



**Address by IFA President, Francie Gorman  
to the  
Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine  
on threat posed by Spruce Bark Beetles to the health of Irish forests.**

**Wednesday, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

Chairman and Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting IFA to address you here today. I am joined by the Chair of IFA's Farm Forestry Committee Jason Fleming, Damian McDonald, Director General and Geraldine O'Sullivan, Senior Policy Executive for Environment & Forestry.

We are here today to discuss the threat posed by the spruce bark beetle to the health of Ireland's spruce forests. Spruce bark beetles have destroyed millions of hectares of spruce forests across Europe in recent years.

What was grown over generations, was destroyed in just a few short years.

**What are spruce bark beetles?**

Spruce bark beetles are small insects that live and reproduce beneath the bark of spruce trees, both Sitka and Norway spruce.

Generally, the beetles reside in trees with weakened defense mechanisms, but they can also attack healthy trees if beetle populations grow large enough.

The majority of young bark beetles (larvae) tend to die off when temperatures drop, but the trend of longer warmer summers is keeping the beetles alive and allowing them to reproduce at a faster rate, while droughts are weakening the trees' defenses. The past two decades have seen an increase in more detrimental infestations, which many scientists attribute to climate change.

There are two spruce bark beetles, the great spruce bark beetle (*Dendroctonus micans*) and the eight-toothed spruce bark beetle (*Ips typographus*), are of particular concern to Irish farmers. Both of which are non-native to Ireland and pose a serious risk to the health of Ireland's spruce forests.

The great spruce bark beetle is found in throughout England, Wales and southern Scotland and is slowly spreading northwards, and is now within miles of the border of western Scotland's pest free area.

The demarcation of a pest free area enables the trade of conifer roundwood with bark to Ireland.

While in 2023, an eight-toothed spruce bark beetle was confirmed in Scotland for the first time. Although Scottish Forestry believe it is a one-off finding that simply hitchhiked on the back of goods being shipped within the UK.

### **Scale of the potential risk**

According to Ireland's National Forest Inventory 2022, spruce forests account for approximately 65% of the private grant aided forest estate, which is predominantly owned and managed by farmers.

Of which 64% is comprised of Sitka spruce and 5% Norway spruce. This is the equivalent to nearly 200,000 hectares of forest land and shows the potential scale of the risk to the Ireland's forest industry should the spruce bark beetle take hold.

Therefore, a spruce bark beetle outbreak would cause extensive economic loss to the forest industry, but it would be farmers that would bear the brunt of the economic consequences, which include a reduction in the commercial value of the infested trees, increased management costs as well as replanting costs.

As per the Department rules, it is a condition of grant aid that in the event of significant tree deaths the losses are required to be replaced within the following two growing seasons or such other period as agreed, in writing, by the Department. Failure to replace losses may result in the recoupment of grants and premiums paid.

### **EU Plant Health Law and protective measures**

Both of the spruce bark beetles mentioned are a Protected Zone Quarantine Pest.

This means that Ireland has a protected zone status against these pests recognised under the EU Plant Health Law (Regulation 2016/2031) which imposes stricter import and protective measures, specifically that coniferous wood with bark cannot be imported into Ireland from EU countries where these beetles are known to occur unless:

- (i) It is accompanied by an Official Statement to say the wood originates from Pest Free Area,  
or
- (ii) The wood is free of bark, or
- (iii) The wood has been kiln dried to <20% M/C and is marked "KD".

Consequently, the importation of roundwood with bark from Great Britain (Wales, England and Scotland) to Ireland is permitted but only if it originates from the officially recognised Pest Free Area (PFA) and is accompanied by an official statement to attest to its origin.

The Pest Free Area is routinely surveyed by the Forestry Commission for the presence/absence of the regulated harmful bark beetles in order to maintain this PFA status.

Despite the surveys and monitoring, the reality is that the eight-tooth spruce bark beetle is steadily spreading, extending its range and has been found in traps within miles of the border of the pest free area. Importing untreated wood with bark is the most likely entry pathway for the spruce bark beetle into Ireland.

According to the CSO in 2021, nearly 300,000 m<sup>3</sup> of coniferous roundwood was imported into Ireland, predominantly for Scotland.

### **Farmers on high alert**

Farmers, as a result of the ongoing negative experience with ash dieback (*Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*) are on high alert.

They do not trust that adequate biosecurity measures are in place to prevent the introduction of the spruce bark beetle to Ireland, or that the current inspection regime is sufficient and consider the importation of timber from the pest free areas to be a major threat to the health of their spruce forests.

In the recent independent review of support for farmers affected by ash dieback supports these concerns and raises a number of points that are relevant to this discussion:

- (i) It states that the potential for future damage to Irish forest for pests may be large and international regulations aimed at mitigating the risks of introducing diseases are considered to be highly inadequate.
- (ii) The ash dieback experience of farmers shines a spotlight on weaknesses in culture, leadership, communications and capability within DAFM.

- (iii) There is a need for greater confidence that the State is doing everything possible to prevent the entry of other pests and diseases and has sufficient contingency plans in place.

### **Temporary suspension of imports to review biosecurity measures**

The best and most cost-effective way to fight any invasive pests is to prevent them from entering.

That is why IFA is calling for a temporary suspension of the importation of timber from Scotland until a full review of the biosecurity measures for the spruce bark beetle is undertaken.

IFA want the Government to be more proactive and to take every precaution to ensure that Ireland remains spruce bark beetle free.

A spruce bark beetle taskforce needs to be established immediately to give full consideration to the various risk factors, to review the current monitoring, surveillance and inspection programmes both here and in Scotland and to introduce additional biosecurity measures or adapt legislation, if necessary.

It is crucial that we learn from the lessons of other European countries, as well as the lessons of the ash dieback debacle.

It is vital that a contingency plan that sets out the procedures and measures that may be required in the event of an outbreak is developed and communicated with industry. We need to increase our preparedness and drastically improve communication with stakeholders.

We must not put the forestry industry and our forests at risk for short-term gains. The experience from Europe is that overlooking just one spruce bark beetle can lead to widespread infestation, under the right environmental conditions.

## **Ash dieback**

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to express farmers' ongoing disappointment with the pace with which the Department is dealing with ash dieback.

In the independent review report published in September 2023, it stated that ash dieback should be treated like a national emergency and that speed and urgency were of the essence – to realise the value of the trees, restore trust and confidence and to reduce the risks associated with large numbers of dead and dying trees in the landscape.

It is now nearly four months, and we are still waiting on the implementation plan. This is not the rapid coordinated response that farmers had hoped would follow.

Farmers were relieved following the publication of the report, that for the first time in 12 years the impact on them and their farm families as well as the financial losses were properly recognised.

Now they are concerned that it was just another false dawn, and that the recommendations will come to nothing.

We need the Government to publish an implementation plan as a matter of urgency and introduce a new ash dieback scheme, a scheme that properly supports and compensates farmers with ash dieback as per the recommendations.

Thank you for your attention.

Ends.

