



**Opening Statement by IFA President Tim Cullinan
to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food & the Marine
on
TB Programme
9th March 2021**

Chairperson and Committee Members, thank you for inviting IFA to address you today.

I am joined by IFA Senior Policy Executive Tomas Bourke.

The IFA is Ireland's largest farming organisation, with 72,000 farmer members covering all production systems. The Association is structured with 947 branches and 29 County Executives across the country.

The IFA President and various Committee Chairmen, along with branch and county representatives are democratically elected by the farmer membership.

IFA represents all farming sectors at National, European and International level. Through our office in Brussels, the IFA represents Irish farmers on the European umbrella body of farm organisations COPA/COGECA. In addition, the IFA is the representative for Irish farmers on the World Farmers' Organisation.

The IFA structure provides for direct engagement with and support services to farmers who experience difficulties on their farms, including the issues associated with the current TB programme.

TB Eradication Programme

The TB Eradication programme implemented in Ireland remains the single largest animal health cost for Irish farmers each year at combined direct and indirect cost of €55m a year. In addition, despite 4% of herds breaking down with the disease annually, the fear of a TB outbreak continues to be identified by farmers as one of the largest annual stress factors associated with farming as a result of the severe impact on normal farm practise and associated losses.

Irish farmers contribute a total of €55m each year to the TB programme, €27m in annual TB testing costs, over €7m in disease levies and €20m in labour when facilitating the testing of over 9m animal tests a year. For the €55m investment, farmers receive only €20m in compensation for animal and production loss and maintenance costs associated with the TB programme.

Clearly, eradication of the disease within the shortest feasible timeframes must be the objective.

However, this will not be achieved by the simplistic approach of tightening controls on farms while ignoring the impact this has on farmers and their livelihoods.

In recent years the levels of TB have increased throughout the country, reaching over 23,000 reactors last year, the highest number since 2009, with 4,624 herds experiencing restrictions.

Between 2012 and 2020, the level of farmers direct contribution to the programme increased by 13.8% from €30.641m to €34.882m, funding from the National exchequer increased from €45.825m to €57.012m and the contribution from the EU reduced from €11.085m to €5.420m.

Farmers in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales do not pay for annual TB tests or contribute to disease levies. They receive similar compensation to Irish farmers with the exception of approx. €4m in consequential loss and hardship grant scheme payments, which are unique to the Irish programme.

It must be remembered TB breakdowns are primarily associated with issues outside the control of the farmer.

TB Strategy

I recognise the work of the Minister for Agriculture Charlie McConalogue and his officials in finalising and launching the TB strategy document which includes key issues identified by IFA.

These key areas included in the strategy are;

- meaningful farmer involvement in the design and implementation of the programme,
- recognition of farmers labour as a contribution to the programme
- revisiting of the herd risk letters, herd categorisation and pre-movement testing,
- an enhanced Wildlife Control Programme,
- better on farm investigation of TB breakdowns and
- the recognition of the importance of financial supports to farmers whose farms are under TB controls.

The strategy better reflects the key role of farmers in the programme and provides for meaningful involvement by farmers in the design and implementation of the strategy objectives through the Implementation and Financial Working Groups.

The Implementation group comprising of farmers and the Department of Agriculture is critical to allow for detailed discussion and agreement on the implementation of the high-level principles contained in the strategy document.

Farmers will be the only stakeholders impacted directly by the TB programme in the day-to-day management of their farms and facilitation of this expertise in determining the most appropriate means to implement the objectives of the strategy is critical to minimise the impact on farms.

The inclusion of the financial supports to farmers in the programme as a key tenet and the recognition of the need for a review of these supports to ensure farmers are fairly compensated for the impact on their livelihood is significant.

The strategy also provides for the contentious issues of pre-movement testing and herd categorisation to be dealt with through the Implementation group.

The Implementation and Financial Working Groups have had their first meetings.

There will be hard decisions to be taken in both groups in terms of controls on farms and the financing of the programme.

These decisions must be farmer centred, have a solid scientific basis, be practical to implement at farm level and make a meaningful contribution to Eradication of TB

We must strive to eradicate TB from the national herd in the shortest feasible timeframe but in doing so we must be conscious of the impact controls have on farm families and their livelihoods who through no fault of their own experience TB outbreaks. The impacts of these controls must be kept to a minimum and farmers fully compensated for the effect they have on the functioning of the farm.

AGREEMENT ON FINANCIALS OF NEW TB PROGRAMME MUST COME FIRST

The critical issue to be addressed in advance of agreeing a TB programme for the next 10 years is the development of a sustainable funding model.

In developing any programme or business plan the first issue to be addressed is always finances and this is no different for the TB programme.

Before we embark on this journey it is a fundamental requirement that this issue is resolved, it is not feasible to seek to finalise a programme without sight of the resources that will be available to it.

The **Financial Working Group** are to receive the 'Cost Benefit Analysis' of the TB programme this week. This will form the basis of developing a sustainable funding model for the programme.

Currently farmers and the state contribute to the TB programme while the broader Agri sector and society accrue benefits without cost.

The funding model must fairly distribute costs among beneficiaries. The TB Forum comprises of a large number of stakeholders with an interest in the TB programme, yet only farmers and the Department are financial contributors.

The work of **TB Forum Implementation group** is critical to the successful development of the objectives in the TB strategy.

This group consists of Department of Agriculture staff and farmer representatives and its function is to discuss and agree the most appropriate approach to implementing the objectives of the TB strategy.

This is the most important piece of the jigsaw in developing and rolling out the actions in the new TB strategy as this is where science and practical implementation will be aligned to minimise the impact on farmer livelihoods and the management of their farms.

For far too long we have had a top-down approach from the Department of Agriculture in the TB programme with little or no regard for the impact of their controls on farm families or their livelihoods.

The new strategy must deliver on its commitments in this regard and ensure the views of farmers, who are the only stakeholder that will be impacted by these decisions are facilitated and taken on board.

Issues that must be addressed in this group include;

The 'Blacklisting' of farmers by the Department of Agriculture in the Herd Risk letters issued last year.

The categorisation of herds and coding system used by the Department of Agriculture that put this information in the public domain without the consent of farmers was rejected throughout the process by IFA and must be addressed in the Implementation Group as a matter of urgency.

The 30-day pre-movement testing requirement in the EU Animal Health Law must not be implemented, this measure targets the lowest risk herds in the country and interferes with the competitive marketing of animals from these farms.

Pre-movement testing has no scientific basis in the eradication of TB and must not be part of the programme.

In addition to the absence of a justified scientific basis for this measure to eradicate TB the measure severely distorts the normal marketing of animals within Ireland and removes vital competition from the market place when associated additional costs and management practices are applied.

This requirement will impact severely on marts and throughput in mart sales as the additional costs and inconvenience will drive more farmers directly to factories, removing vital competition from the trade.

WILDLIFE PROGRAMME

The effective management and control of wildlife susceptible to TB is vital in eradicating the disease from the country. This must continue to be the key policy in the enhanced TB programme.

The existing Wildlife Control Programme must be appropriately resourced to ensure timely and effective captures take place surrounding all TB outbreaks, where wildlife is associated with the breakdown.

The Department of Agriculture have set out plans to resurvey for sets in capture areas, farmers will assist with this process.

However, the resources necessary to implement the Wildlife Programme in a more effective manner must be provided, mapping sets does not address the TB issue, it is the timely application of the capture and removal programme that addresses TB.

The Wildlife Programme must be extended to proactively reduce densities of wildlife, including deer, in advance of major infrastructural works and deforestation commencing to protect cattle from TB outbreaks that have been all too common as a result of wildlife disturbance throughout the country.

Badger density reduction must continue to be the primary focus of the Wildlife Unit, the vaccination programme should only be considered when its effectiveness has been appropriately established and the areas in question have had a comprehensive resurveying for setts and capture programme completed

A National Deer Management strategy must be developed and resourced to reduce deer density throughout the country to the levels that are sustainable within their natural habitat and at which they are not a disease threat to farm animals.

The Department must provide the supports and oversight to implement a deer population reduction programme surrounding TB outbreaks.

BREAKDOWN MANAGEMENT

All controls imposed on farmers in the TB programme must have a sound scientific basis, contribute directly to the eradication of the disease and be fully compensated for where they impact on the normal functioning of the farm.

TB breakdowns do not recognise county or regional office boundaries or Veterinary Inspector DED's. The Department's management of TB breakdowns should be based on a breakdown area under single management to ensure consistency of approach and immediate access to all relevant information associated with the outbreak.

A detailed and thorough investigation of all TB breakdowns involving more than 1 animal must be carried out to identify and remove all sources of the disease in the herd.

The Department must target resources and controls in the cases deemed to be the highest risk to remove the disease from the farm. These farms must then be allowed unhindered access to the open competitive market for their animals. These farmers must be fully compensated for all costs and losses incurred during the restriction.

Included in addressing the TB problem on these farms must be earlier consideration if agreeable with the herdowner of depopulation in order to return the farm to normal functioning in the shortest feasible timeframe.

Farmers must be supported in removing high risk animals from their farms if the Department data identifies these animals as a higher risk of infection or likely to contribute to further TB breakdowns.

All herds once derestricted by the Department of Agriculture, following intensive investigation, testing and disinfection must be allowed free unhindered access to the market place.

TESTING

Given the very severe impact TB restrictions and controls have on farm practice and farmers livelihood's and the Department proposals for higher levels of controls in these areas the Department must be in no doubt as to the status of the herd.

There can be no ambiguity in relation to the identity of herds where factory lesions are found and in cases where positive test results are not necessarily TB there must be safeguards to avoid herds incorrectly or unnecessarily having TB restrictions imposed.

The Department of Agriculture have clearly set out the weaknesses in the testing tools available as a justification for tighter controls, we must also recognise weaknesses in the tools available that could result in farms undergoing unnecessary restrictions and controls, there must be safeguards in the programme that ensures no farmer under goes a TB restriction or enhanced programme measurements unnecessarily.

CONCLUSION

IFA is acutely aware of the importance of maintaining the hard-won high health status of our national livestock herd as a major exporter of agriculture produce.

Farmers have and continue to support the efforts of the Department of Agriculture in eradicating TB from the national herd at an enormous direct and indirect cost.

IFA is demanding the eradication of TB from the national herd in the shortest feasible timeframes.

However, this cannot be achieved by further increasing the already enormous and disproportionate cost burden imposed on farmers in the programme.

The main contributing factors identified by the Department of Agriculture can be addressed in a practical and effective way that takes account of the farming dynamic in Ireland and the critical importance of animal movements and live exports.

IFA are actively engaged in the TB Forum process with the clearly outlined objective of eradicating TB from the National Herd while minimising the impact of controls on farms during this process.

Chairman, thank you and the Committee members for your attention and we would be delighted to take any questions or comments.

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