provide material for roundabouts and amenity sites.

Mr Buchanan: The map refers to larch, and I see that most of the problems seem to be east of the Bann. Are checks done for diseased larch?

Mr Beatty: Import checks?

Mr Buchanan: Yes.

Mr Beatty: What is the status with larch?

Mr Morwood: There is no longer any grant support for planting larch. The spread of the disease, unlike that of Chalara, which Malcolm mentioned in response to Mr Irwin, is occurring in the country at the moment and is predominantly windborne. The spores that are produced on the larch of the disease *Phytophthora ramorum* (*P ramorum*) are moving on the wind and the rain in the country. Our strategy is to remove — to fell — affected trees to reduce the inoculum and the spore levels and prevent the disease spreading. We are not so concerned about the disease being introduced through larch. Larch planting has almost come to halt.

Mr Beatty: The main vector for ramorum disease is probably rhododendron rather than larch. We deal with larch because it spreads diseases in the country, but it would have come in on a different plant. It is a different disease and has a lot more hosts.

Mr Buchanan: West of the Bann, only a few sites have been identified as having a problem. Have all the other sites west of the Bann been inspected to ensure that there is no disease in them?

Mr Morwood: Last year, we carried out, on two occasions, aerial surveillance over the whole country by helicopter. It takes about two days to complete that surveillance. Looking at concentrations of larch, we identified in the order of 70 to 80 waypoints across the country, and that includes larch in all counties, the publicly managed forests and private woodlands. That is how the sites that you identified in the west were picked up.

The Chairperson: Tom made a point about other diseases coming in. Another spine of our review and report was the high-risk species and the work that we can do on them. Our report was very clear: the Committee advised the Minister to introduce legislation as soon as possible, given the legislation introduced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in January last year. DARD indicated that it planned to do so and would bring draft legislation to the Committee for scrutiny as soon as possible. Nearly a year after DEFRA introduced its legislation, the Committee has yet to see draft legislation. Where are we with that?

Mr Beatty: When we bring in legislation, it will be on an all-Ireland basis. We want to coordinate the introduction of that with our colleagues in the South. It does not make any sense to do it on our own. We are still working very closely with DAFM to implement an all-Ireland pesticides and plant health strategy, and the legislation will follow from that. Ministers have talked about that in the North/South Ministerial Council, and officials will meet again in January to take that forward.

The Chairperson: Surely work as critical as this needs to be done outside of formal ministerial North/South meetings. This needs to be implemented as soon as possible, as the Department indicated. Surely, if we are waiting for staged meetings, we will —

Mr Beatty: I am saying that it is still on the agenda and that we are still going through it to try to progress towards legislation. Jim was saying that, irrespective of that, we have surveillance in place to protect ourselves. The legislation would be very helpful, but there are other means as well. Remember that the point of the legislation was to allow pre-notification and add to the intelligence that we have, and, in the absence of that, we are following up in other ways, including intelligence and documentary checks, and our colleagues in the South are doing exactly the same.

The Chairperson: The all-island strategy was to give us enhanced protection, but it seems from your answer that it is delaying protection.

Mr Beatty: I do not agree with that. The important thing is to make sure that plant health is dealt with on all-Ireland basis, because it makes no sense for us or the South to do it alone. It has taken time and there are further issues, but it is not the only game in town. We can do an awful lot by administrative means, which is what every other country does, and that is what we are doing. We still want to bring in legislation, and we are still talking and will continue to talk to the South.

The Chairperson: It does, if you like, make folly of the agreement that draft legislation should be brought to the Committee as soon as possible. I know that "as soon as possible" is not always possible. We are now saying that legislation would be useful but that we have an administration process. However, legislation was the right option for DEFRA. Surely DEFRA could also have only an administration process.

Mr Beatty: Absolutely. It is entirely possible, but DEFRA decided to go down the legal route. We are not there yet, and I am not sure what the position in Scotland or Wales is.

Mr Morwood: Scotland and Wales have gone down a statutory route.

The Chairperson: The obvious question, then, is this: if legislation is beneficial and the Department wants it in place, what are the details and why is it not in place?

Mr Beatty: I am trying to think what I ought to tell you.

The Chairperson: Facts. The truth.

Mr Beatty: I always tell you the truth. *[Laughter.]* I have probably gone as far as I am prepared to go today. We are discussing with colleagues in the South the appropriate way to do this and how.

The Chairperson: You are really saying that the South is holding up the process.

Mr Beatty: I could not possibly comment on what the South is doing. I am saying that what we are doing is talking to the South.

The Chairperson: You can understand my concern about this.

Mr Beatty: I can.

The Chairperson: I detect possible frustration on your side.

Mr Beatty: Perish the thought, sir.

The Chairperson: I think that the Committee needs to pursue this.

Mr Beatty: I can assure the Committee that there are effective means in place, through the administrative route, that give us a comparable level of protection.

The Chairperson: Again, you are basically saying that DARD does not accept our recommendations.

Mr Beatty: We and the UK as a whole are working with the European Community. Remember that all this sits under the European legislation. We are collectively working with the Commission to try to get a better framework so that this and similar issues in the future will be dealt with under European Community legislation. I have given you a hint of where the answers might well lie.

The Chairperson: If we are waiting for Europe, we could be in trouble, given that the cogs there turn even more slowly than they do here.

Mr Beatty: The legislation is very much European directive territory. That is what we collectively — all the member states — signed up to as part of the single market, and that is very much the regulatory regime that we work under. We have no freedom to go outside that. It would be a very serious matter if we did, whatever the frustrations of individual member states that are faced with the disease. The argument that many member states make to the Commission is that the new or revised directive should allow for the possibility of member states acting in face of the risks to them at that time, but there is a tension. The Commission, quite rightly, said that the important thing was to safeguard trade. We want to know whether that takes full account of new circumstances. If it is an existing disease and everybody knows about it, that is fine. This, however, is about the new diseases that no one knew anything about. That is the issue.

The Chairperson: Yet DEFRA can implement legislation.

Mr Beatty: Obviously, yes.

The Chairperson: Hence the problem: the legislation that our report recommended is being delayed.

Mr Beatty: The Minister is still very keen for legislation to come in. The caveat is that we want to do it on an all-Ireland basis.

The Chairperson: I suppose that the obvious question, then, is whether the Minister needs assistance from the Committee in pushing her view to the Republic of Ireland Government.

Mr Beatty: I am sure that the Minister would always welcome the assistance of the Committee.

The Chairperson: We will park that, unless another member wants to pick up on it.

Another important issue is the reconstitution scheme. Again, the Minister committed to putting that in place as soon as possible. The Department has the reconstitution scheme, whatever that may look like, and the forestry grant scheme, under the existing rural development programme, which is closed to new applicants. Where are we with that?

Mr Beatty: Stuart will keep me right on this. The reconstitution scheme was part of the woodland grant scheme. There were five applications and many other cases of people having trees removed. What happened, as I understand it, is that the industry put its back into this, and we planted many of those trees without public assistance. Landowners and their advisers were able to solve this pretty much by themselves. We are working on the five applications.

The Chairperson: We are in a transition period before the new rural development programme. Does the gap between programmes concern you? If more cases are found, might there be need for another reconstitution scheme?

Mr Beatty: Yes, we are concerned. The European Community is bringing in transitional regulations. So we will work through those to see what scope they allow to address it. Again, all of this is Community-led. It is all to do with the rural development programme and whatever the transitional regulations allow us to do.

The Chairperson: What of the five applications? Were they all successful, and have letters of offer been sent?

Mr Morwood: They are being processed. Some were for quite significant areas, others were small. There are areas in which the ash had quite a low intensity and others where it was at a high intensity. So there was quite a mix, and the applications are being processed in preparation for the winter/spring planting season.

The Chairperson: I accept the rationale, but was the three-species condition an obstruction for some people?

Mr Morwood: That was to build in greater resilience to the reinstated woodlands. So, for example, if the woodland had been an ash/oak mix, we expected the resultant woodland not to be entirely oak. It was to ensure that a mixed woodland resulted.

The Chairperson: The Committee has no further questions, so thank you very much for your time. The Committee regards this as very important; hence our work on it this year. We wish you all the best in your endeavours.

Sorry, I must not let you go just yet. There is one question that I forgot to ask. I am sorry for going into relaxed mode and then hitting you with another question.

The two cases in the Republic mark a very serious development. You have kindly given us photographs showing what might be described as a scorched-earth policy, although it was probably essential. Do the photographs illustrate how you see plan B?

Mr Beatty: If we are to treat these diseases on an all-Ireland basis, we would have to take very similar action. What the Republic has done is, in my view, very sensible. That kind of commitment will be required to deal with the diseases. As we have found with the larch, very dramatic action will be required to get ahead of some of these diseases. The issue always is that inspectors will have to serve notice on people who have plants with no disease and no symptoms, and we will be depriving people of their assets. That gives rise to the issue of taking wealth or materials away from people without much evidence other than our opinion. We would be reluctant to do that, but the professional side of me says that it is probably the minimum that needs to be done.

The Minister would certainly look to the Committee for support in pushing through such a policy. You can imagine there being two or three cases and the Department taking away all those hedgerows. There would be a lot of public concern, and people would ask whether it was necessary. My view is that is necessary, and I wonder whether it would be enough. People will also ask us whether we will do this the next and every time that it is found. Questions would be asked about where the line should be drawn: three cases, 10 cases or more than 10? It depends on circumstances, and we will just have to take that as it comes. We are asking some landowners to do quite a lot, and there is no doubt that it is hurting them.

The Chairperson: Has the Republic faced resistance from the bodies and communities involved? Is there resistance or support?

Mr Beatty: I think that there is support. Ash is an important part of our tree culture, and people like to see it in the countryside. The evidence is that not acting means that ash is lost anyway, which would be much worse. So this is about taking some hurt for the public good but knowing that you are in the firing line anyway.

The Chairperson: I imagine a perimeter and everything in a copse or woodland being taken away.

Mr Beatty: This is a farming and hedgerow situation.

The Chairperson: In a farming situation, there are field boundaries between one farm and the next. My concern is about the livestock that will be in some of the fields. What other measures can be put in place to assist the farmer or business to deal with that situation?

Mr Beatty: That is the sort of thing that we would have to work through. You can see in the top photograph that some trees were left. A holly bush has been left, so the environment there is not

entirely treeless. Digging up the earth has taken away the ash, but you are right in saying that there is now a deep ditch, and animals could fall into it. So something has to be done. That is a discussion we still have to have, but it would happen very quickly once we get into that situation here.

The Chairperson: Have you had any feedback from other outside agencies, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the Woodland Trust or the Ulster Farmers' Union? Has there been any consultation with them on a plan B of this sort?

Mr Beatty: We are still at the stage of evaluating what has happened. It is important to share that information, which is why I brought it to the Committee. The next stage is to take the information to those organisations. Principally, this has to be about the landowners. They are the people whom we need to talk to, and we cannot do that until we have the situation in our hands. The others will certainly be represented at policy level, but I doubt that I would find a policy discussion helpful when on a site with a landowner. It is very much about the farmer, and it is my intention to do just that.

The Chairperson: There are no further questions. You are away this time, and I am sorry for giving you a false sense of security earlier. Thank you very much for your time.