



**Opening Statement by Adrian Gallagher, Chair IFA Sheep Committee,
to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food & the Marine
on
Dog Control and Sheep worrying**

2nd July 2025

Chairperson and Committee Members, thank you for inviting IFA to address you today on this very important issue for farmers, particularly sheep farmers.

I am joined by IFA Senior Policy Executive Tomás Bourke. IFA Policy Executive James Walsh is also present here today.

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

The IFA President and various Committee Chairs, 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 Sheep Committee comprises democratically-elected members from each of our 29 county executives representing all production systems.

Dog Control - Irresponsible Behaviour of Dog Owners

Sheep farmers are affected by the irresponsible behaviour of some dog owners more than any other sector.

I know through Comhairle na Tuaithe and its stakeholders (such as Leave no Trace and others) that a lot of time and resources is being put into championing good behaviour, predominantly via educational/media campaigns, but unfortunately more is needed.

As Chair of the IFA Sheep Committee, I'm hearing of more and more incidents and stories of irresponsible and at times aggressive behaviour of dog owners, unfortunately, and dog attacks/livestock worrying.

Some of it no doubt is because of ignorance and lack of knowledge/appreciation on the part of the dog owner. Some of it perhaps is because of the growing disconnect with agriculture, rural life and the outdoors for many, together with a growing lack of respect for the landowners and the financial hardships we have to endure.

Some of the issues are due to political and administrative responsibilities being scattered rather than falling under the remit of one body. That should improve with the Department of Agriculture taking up the reins, but dog control must be fully resourced, with measures implemented in a timely manner and more importantly enforced.

Lack of enforcement of obligations on dog owners and low levels of sanctions in this area are allowing this behaviour to continue, with sheep farmers having their flocks savaged by dogs on an almost daily basis at this point.

You will all hear about the major attacks that take place, but this is a problem that is not just confined to sporadic large-scale slaughtering of sheep by dogs. There isn't a day goes by that sheep farmers throughout the country do not encounter their flocks worried; sheep run into fences and drains; and some savaged.

These cases do not make the headlines, but they are happening, creating huge animal welfare issues for sheep and livestock in general and costing farmers money through lost production, animal loss and veterinary bills.

You also don't hear often enough the emotional & long-standing consequences dog attacks have on the farmer, farm family & remaining flock, most particularly where multiple incidents occur, which isn't all that rare either unfortunately.

This must be stopped.

Lack of meaningful action in this area has led us to the creation of our 'No Dogs Allowed' campaign, which is now in its fifth year in an attempt to protect the health and welfare of our animals.

It is not acceptable to farmers, who provide full traceability for the seven million cattle and almost three million breeding sheep under our care from birth, where every animal is individually tagged and traceable to the person responsible for them, that a similar system is not in place for dog owners.

Equally there are very severe sanctions for farmers when in breach of animal welfare obligations, but the sanctions imposed on dog owners do not reflect the seriousness of the damage these dog owners allow their pets inflict on our animals.

IFA has consistently called for appropriate sanctions and to develop a single national database identifying dogs and their owners/person responsible for the dog.

Ireland operates multiple authorised databases. For practical enforcement, one centralised national database must replace this fragmented and ineffective set up, facilitating immediate identification of the person responsible for the dog.

The critical issue in the first instance is to have all dogs in the country microchipped, registered to the owner and licensed in order to establish a national database for all dogs and their owners. This all comes back to enforcement, boots on the ground and appropriate sanctions for non-compliance.

Without this information, enhanced legislation will not work as dogs are not linked or identified to a person responsible. This system must be accessible to enforcement bodies on both sides of the border to ensure that no dog or owner can go unidentified. A similar system is required in Northern Ireland to allow enforcement in border regions.

Based on the latest figures published by the Dept of Agriculture, approximately 204,000 dog licences were issued in 2023. With an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 dogs in the country, there could be 600,000 unaccounted for and unregistered.

The most startling aspect of these figures is that nobody really knows how many dogs are actually in the country. This is an issue that must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Implementing stronger legislation in this area has been key to our campaign and would be a significant step in delivering for farmers.

Local authorities are responsible for the control of dogs under the Control of Dogs Act 1986. This act gives them the power to appoint dog wardens, provide dog shelters, seize dogs, impose on-the-spot fines and take court proceedings against owners.

In 2023, only 1,858 on-the-spot fines were issued for breaches, with a mere 631 fines actually paid. Reporting of livestock-worrying incidents rose to 276, a 3% increase on 2022, though many more go unreported. Reports of aggressive dog behaviour surged to 1,383, resulting in 442 injuries, yet only 311 cases were prosecuted and 149 resulted in convictions.

Enforcement remains severely limited, with only 80 wardens on the ground throughout the country with just 53 of these full-time, equating to roughly one dog warden for every 10,000 dogs based on best estimates of the number of dogs.

An essential aspect of enhanced legislation will be the enforcement which will require more resources for dog wardens, better clarity on the powers of dog wardens and Gardaí in implementing the legislative obligations of dog owners and the use of other service providers who have reason to interact with dog owners and their dogs. There must be full enforcement of existing microchipping and licensing obligations for all dog owners, alongside stronger and clearer enforcement powers for dog wardens, An Garda Síochána and the PSNI.

Under the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, owners and persons responsible for protected animals are legally obliged to prevent unnecessary suffering and to safeguard their welfare. This includes providing adequate food, water, shelter, and veterinary care.

Offences such as cruelty, abandonment, neglect, poisoning and illegal procedures carry severe penalties of up to €250,000 in fines and/or five years' imprisonment. Courts may also disqualify offenders from keeping animals.

These types of sanctions must also extend to cases where dogs have been found worrying or savaging sheep.

The most effective mechanism to ensure compliance with responsible ownership of dogs is to ensure the sanctions are such that dog owners will comply with their obligations.

Dog owners who allow their pets worry and/or slaughter sheep must be legally liable for all losses incurred by the farmer. They must be liable for fines comparable to those set out in the Animal Health and Welfare Act and be disqualified from dog ownership. If the authorities are serious about protecting our livestock, then they must get serious about the sanctions for these actions.

Increasing resources and providing stronger powers of enforcement for dog wardens and Gardai particularly at a time when a dog is associated with an attack on livestock are vital.

IFA recently met with our colleagues in the Ulster Farmers Union on dog control. Currently dogs from either side of the border cannot be identified or tracked as there is no joined up all island system in place.

To address this, IFA and the UFU are calling for co-ordination and co-operation between authorities in both jurisdictions to establish a database that fully integrates licensing and microchipping information, clearly identifying the person responsible for each dog. This system must be accessible to enforcement bodies both sides of the border ensuring no dog or owner can evade identification.

Despite an increase in fines from €100 to €300 in 2023, and a €2m fund dedicated to upgrading shelters and vehicles (supporting the ISPCA and others), the current frameworks are proving inadequate. Breed-specific legislation such as the ban on the XL Bully, while necessary, addresses only part of the problem.

Most notably, the proposal for a single national database has gained widespread support. It would work in the same way as the European regulation underway to improve traceability of dogs and cats across all 27 Member States. It aims to crack down on irresponsible breeding, inadequate welfare practices, and illegal trade. Central to the proposal are sweeping reforms governing how dogs and cats are bred, sold, identified, and cared for throughout the EU

To complement these structural reforms, the IFA is advancing eight key proposals:

- 1) A single National Database for all dogs correlating licensing and microchipping and identifying the person responsible for the dog but at a minimum alignment of the existing licensing and microchipping records to one central access point.
- 2) Full enforcement of microchipping and licensing obligations of dog owners for all dogs.
- 3) Stronger powers of enforcement for dog wardens and Gardaí and clarity of these powers.
- 4) Increased on the spot fines for failing to comply with the microchipping and licensing requirements.
- 5) Increased sanctions and on the spot fines for failing to have the dog under control.
- 6) Significant and proportionate sanctions for dog owners when dogs are found worrying/savaging/slaughtering livestock.
- 7) Legal requirement for dogs to be microchipped and licensed and identified on the NVPS (National Veterinary Prescribing System) prior to any veterinary treatment or prescribing of medicines by veterinary practitioners.
- 8) Authority to apply the legislative obligations to dogs in border regions owned by persons not resident in the state.

Governance will transition entirely to the Department of Agriculture by the end of 2025. This streamlining aligns with the Working Group's aim to clarify roles across policy implementation, warden deployment, fines systems, and breed controls.

These reforms are not merely desirable they are essential. A single national database will close existing record gaps and deliver traceability. Increased warden numbers and enforcement powers will translate policy into on-the-ground protection. Enhanced public education and awareness of the extent of sanctions that would be applied is important to increase responsible dog ownership in the long term.

In closing, these comprehensive proposals provide a safer, more effective, and more humane system of dog control in Ireland. One that reflects modern best practice, protects our livestock, and ensures accountability. I welcome the Committee's insights and questions on how we might proceed to legislative and operational implementation.

We are hearing some positive soundings in this area from Government but the problem has gone on for far too long. We need real and meaningful action and we need it now.

Ends.