



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural
Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Bovine TB Review: Ministerial Response to
Committee Report

29 January 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mrs Michelle O'Neill	Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development
Dr Mark Browne	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Bert Houston	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mr Gerry Lavery	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Mrs Colette McMaster	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee Minister O'Neill; Gerry Lavery, permanent secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD); Dr Mark Browne, deputy secretary for policy; Bert Houston, chief veterinary officer; and Colette McMaster, assistant secretary. I hope that I got everybody's name right and have not left anybody out. You are all very welcome. Minister, you will have heard my wee spiel there just before I introduced you and welcomed you to the Committee. I am sure that you have a presentation for us. We will go straight into questions after that, because I know that time is valuable.

Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the Committee for having me along. I am grateful for the opportunity to brief the Committee on TB, particularly on the back of its inquiry. I also want to give you an update on the Department's priorities. This briefing on bovine TB follows on from the presentation to the Committee on 3 July 2012, when you were taking evidence for the review, and my response in the Assembly on 26 November to the motion that accepted the Committee's report.

Eradication of TB in cattle is obviously a key priority for me. I share the Committee's widely held aspiration to achieve the progressive reduction of disease levels towards the ultimate eradication of bovine TB here and by as soon a date as possible. The Department's robust, EU Commission-approved TB eradication programme is based on the internationally recognised disease control measures necessary to control and eradicate disease. This programme is essential to protect public

and animal health and to safeguard our international trade in livestock and livestock products, which is worth over £1 billion a year.

TB is a complex and multifactorial disease. It continues to be our most challenging and costly animal health problem, as the comprehensive evidence to the Committee has confirmed. Eradication of TB is not something that can be achieved in the immediate future for all the reasons that have been detailed in your review. However, I believe it is important that we regularly take stock of the position and refocus our efforts to make further progress. The Committee's review and report provides an opportunity for us to do that.

The unexplained rise in TB clearly demonstrates that there is still much that is not known about how TB spreads, how it can be diagnosed more accurately and what can be done to prevent its spread. Obviously, more needs to be done. However, we need to take care that any additional control measures that we take are proportionate, practical, cost-effective and likely to help to reduce TB.

You will have received my Department's formal response to the 17 recommendations in the Committee's report. The Department notes and fully accepts 15 of those. There are just two recommendations that present some difficulty as regards full acceptance. I do not propose to go through all the recommendations and my Department's response in great detail. However, if you will allow me, I will make a few comments on some of the recommendations.

Recommendations 1, 2 and 3 relate to TB levels and incidence rates. I can assure you that my officials have been investigating the possible contributory factors to the recent rise in TB levels. While we cannot say with any certainty what has caused the rise based on the analysis that has been completed to date, my Department is considering whether there are any additional control measures that we could take in the TB eradication programme that may help to reduce TB. Meanwhile, we also continue to enhance partnership working with the private veterinary practitioners (PVPs) and to improve the two-way knowledge transfer on TB. My Department will also continue to enhance the supervision and monitoring of TB testing to improve the rigour of the TB testing process by all vets.

Recommendations 4 to 7 relate to testing and surveillance. My Department has already commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to bring forward specific research proposals for 2013-14 to investigate the effects of the concurrent disease and nutritional and vitamin deficiencies. A lot of good work has already been done in piloting better communications with PVPs and in providing more focused biosecurity advice to industry stakeholders and herd keepers; for instance, at the recent winter dairy fair. This also fits well with the disease initiatives that are being developed by the new industry-led organisation, Animal Health and Welfare NI, to deal with bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) and Johne's disease, which will also bring benefits in relation to TB.

My Department has already commissioned AFBI to undertake evaluation of how best to use the gamma interferon test in the TB eradication programme and to develop research proposals to evaluate the range of commercial and near application serological tests for TB that could be deployed as alternatives to, or in conjunction with, existing TB tests. My Department has also commissioned AFBI to conduct an early review of the potential application for molecular strain typing to establish how it may best contribute to TB eradication in practical terms.

Recommendations 9 and 10 relate to wildlife. My Department is interested in the TB research that is being conducted by Queen's University Belfast, as well as that commissioned by other research providers. I appreciate the Committee's broad welcome of the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) wildlife intervention approach that it announced last July. I shall return to that a little bit later.

Recommendations 11 and 12 relate to chronic and repeat breakdown herds. My Department has already commissioned AFBI to develop research proposals to investigate this issue and come forward with specific proposals to address it. That is another key priority for my Department.

Recommendations 13 to 15 relate to biosecurity. I have already referred to the good work that is being done to enhance biosecurity advice. Publication of the results of AFBI's TB biosecurity study will be of particular interest, as will information from the DARD-commissioned research that AFBI has undertaken into badger and cattle interactions at pasture and in cattle housing in east Down.

Recommendation 17 relates to the possible development of a TB vaccine. Although the eventual approval of TB cattle vaccine and associated differentiating infected from vaccinated animals — DIVA — test could be a positive development, we must ensure that our export-dependent livestock and

livestock-product sector is not compromised. We must also avoid all-island trading difficulties should a different approach be adopted, either North or South.

As I indicated, only two recommendations, 8 and 16, pose some difficulty for the Department at present. Recommendation 8 calls on the Department to propose a target for eradication of TB. Setting a meaningful date for eradication is not possible at present because all the steps needed to get to eradication and the tools that we would need to use are not yet known. For that reason, there is no target for TB eradication in the Programme for Government. However, as you are aware, the Executive agreed to include a building block in the Programme for Government with reference to the funding of around £4 million that DARD has allocated to conduct TB and wildlife research and studies. The evidence provided by this research should help to ensure that we have a well-informed strategy to address the issue of cattle-to-cattle spread as well as the wildlife issue.

Recommendation 16 relates to support for the vaccination of badgers by interested landowners. I wish to make it clear that my immediate priority is to progress the preparations for the design of the test and vaccinate or remove wildlife intervention research. Therefore, I have no plans at this stage to introduce any additional programme to support landowners who wish to vaccinate badgers on their land. However, once we have the TVR study under way, my Department will be prepared to work with local interested parties, should they come forward in the future with proposals to undertake badger vaccination on their land.

This is an opportune time to turn to the test and vaccinate or remove research. As you know, this proposed approach would involve testing live badgers, vaccinating and releasing the test-negative badgers and removing the test-positive ones. TVR would focus on removing diseased badgers and protecting unaffected ones, which, we hope, could lead, in time, to a healthier badger population with a reduced capacity to transmit TB to other badgers and to cattle. This balanced approach has been welcomed by a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including environmentalists and farmers. The approach has not yet been tried anywhere else. Our aim is to test its effectiveness on the level of TB in badgers and cattle here. We expect the design of such a study to be complex, but we want to make sure that we get it right.

As you are aware, the Department commissioned the Food Environment Research Agency (FERA) to carry out computer-modelling of the TVR approach. The intention is that that modelling will help us to identify the most appropriate area for the study, the optimum size of the area, and the frequency and appropriate duration of the intervention. We hope to use outcomes of the modelling to help us to design a scientifically robust TVR study that provides a reliable evidence base in the most cost-effective way. Based on the information from the computer modelling, we expect that the TVR study will involve carrying out five TVR interventions in an area of 100 square kilometres. We also expect to identify a separate, closely matched control area of 100 square kilometres for comparison purposes, where we will monitor both the cattle herd breakdown rates and the prevalence of TB in badgers.

An important consideration in the TVR study design will be to identify any perturbation of badgers to help determine whether TVR causes perturbation. The only evidence available on perturbation is based on badger-culling trials in England, where large numbers of healthy and diseased badgers were removed. However, there is no evidence of perturbation based on a TVR approach, which will remove only a small number of badgers that are test-positive. I am also aware that there is no reported evidence of adverse perturbation effects of badger interventions in the South.

Of course, any intervention will depend on the availability of the funding required, which must be fully justified in cost-benefit terms. As the badger is a protected species, any direct interventions in the badger population here will also be subject to the agreement of the Environment Minister and the issue of necessary licences.

Although we are still at the preparatory stages of designing the TVR wildlife intervention research, based on information from computer modelling, we believe that the optimum location to see a measurable effect on the level of TB in badgers and cattle will be an area with high badger density, high cattle herd density and high TB-confirmed herd incidence, such as County Down.

We have, therefore, selected mid-Down as the area in which the TVR study will be located and where we plan to conduct a badger sett survey. That is the next phase of our preparations to inform the design of the TVR study. The winter months are the best time to start the survey while the foliage is reduced and cattle are still housed. I am, therefore, pleased to advise the Committee that I intend to commence the preliminary badger sett survey work as soon as possible.

I have agreed that AFBI should start the sett survey in a 100 square kilometre area between Banbridge and Rathfriland. That work will get under way as soon as permissions from local farmers are obtained, in response to explanatory letters that my Department will issue very soon.

I encourage all farmers in the area to participate in the survey, and I hope that Committee members and other stakeholders will also encourage farmers to support the sett survey.

In conclusion, I reiterate my commitment to the Committee's report, which I welcome. I assure you that the Department is exploring whether additional actions can be taken in the TB eradication programme to address the recent rise in disease incidence and will discuss those with key stakeholders over the coming months.

I have asked my officials to bring to me proposals for possible further TB programme measures by 30 June this year. Any new control measures will have to be proportionate, practical and cost-effective.

Thank you, Mr Chairman, for allowing me to make my presentation. I am happy to pause now and take questions on the subject.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much for your presentation, Minister. I remind members to ask one question only. No statements or speeches, please. If we could have concise questioning of the Minister and her officials, that would be greatly appreciated, as we are time bound and have just under half an hour for this session before we have to move on to the next one.

Minister, I want to ask a question about the wildlife intervention research programme, which the Committee welcomed. This is all about time and money. Since you first mentioned the programme to the Committee, way back on, I think, 3 July 2012, it seems that we have been given very little information, which has led members to doubt whether the Department is serious about the issue. What more information can you give us?

The recommendation states that there should be time-bound delivery. This is not about the commencement date of the next stage but about when this will be delivered. Can you, at this point, give us any assurances that the project will be time bound?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to do so. It is disappointing to think that the Committee thought that it had not been informed of, or brought along with, all the developments.

From its research and inquiry, the Committee will be very aware that this is a very complex disease, that there is no simple solution and that a variety of factors and reasons contribute to incidences of TB in particular areas. Given all those factors, it is a very difficult problem to address.

That having been said, we already had the robust EU eradication programme in place, so it is not as though we were sitting back and waiting until the Committee completed its inquiry. We had the robust EU eradication programme in place, and I believe that we have made progress with the disease through scientific research. However, we certainly do not have all the answers.

To my mind, it is about striking a balance between additional disease measures and allowing the farmers to continue to operate their business. As I said in my initial contribution, any approach has to be practical, value for money and appropriate. To my mind, at the core of all this is the need to protect our £1 billion-plus trade in export products every year. Our EU plan is vital in that regard. It also allows us to draw down the £5 million of co-funding for the research. While all that is going on, we have now identified TVR as our approach. It is a new approach and not something that has been tried anywhere else. There is an onus on us to make sure that we get it right. The Committee would be the first to criticise me if we were to rush it through and it was not right. A lot of the hold-up has been in the modelling, talking to FERA and making sure that we get it right from the start.

We have now identified a timeline of issues that we need to take forward. The modelling is the first issue, including the badger sett survey in County Down that I have just announced. Then, we must make sure that we use that information and learn from it to design the TVR approach properly. So, for me, the priority this year is about gathering that information and setting a baseline, because we have to be able to measure it and ensure that it is working and that we can stand over it. We have to be able to see the TB rates come down. So, this year, we are gathering information, and next year, we will be implementing the TVR approach.

I think that this is a very positive step. I understand that people are frustrated. This is a disease that, obviously, has a negative impact on the farming communities that encounter it. So we will make sure that we eradicate the disease in as short a time as possible. There is no point in our spending money on something that is not going to work. We need to ensure that it works.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you, Minister.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister and her officials to the meeting. At the end of the day, we are down to the money aspect. Over the past three years, the cost of compensation has gone from £9.9 million in 2009-2010 to £8.6 million in 2010-11 and £13 million in 2011-12. The total cost for the three years has risen from £23 million to £26 million. Has any budget limit been placed on this, and what sense of urgency is there about trying to reduce the cost of compensation?

Mrs O'Neill: My officials have spoken to the Committee about the compensation issue before. I held a review in 2012, and I informed the Committee that I had decided to proceed with brucellosis compensation only and that I had deferred the TB compensation decision to take account of the Agriculture Committee's review and the work that it was doing, and I note that the Committee does not support the idea of a cap on TB compensation. I will now conclude the review that I started last year, and I will take the matter forward as part of looking at the wider TB measures that we need to take. It is still an issue that we need to address. The levels of compensation are very high, and we need to reduce that. We are being criticised by Europe for it. To me, it is an issue that we need to tackle, and I encourage the Committee, when it is thinking about the wider issues of TB and how we are going to address them, to consider that one solution is not going to fit. We may need a whole package of solutions, and addressing the compensation issue is something that I want the Committee to come back to at some stage in the future.

Mrs Dobson: You are very welcome here, Minister. In relation to recommendation 7, on information already available to DARD on the strains of TB and their movement, can you tell us when AFBI was commissioned to research:

"the potential application of molecular typing"?

Is it entirely necessary for AFBI to be commissioned to conduct research into data that are already held by your Department's officials? Those data have never been sufficiently interrogated. Have you any indication of the cost and timescale of that research?

Mrs O'Neill: There are a number of pieces of research going on in AFBI at the moment and within the Department. I am happy to talk to you about those, but it is very important that we get the science right. Obviously, no one has a quick solution for tackling TB in general. No matter where you look, New Zealand, Australia or Scotland — well, obviously Scotland is free — but if you look at the South of Ireland, you find that no one has any quick solution or quick fix. So it is important that we get the science right, and that is why we have commissioned AFBI to look at it.

As to the detail of molecular strains, Colette, can you answer that?

Mrs Colette McMaster (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): AFBI has been asked to provide a proposal for evaluating the existing data that we have. We will use AFBI's analysis or evaluation of what is there to decide whether we need to commission any further work from AFBI. From this, we aim to ensure that we are using the data that are available to DARD within the programme as usefully as possible. So AFBI has been asked to provide a research proposal. We hope that it will be able to deliver on that between now and the end of March 2013.

Mrs Dobson: But the data are already held by your Department, so what cost —

Mrs McMaster: We hold the data, but AFBI is actually the expert on what the data are and how they are made up. AFBI has collected those data over the years. It makes the data available to the Department, but it has that expertise. AFBI researchers have developed that approach, so we have asked them to evaluate the data on this that have been gathered to date.

Mrs Dobson: Do you appreciate, Colette, that it seems to be research for research's sake, given that the information already exists?

Mr Bert Houston (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): We currently use those data anyway in our investigations as best we can. The idea of the project is to help direct us to use them in the most effective way that we can. At this time, the data are available, and my veterinary officers are using them to try to help them to investigate the breakdowns. The proposal is to make sure that we are using the data in the most effective way that we possibly can.

Mrs Dobson: Have they not been sufficiently interrogated before?

Mrs O'Neill: The point is that AFBI has been asked to look at how that tool can be best applied practically. So, it is using the information that the Department already uses, and it is being asked to look at how that can be applied practically.

Mrs Dobson: What about the cost and timescale? That was part of my question.

The Chairperson: That is part of the same question, so could you clarify that?

Mrs McMaster: The timescale is for the initial report to be provided to us between now and, I think, the end of March — certainly in the next few months. That is the sort of timescale that AFBI is working to in the current project.

Mrs Dobson: What about the cost?

Mrs McMaster: I do not have the actual cost of that to hand.

Mrs O'Neill: We can easily provide it for you.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister and her officials for attending today.

Where TB in badgers and wildlife is concerned, in 2008, the previous Minister announced that her Department would be undertaking a wildlife study. I am not so sure that that ever happened. I know that you are a different Minister, but the officials are probably the same. Given that recent trials have shown that there is a clear link between TB in badgers and TB in cattle, does the Department have any clear direction in which it intends to move in dealing with TB in badgers and TB in cattle? I believe that the Department is tinkering around the edges on this.

Mrs O'Neill: I outlined that. Our direction is the TVR approach, and that is the priority for me in taking this forward. As I said, we are doing the badger sett work now. This year is all about gathering information and getting a baseline. Next year is about implementing the TVR approach on the ground. Alongside that, we have the EU-approved eradication programme in place. As I said, I have asked officials to come back to me by the end of June with other measures. Given that this is a multifactorial disease, I think that a number of reasons contribute to why one area has a higher incidence of it than others. Nobody has a clear answer. We are going to have to continue with a range of issues in moving forward, some of which will include the issue of compensation.

Mr Buchanan: Minister, in your opening remarks you talked about the complexity of the disease. You talked about reviews, research, science, models, surveys, and so forth. Despite all that, TB increased by 40%. Will you tell the Committee what practical measure has already been put in place on the ground to try to stop the spread and increase of TB? We can have all the surveys, research and models that we want, yet it is plain to see that, despite doing all that, TB is still rising. We need to put something practical on the ground to try to stop TB increasing and spreading. Can you tell the Committee what positive action has been taken?

Mrs O'Neill: I can. It is fair to say that I share the Committee's concern. I am equally frustrated by the rise in levels, given that we have an EU-approved eradication programme in place. I sound as though I keep repeating myself, but it is a fact that TB is a very complex disease. There is no clear science to say, "Here is the disease, and here is how to fix it". So, you have to do the research. That is all part of the process of being able to get to the stage where we are eradicating the disease. I am as committed to doing that as the Committee obviously is.

I think that we need to turn that into action and ask about what we can do. We will continue with the research, because that will be key. We will continue gathering all the evidence, and we will continue with the TVR approach, which I think is a positive way to deal with the disease and will, hopefully,

bring us to a much more positive place in the future. As I said, it is a complicated disease, so I think that we will have to look at a range of measures outside even TVR. We will have to look, for example, at what Australia and other countries have done to tackle the disease. I do not think that even the Committee would support some of the issues that they have taken on, such as extending closed periods for farmers. Those are all things that would interrupt the everyday life of a farm. So, we need to be very careful. The approach needs to be balanced, and it needs to ensure that we get value for money out of anything that we do.

Mr Buchanan: With due respect, it has been a complex disease for a number of years, and its incidence is still increasing. We are still working with science and doing research, but there is nothing practical on the ground to stop it. That is the problem.

Mrs O'Neill: Through you, Chair, that is an incorrect statement. I highlighted the number of initiatives that are going forward. A £4 million EU eradication programme is in place, but the member may wish to dismiss that. You could see for yourself the complexity of the issue through even the review that the Committee got involved in. A combination of all the issues that we are aware of, such as increasing our message out there to the farming community, biosecurity issues, and gathering research, will be necessary if we are to get to the position where we can eradicate the disease. So, it is not fair to say that no practical work is happening. For me, a lot of firm, concrete work is ongoing.

The Chairperson: Members, after the presentation from the Minister and her officials, when we come back to Committee, I will give you an opportunity to discuss the presentation and any action that we would like.

Mr Swann: Thanks, Minister, for your presentation. I am sorry that I missed the start of it. None of the other members touched on the mid-Down badger sett survey. That was quite an announcement. I believe that it is the first survey of its kind. Can you give us some parameters of exactly what the survey will entail? I know that you said that it will take place between Banbridge and Rathfriland in an area of 100 square kilometres. Is there any more detail on that?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to give that. We have a plan in place for communicating with farmers in that area so that we can raise the issue. As I said at the start, I really encourage members to encourage farmers in that area also to get involved in the badger sett survey. Colette, do you want to come in on the detail of that?

Mrs McMaster: The purpose of the badger sett survey is to identify where the badger setts are in that 100 square kilometre area between Banbridge and Rathfriland. The aim is also to get an idea of their actual number and volume to help to design the subsequent TVR study. AFBI has been commissioned to undertake that survey. As the Minister said, the first step will be for DARD to write to farmers in that area and invite them to agree to participate in the survey. The farmers will not need to do anything active on that, but we need permission from them for AFBI staff to come on to their land to survey the area. For the purpose of gathering data, and so on, we ask for their permission to give us some information about their land, farm, and so on. However, that is all that is needed at this time.

We will also tell them that they are being approached now for permission to allow a badger sett survey to be done on their land. When the TVR study goes ahead, we will come back to invite them to agree to participate in that. So, at this stage, it is very much a preparation phase for the TVR study. We will be able to use the information that is gathered to help to design that study better. As the Minister said, we hope to get high participation in the area. To do that, we hope to follow up on the letter to farmers with meetings in the area. We will meet key stakeholders later this week to talk to them about it, seek their co-operation and encourage people to participate.

Mr Swann: So, it is a population count?

Mrs McMaster: It is a sett survey, so, yes, it is a survey of the number of setts that are in that area. The Minister also said that there would be the intervention area and the control area. So, we are actually hoping to identify two areas of 100 square kilometres. This is the first one. We will be following on with identification of a second area and, again, rolling out the badger sett survey.

Mr Clarke: My question is in a similar vein to Robin's. Why was that area chosen? Is that the area that had the highest incidence of the disease? I am thinking back to an answer that you gave a few

minutes ago, Minister. You talked about the complexities, different areas and the associated different problems. So, why was that area chosen?

Mrs O'Neill: We corresponded with FERA on what the optimum area would be. That area was identified because of the population of badgers and the incidence of herd TB.

Mrs McMaster: We are seeing results from the FERA modelling. The purpose of this survey is to allow us to measure the effectiveness of TVR on TB in badgers and cattle. So, the best area to choose to get a measurable effect is one with high badger density, high cattle-herd density and a high TB-confirmed incidence. So, County Down fits into that.

Mrs O'Neill: If it is helpful to the Committee, we could provide the FERA report, which backs up why you would choose that area. That report may be useful for the Committee in its deliberations.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her announcement today. It certainly seems that this is a very emotive subject. Although some people think that not much has been done in a number of years, in actual fact, all that research has been done.

What will be the role of the public, for example, the farming community, when the Department embarks on this process, as it is about to, and takes one of the most positive steps that it has taken by starting to look at the eradication of the disease? Are you saying that the farming community and the Department now need to take a partnership approach to the matter? If Europe is starting to question the amount of compensation that is paid, which could be a worrying move, am I right in saying that we need to do this now? If Europe comes back at us on the compensation issue, we need to be doing something practical. The farming community must now play its part in this matter, painful as that may be in some cases.

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks, Oliver. I think that it is key that we have stakeholder involvement. As Colette said, later this week — maybe on Thursday — there will be a stakeholder group meeting where we will be able to inform everybody of the direction of travel that we are taking and get them on board. To reiterate, we really want farmers in that area to come forward and to work with us by letting us survey what is on their land. There is nothing to fear from taking part in the study. So, I very much think that a partnership approach would be key in allowing us to identify the appropriate area and to have as many farmers as possible involved. That would enhance the study. So, there is nothing to fear. If the Committee were minded to, it could use its influence to encourage farmers in that area to get involved.

I think that we are going to have to come back to the compensation issue as part of the wider discussion on a bigger package of measures to tackle TB.

The Chairperson: The information that you provided today is very important, including the update on the wildlife intervention research programme and now the TVR approach. However, I am going to interrogate the detail of the timeline, because it is also very important. Without it, you could lose credibility with some of the members here, and you could lose credibility with the stakeholders, who broadly agree with and support this. Can you give us solid and concrete timelines for the farmers you are trying to get participation from? You referred to the FERA survey. A survey has already been done in this area. You are talking about more sett surveys this year and a plan of action for next year. What is that plan of action, and when will it be commenced? When will we see outcomes?

Mrs O'Neill: As you said, there has been broad stakeholder encouragement for the TVR approach in that it has a balance between the environmental and the farming sides. So, I think that that has been positive, and we obviously do not want to lose any of the goodwill that has been built up. The piece of work on modelling has been quite complicated. This year has to be about gathering the information, because you have to have a baseline on which to measure your study. That is just practical. There is no point rushing at it and doing it half-heartedly, because that would mean that it would not be a worthwhile piece of work. We are very committed to making sure that we get it right from the start. Again, given that this is unique to the North and that it has not been trialled anywhere else, it is very important that we take our time. All that being said, I accept that people want to know when we will see action. However, this year, as I said, the focus is absolutely on gathering the information, and next year is about being on the ground with the TVR approach.

Dr Mark Browne (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): It may be worth mentioning that the work that we are doing on the model in this preparatory phase is extremely important. The

model is not just of value in designing the survey, although that is its key purpose; it will remain thereafter. We will feed back the results from the survey into the model to improve it, because the model is based on a mixture of data that we have locally available and data that have been derived from research in England. We will be able to improve that model, and that will then give us a useful way to anticipate the potential impact of any further intervention of any sort. So, the model itself is an important output of the study, even though it is part of the preparatory phase.

Mr Byrne: How much discussion has taken place with our counterparts in the Republic about tackling the problem? They have had pilot schemes in three areas that seem to have been very successful. Those schemes are in Donegal and Wexford, and another is in a location that I forget. Who in the Department will drive this forward, because there is a sense that there has been a degree of complacency about the whole issue?

Mrs O'Neill: I am committed to driving it on, which is why we brought forward the TVR approach. The senior team is also committed to driving it on. It is an issue that we really want to get to the bottom of. It is not a positive thing for anybody to be sitting in the position that we are in now. Notwithstanding that, we have to deal with many complicated issues. We continue to look at how other countries eradicated TB. For example, we look to Australia and New Zealand, and we look for positive examples that we can draw on.

Obviously, we will continue to talk to officials in the South. There is regular engagement at that level on all sorts of animal health and welfare issues, and this is another of those issues. We also discuss the matter at North/South Ministerial Council meetings. We will continue to do that and to draw on what is positive in what others have done. I am not interested in recreating the wheel. If there is something that is positive and that works, we would, obviously, want to apply it.

Mr Byrne: Are we gaining any wisdom from the way that it has been done in the South?

Mrs O'Neill: The South has looked at numerous different ways of doing it. For a start, their TB compensation is capped along the lines of the proposal that the Committee here did not agree. Farmers in the South have taken on the payment of a levy towards the cost of compensation, and they pay for their annual TB herd test. When looking at the wider issues and at what else we can do, we will also have to look at all those things.

Mrs Dobson: I represent Banbridge, and this is the first that I have heard about this survey. I think that we need to be fully informed because I am certain that I will have farmers approach me through my constituency office looking for detail that I do not have at this stage. So, it would be very useful to have that detail.

Mrs O'Neill: You would not have the detail yet, because I am announcing it just now. There is a stakeholder advisory group meeting in a few days' time. We are also communicating with all farmers and will be using the press. So, we are happy that Committee members will be kept abreast.

Mrs Dobson: You can be sure that as soon as you communicate with farmers, they will communicate with me, so it would be useful to have that detail.

Minister, in the Department's response to recommendation 13 on biosecurity training and advice, you say that private vets:

"are ideally placed to reinforce the BVD message".

In the Department's response to recommendation 5, you state that you recognise the potential of private vets:

"to advise and influence farmers in the course of their daily interactions."

Do you not see, however, that your Department's plans to bring lay testing in-house will irreparably damage the network of our local private vets?

Mrs O'Neill: You will be aware that we had a pilot programme. However, there has been no decision on that, so you are running ahead of the issue, if you like. Where the biosecurity issue is concerned, I think that private vets are in a good position to deliver the message, given that they have such regular

interaction with the farming community. We have had some improvement in getting the biosecurity message out. Obviously, that is a key issue if we are going to tackle the disease. So, we will continue to use the vets in other avenues that we have to communicate that biosecurity message.

So far as your first point is concerned, that is not a decision that has been taken.

Mrs Dobson: When we questioned your officials about the pilot programme, the lack of information and detail that they had on it was very clear. With that in mind, can you guarantee that your plans will not lead to the closure of private veterinary practices across Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: The lay testing was taken forward as a pilot issue. I will consider the results of that study and take it from there. There is really nothing more to say about it at this moment in time.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Minister.