



REVIEW OF SUPPORT FOR FARMERS IMPACTED BY ASH DIEBACK

Report to the Minister for Land Use and Biodiversity

Foreword and acknowledgements

The issue of ash dieback has impacted very severely on landowners who availed of grant-aided planting of ash over the past 35 years. Our interactions evidenced the very real anguish that this disease has wrought on owners, their families and the industry. At this point, there is an acceptance that the disease is irreversible and that the action required is the urgent clearance of the diseased woodland and agreed decisions on the future use of the lands.

We undertook to consult with representative organisations and individual landowners affected by ash dieback and we are extremely grateful for the open and generous manner in which those involved facilitated detailed discussions during July & August. We also received written submissions which we have carefully reviewed.

We also wish to acknowledge the full support of DAFM staff in providing us with reports and documentation, facilitating meetings and responding to our queries. We are also particularly grateful for the unstinting support and assistance of Teagasc at key stages.

We have worked hard to frame a suite of recommendations which, if implemented with urgency, we believe would receive broad support and help to resolve this very difficult situation. We are hopeful that a collaborative approach between all parties around a clear framework of action and the necessary financial arrangements will prove successful. In addition, we believe that this can be an important signpost to the delivery of the Government's ambitious Forest Strategy and Forestry Programme to 2027 and beyond.

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15 September 2023

Review of support for farmers impacted by ash dieback

1 Introduction

In June 2023, we were asked to carry out a rapid review of the DAFM approach and supports for landowners affected by ash dieback since 2013 and to provide the Minister with advice and recommendations on a way forward in line with the draft Forest Strategy. (see Appendix 1). The objectives of the review are to:

1. Review the performance of extant and historic schemes including delivery of objectives, costs and impact
2. Understand the experiences of landowners impacted by the disease with regards to the disease itself, engagement with DAFM and its response and their future aspirations and plans
3. Consider the DAFM approach to support in the context of other plant and animal diseases in Ireland and Europe more widely
4. Consider limits to government assistance such as State Aid rules
5. Develop a set of principles and recommendations to underpin future schemes or amendments to the current scheme, in line with the draft Forest Strategy emanating from Project Woodland.

The scope of the review is limited to the design and implementation of the various schemes for ash plantations. Issues beyond this scope that the Minister may want to consider further (eg. ash disease beyond young plantations) are captured in Section 9.

We met in person and online between 22 June and 15 September. Face to face and online interviews were held with 28 stakeholders including landowners, representative organisations and DAFM officials. We also visited several sites to see the impact of the disease at first hand and to assist with the exploration of future options.

Our report analyses the background and context for the disease itself (section 2), our understanding of DAFM's interventions and response (section 3) and the key points made by stakeholders (section 4), drawing out key findings that are summarised in the separate Executive Summary. We then present conclusions in relation to the 5 objectives as laid out in our Terms of reference.

2 Background and Context

2.1 ash planting in Ireland since 1990

ash has a unique cultural significance in Ireland. Travel along any roadway and one is likely to encounter ash trees and the connection to hurling and camogie is uniquely Irish. As children we all learned about how Setanta became Cú Chulainn by driving a sliothar down the throat of Culann's ferocious hound with his hurley. The 'clash of the ash' describes the essence of hurling and camogie. So, for many centuries, ash has been used to make hurleys, while hurling and camogie have continued to grow and prosper as two of Ireland's national sports which has driven demand for new hurleys. Hurleys are short-lived by nature, so a continuous supply of hurleys of a variety of shapes, sizes and strengths is needed to sustain the game at home and abroad. According to McCracken et al (2017) *'there is an annual requirement for 360,000 hurleys, crafted from 2,000 m³ of ash wood'*.

Selection of ash for hurley making is based on choice of well configured tree butts including the upper root zone. The industry suppliers of suitable plank wood make their selection from visual inspection in the forest. While this application delivers a commercial premium to the grower, it is derived from the lower section of tree trunk only (up to 2 metres high) and it can be difficult to predict in advance how many trees in a stand will be suitable or the output of hurleys per ash butt.

Most ash for making hurleys in Ireland is imported. The combination of the importance of hurling in Ireland and the lack of availability of suitable ash for hurley making was the catalyst in the late 1980's for the development of a Forest Service scheme to promote ash plantations so that Ireland could move towards self-sufficiency in hurley production by 2020 (McCracken et al, 2017). The Forest Service promotional leaflet 'Grow ash for Profit' published in March 1988 advertises and promotes the financial rewards to be made by growing ash (see Appendix 2). This was the first time that the Forest Service had introduced a scheme to incentivise private landowners to plant native hardwoods as a commercial crop in a newly established forest. Given the domination of Sitka Spruce in commercial forestry, this was an important strategic component of forestry policy. Between 1990 and 2012 (the year that the disease was first detected in Ireland), on average 688 hectares were planted with ash each year. The scheme took about three years to become established but thereafter it is notable how consistent the figures were from year to year (see Figure 1).

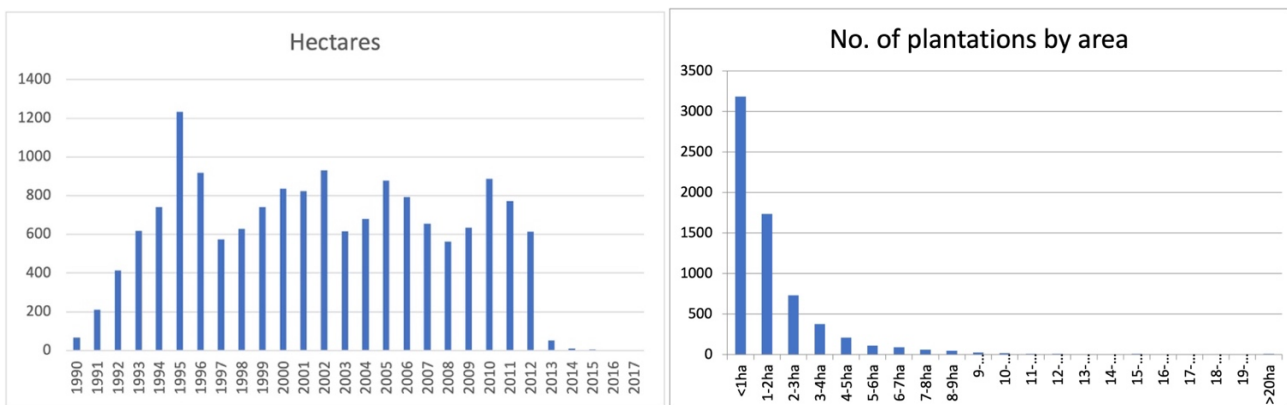


Figure 1&2: ash planting in Ireland by year and area

Between 1990 and 2017, in the order of 6,500 landowners became involved in the scheme, with a large number (up to 90%) of plantations being under 3 hectares (see Figure 2). ash was often the only form of forestry that a landowner was involved in and it offered an opportunity to create new woodland with ecological, aesthetic and longer term commercial benefits. For some, part of its attraction was in providing a pension opportunity at maturity or a legacy for children. And then the disease hit.

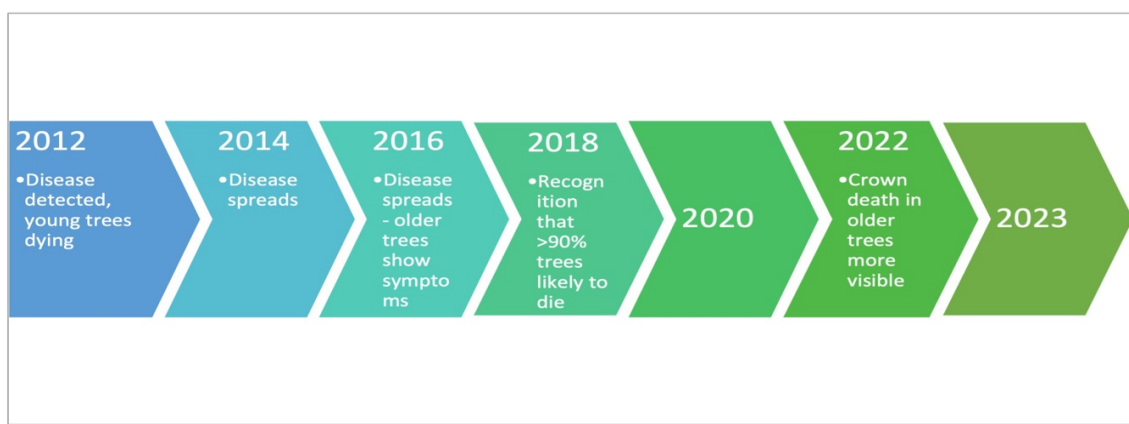
Review Group Finding 1

The pre-2012 ash-planting was popular and successful due to the commercial, cultural, silvicultural and ecological opportunities of the species. Many landowners with no previous involvement with forestry planted ash between 1990 and 2012. The even spread of new planting over the years provided a steady demand for ash seedlings, labour, and (over time) a sustainable supply of ash for hurley making. With sustainable forest management principles applying, these plantations would have been producing economic, social and environmental value for many decades to come.

2.2 Ash dieback disease

ash dieback disease (also known as 'Chalara') is caused by the fungus-like pathogen *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*. The disease first emerged in Europe in the 1990's and has subsequently been spreading across the continent via wind-borne spores and the movement of young trees. ash trees in Ireland have been monitored for the disease since 2008 and it was first detected in 2012. We did not specifically investigate the introduction of the disease to Ireland. However, the general view of stakeholders is that it came in via infected saplings and showed up initially in Leitrim in plantations from 2009. This view was supported by DAFM in its evidence to the *Joint Oireachtas Committee*, however this evidence also highlights the unknown source of the disease within the plantation and highlights the possibility that it may have been present and undetected before that time or may have been introduced in replacement plants for any that died post-planting.

Fig 3 Timeline for ash dieback in Ireland

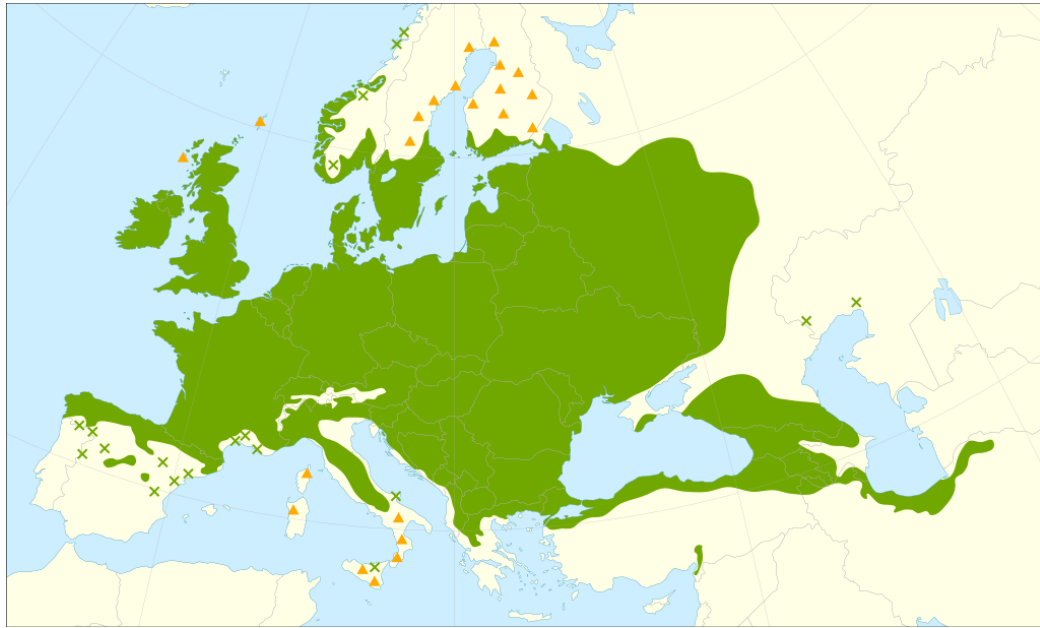


2.3 European context

This section draws on information provided to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture and Marine [DAFM November 2022]. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the distribution of common ash and the ash dieback disease across Europe. In summary, the disease is now endemic across continental Europe. According to DAFM, Ireland and the United Kingdom were the only countries in Europe that attempted to prevent its introduction and spread.

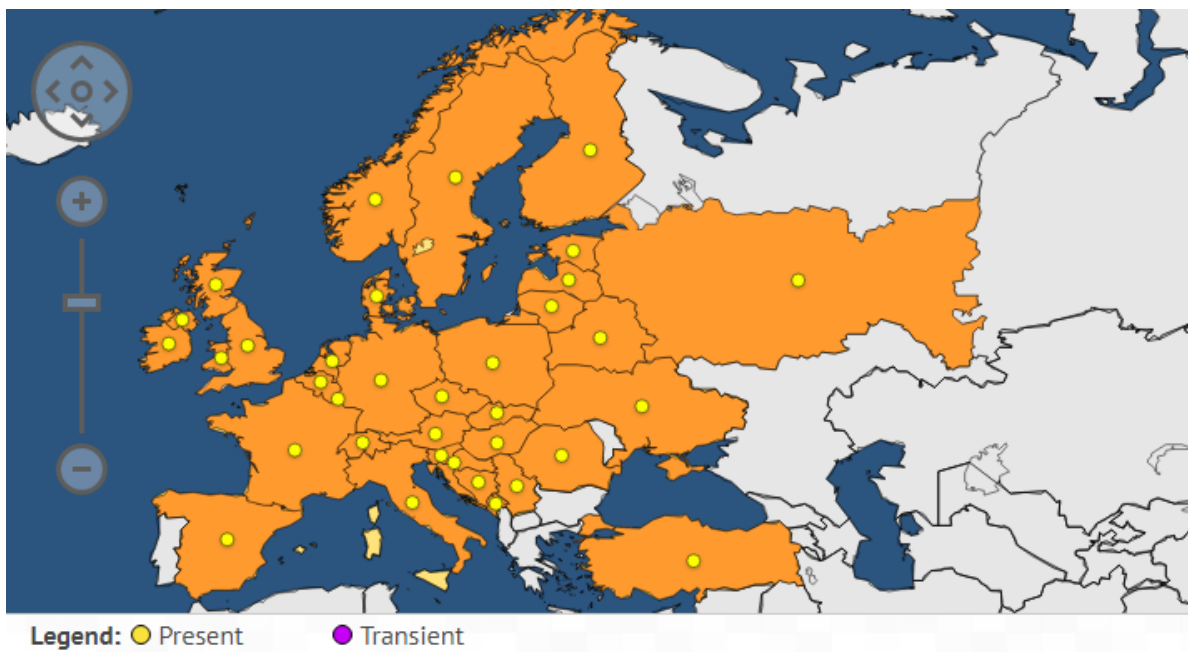
Competency for EU Plant Health Legislation rests with the EU Commission. There were few controls on the movement of plants between Member States until the introduction of a plant passport system for all plants moved within the EU between 'Professional Operators' in 2016. In the years preceding the detection of ash dieback disease, both Ireland and the United Kingdom advocated for measures to be introduced in the EU to deal with ash dieback through the EU's Standing Committee for Plant Health. Ireland, through the Department of Agriculture, sought a 'Pest Risk Analysis' for ash dieback disease to be carried out at EU level and for the disease to be added to the EU Regulations as a harmful organism. None of these approaches were successful.

Figure 4: Distribution map of ash in Europe



Native range X Isolated population ▲ Introduced and naturalized (synanthropic). Source: EUFORGEN https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fraxinus_excelsior_range.svg

Figure 5: Distribution map of ash dieback disease in Europe



Source: [European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organisation \(EPPO\)](https://www.eppo.int/)

There is therefore clear evidence that Ireland was actively seeking ways to tighten up regulations on the free movement of ash plants prior to the detection of the disease in 2012. Post 2012, both Ireland and the United Kingdom introduced emergency national legislative measures, only to be directed by the EU Commission that these measures were in breach of the EU Plant Directive and should be revoked. An All Ireland Chalara Control Strategy was launched in July 2013 by the two responsible Ministers, following a joint announcement in October 2012 of a 'Fortress Ireland' approach encapsulating a policy of disease eradication (McCracken et al, 2017).

From our perspective, there seems to have been no recognition at EU level that the island geography of both Ireland and the United Kingdom combined with the economic and cultural importance of ash as a native hardwood required special measures to be adopted to try to prevent the entry of the disease onto both islands from mainland Europe. That said, even had additional measures been introduced across the EU, given the wind-borne nature of the disease, its high transmissibility and the widespread distribution of ash trees across the island, it seems likely to have established here at some point.

Review Group Finding 2

European policy and legislation were ineffective in stopping the spread of the disease across continental Europe – and importantly onto these islands. It is clear that the European response to representation from both Ireland and the UK inhibited both states' ability to act and restrict further imports of potentially infected material. Whilst this is unlikely to have stopped the initial infection, it may have slowed things down in the early years.

2.4 Comparison with other plant and animal diseases

Stakeholders repeatedly raised the issue of other animal and plant diseases and how they are dealt with, particularly with regards to financial compensation. Some stakeholders drew a comparison between the management of Bovine TB and the arrangements currently in place for ash dieback disease. Comparing plant and animal diseases is a particularly complex area with different regimes for disease control, different economic and financial impacts, and different State Aid regulations. We have taken a general overview to address the key points raised by stakeholders but must emphasise that these are all specialist areas in their own right.

For Bovine TB, the overall objectives of the TB compensation schemes are to remove the risk of spread of the disease from the affected herd, by culling both sick and healthy animals and to enable the farmer to get back to full capacity with a healthy herd as quickly as possible. These objectives must be considered in the context of both animal welfare considerations and the strategic importance of the beef and dairy sector to Ireland's economy. Current policy is to provide the farmer with sufficient compensation to build back their herd with mature animals of a similar age to those that had to be removed. Affected farmers are also entitled to the salvage value of the diseased animals and, in particular circumstances, income supplement payments and hardship payments.

Several stakeholders argued that the current RUS scheme falls far short of the comparative scheme for Bovine TB and is not comparable to other agricultural plant diseases because of the long time needed to grow another crop of trees to match the value of those lost. In the case of Bovine TB, it was argued that the farmer could be back on his or her feet again with a healthy herd by buying animals of a similar age within a relatively short time period, whereas ash owners may have to wait 30 years or more.

As regards plant diseases, it is interesting to compare the response to ash dieback with the response to *Phytophthora ramorum* – a similarly devastating disease that is killing Larch trees. Few stakeholders other than Coillte had much appreciation of the Larch disease, or seemed concerned about its progression in the same way as ash. This can be contrasted with the very high state of alert and international action with regards to *Ips typographus* bark beetles which pose a high threat to spruce and have been detected in England with increasing frequency in recent years.

During discussions, other favourable references were made to the frost scheme and the fodder crisis response, both put in place to deal with 'natural' crises impacting on farmers' crops. Although the scale of the *immediate* economic impact of these crises for the country is of a different magnitude, the principle of the State co-ordinating a national partnership response to the impacts of nationwide fatal disease still holds.

We heard many different views on the issue of 'State Aid' rules with quotes made from a range of different historic and extant regulations and Commission communications. For clarity, our understanding is as follows:

- State aid consideration is currently covered by [Communication from the Commission 2022/C 485/1](#), effective from 1st January, 2023.
- Within these guidelines, forestry is dealt with specifically and separately from other agricultural activities under Part 2, Chapter 2 (articles 494 – 633).
- Section 2.1.3 (articles 514 – 522) lays out the limits to aid for the prevention and restoration of damage to forests.

Other sections of text shared with us (particularly articles 360 – 378 of the above document regarding "Aid for the costs, prevention, control and eradication of animal diseases, plant diseases and infestation by invasive alien species and aid to make good the damage caused by animal diseases, plant pests and invasive alien species") were often from other parts of the Guidelines and therefore not relevant to forestry, or were from previous versions of the Guidelines or other texts.

Whilst the rules outlined in section 2.1.3 are very specific in limiting the payment of aid for restoration from damage by disease, there are other sections of the chapter which may enable other mechanisms for the future (eg. in relation to mutual insurance funds, processing and marketing or co-operative action).

All of our findings are consistent with Wilkinson et al (2011), '*for plant diseases, the costs of outbreaks are borne almost entirely by producers who receive no compensation from the government*'. This is in contrast to animal diseases such as Bovine TB management in both the United Kingdom and Ireland and diseases such as foot and mouth, avian influenza and BSE where '*the government conventionally pays for the eradication of the disease and compensation to affected producers*'. Furthermore, forestry is treated differently to other plant crops for the consideration of State Aid, leading to further inconsistencies and scope for confusion.

Review Group Finding 3

While it may appear logical to farmers that similar 'State Aid' provisions should apply to both animal and plant diseases and between annual and long term forest crops, this is not reflected in the legal position in the EU. Therefore, we conclude that notwithstanding the sense of injustice felt, a State Aid compliant solution for forestry is likely to have to rely on Articles 494-633 of Communication of the Commission 2022c 485/1. The heightened awareness of woodland disease by farmers arising from the ash Die-back issue brings the State Aid limitations into sharp focus as the State seeks accelerated afforestation to meet Climate targets. Given that forestry objectives in Ireland are heavily dependent on persuading farmers to make a permanent land use change to woodland, this is likely to be a long-term challenge for successive forestry programmes.

2.5 Forest Policy

Ireland has been fundamentally reviewing its forestry policy in the context of the climate emergency, the biodiversity crisis and the regulatory upheaval in the licensing system. A key stage in this has been the establishment of the shared National Vision and Forest Strategy. The critical importance of the Forest Strategy to achieving Ireland's Climate objectives is fundamental and delivery of the strategy requires that farmers have confidence in forestry as an attractive land-use option.

Project Woodland made positive progress towards re-building confidence in the licensing system, but this progress is put in jeopardy by the handling of ash die-back. Although ash only represents a small proportion of forestry in Ireland, we cannot over-state how important the handling of this situation is for the wider delivery of the Forest Strategy and the new Forestry Programme. Important aspects to include in future approaches are the recognition of the partnership with farmers that includes some risk-sharing as regards woodland disease. In the case of ash plantations since the late 1980's, it has to be considered that this followed strong promotion by Government agencies with emphasis on the potential for good commercial returns to the farmer and national targets to replace ash imports for the hurley sector.

Review Group Finding 4

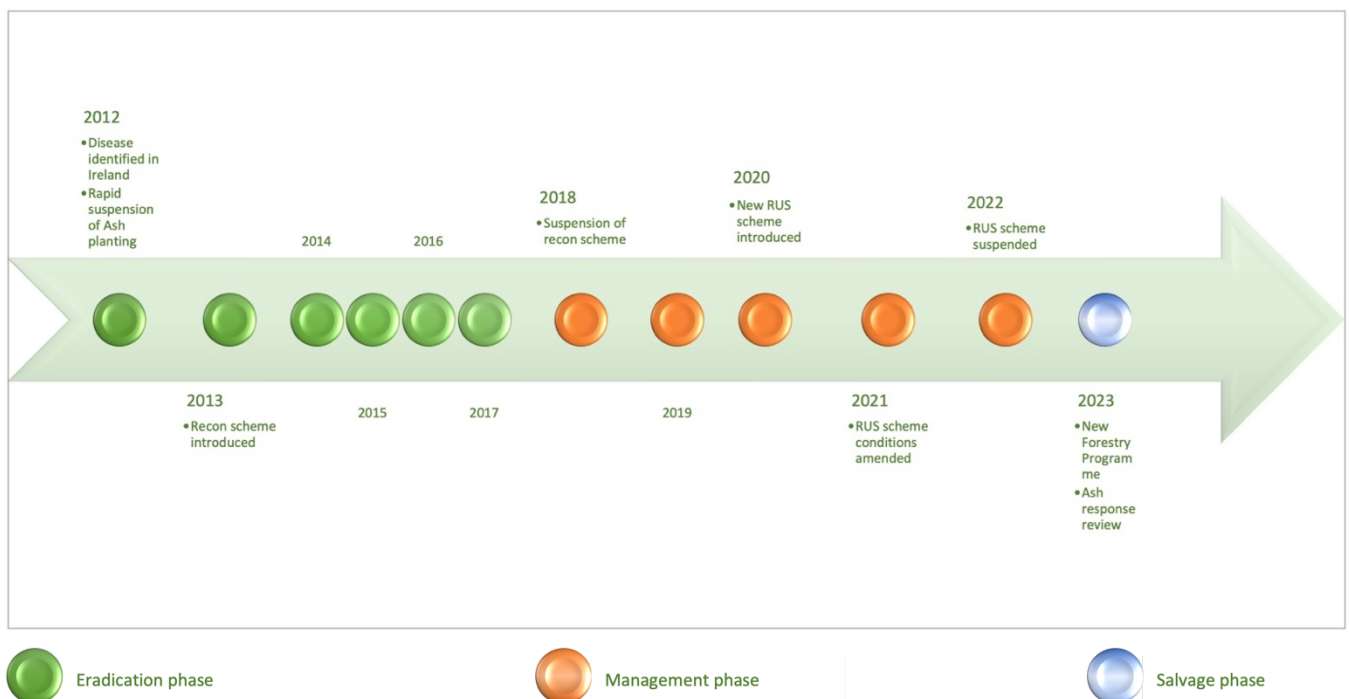
The impact of the handling of ash dieback on the delivery of the draft Forest Strategy is disproportionately large relative to the scale of ash woodland in Ireland or its commercial value. The way that the State interacts with farmers on this issue is fundamental to how land owners judge the attractiveness of forestry as a land-use. If there is no confidence that farmers will have some protection from future losses, the incentives needed to encourage them into forestry will be even greater.

3 DAFM interventions and National Response to the Disease

3.1 Introduction

The national response, led out by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine on behalf of the State, can be divided into four periods: pre-detection (1990 – 2012); post-detection / eradication phase (2012 – 2018); ‘management’ phase (2018 – 2023), and the current ‘salvage’ phase. See Fig 6 below.

Fig 6: DAFM Timeline



3.2 Pre-Detection Period

The first period, prior to the detection of the disease in Ireland, was dealt with in Section 2 of this report. The key point to make in relation to this period is that the Irish State was aware of the disease and its progression in Europe and was actively involved at EU level in exploring ways of reducing the risk of the disease entering Ireland. Could more have been done? Some stakeholders drew attention to discussions during this period about the introduction of plant quarantine processes and whether such an approach might have protected Ireland from the disease. Given the attempts made by the Irish authorities to have the disease recognised as a harmful organism requiring an EU wide Pest Risk Analysis, and the fact that ash dieback disease is not regulated under EU rules regarding free movement within the EU, it seems unlikely that any attempt at introducing a unilateral approach for Ireland would have been considered acceptable by the EU.

According to McCracken et al, 2017, 'In recent decades there has been a significant increase in the global trade of plants and plant products. It has been recognised that this movement of plants poses a high risk of introduction of unwanted organisms into areas which were previously free from them. It has been suggested that woodlands and native plant communities in the UK and Ireland are currently suffering from plant pathogens introduced, often on living plants, by human activity' (Brasier 2008). This author suggested that the potential for future damage may be large and is critical of the international regulations aimed at mitigating the risks of introducing diseases, which he considers to be highly inadequate.

Review Group Finding 5

Prior to 2012, multiple attempts were made by the Irish and UK governments to implement biosecurity measures within the EU to prevent the disease from reaching these Islands. These attempts were unsuccessful in the context of EU policy at the time (see section 2.3)

3.3 Post Detection 'Eradication Phase' - Reconstitution Scheme - March 2013 – 2018

A comprehensive account of this period is to be found in McCracken et al 2017. The overriding objective during this period was the eradication of the disease but as time went on and through regular surveying it became increasingly clear that the disease was taking hold beyond young plantations, and it was decided that the overall strategic approach and associated scheme would be reviewed. McCracken et al (2017) stated that '*evidence from other European countries had shown that once the pathogen is established in the wider environment it is impossible to control or even restrict its spread (Timmermann 2011).*'

The main objectives of this first reconstitution scheme were:

- Mobilisation of the sector and investment of funds in attempting to eradicate the disease in areas where it was first detected and subsequent measures to remove and replace host material to slow the spread of the disease,
- Prohibit movement of ash plants into Ireland while the support for new ash plantations was temporarily suspended,
- Initiated support for research into the spread of the disease and possible identification of resistant or tolerant genotypes for future planting.

These appear to have been sensible and reasonable responses to the disease in 2012 and the following years. However, from around 2017 onwards it was becoming increasingly clear that this policy approach had failed. The scheme was eventually suspended in 2018 pending further review. That effectively 'froze' action on ash plantations regardless of disease status. There was neither the recognition that full clearance was now the required action, nor that it was effectively prevented by the cancellation of the scheme and paralysis in licensing for felling in that period.

Review Group Finding 6

The suspension of the scheme in 2018 with no replacement until 2020 reflected neither the emergency nature of the situation or the plight of landowners watching crops deteriorate and die, without recourse to government advice or support. This hiatus also resulted in the loss of contractor capacity.

3.4 'Management' Phase - Reconstitution and underplanting Scheme (RUS) – June 2020 – 2023

Following a two year review period, a new Scheme was launched in June 2020 called the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (RUS). The objectives of this scheme were:

- 1) To encourage the active management of ash plantations in the context of the control and spread of ash Disease.
- 2) To promote the vigorous growth of ash through thinning to realise as much of the potential value of the crop as possible.
- 3) To support the removal of affected ash crops and their replacement with alternative species.
- 4) To build resilience and diversity into plantations and possibly identify disease tolerant or resistant individuals.

The objective of the new scheme was a move from disease eradication to disease management. Whereas a hallmark of the first reconstitution scheme was a concerted national and all-island effort to eradicate the disease, this second management scheme was dependent on individual landowners and their forestry advisors deciding whether or not to apply. Uptake of the scheme was very low and overall levels of dissatisfaction extremely high. These points were made in passing in the Mackinnon review in November 2019, and again in the O'Hara report of 2021. However, as the scheme was deemed out of scope, it consequently received little attention during the Covid years as the licensing crisis evolved into Project Woodland.

Feedback from the stakeholders is uniformly negative as regards this scheme and its rollout. It is also clear that at this stage that several of the prescriptions included in the RUS scheme were already redundant. This was further exacerbated by the complexity of the scheme and the poor levels of engagement between DAFM and the various players in the sector (foresters, advisors, farmers, contractors). Silviculturally, the exclusion of older plantations, the requirement for a damage level assessment survey and the underplanting element were not appropriate when it was clear by this stage that the disease would decimate 90% or more of ash trees.

These inadequacies undermined the role of DAFM inspectors in implementing the scheme and led to an unfortunate breakdown in trust. Our discussions with Forest Service staff showed them to be committed professionals dedicated to forestry promotion and anxious to work constructively with landowners and other forestry professionals. We heard no evidence that the issues with the scheme are a reflection on the professionalism of individual Forest Service staff (although customer service experience varies) but derived from the unsatisfactory RUS scheme construct. It should also be recognised that between 2020 and 2022, the Department was also having to deal with the operational impacts of Covid and the simultaneous licensing crisis.

The flawed nature of the scheme is underlined and evidenced by the multiple changes introduced on a piecemeal basis since 2020. Taking the period 2018 to 2023 therefore, we find that the State's response to this disease was ineffective. Between the flawed nature of the RUS Scheme and the inordinate delays in processing those applications submitted in the period, farmers were effectively inhibited in taking the actions required to salvage value and minimise costs.

Review Group Finding 7

In our view, the RUS scheme eventually introduced in 2020 was silviculturally flawed, based on an out of date premise that ash trees in infected plantations could still be saved. This left inspectors and owners without the means to deal with the problem. What can now be appreciated is that active clearance of ash in this period would probably have protected the salvage value and mitigated costs as conditions have worsened since. Without an approval (RUS or felling license), farmers were legally prevented from clearing the woodlands.

3.5 'Salvage' Phase - Forestry Programme 2023 - 2030

Amendments have been implemented or are now proposed for the current scheme to encourage more landowners with ash plantations to engage with the scheme. The main changes are:

- Removal of objectives 1 and 2 of the scheme (see above) in 2021
- Removal of the 25 year age classification for qualification into the scheme (July 2021)
- Removal of the damage level assessment survey to accompany RUS application (June 2022).
- Removal of the underplanting element.
- An increase in the site clearance grant from €1000 per hectare to €2000 per hectare (2023).
- Re-establishment grants will be based on the new programme levels (2023)
- Landowners with ash plantations who are still in premium will benefit from the new premiums depending on their reconstitution choice.

While the new scheme acknowledges the weaknesses in the past scheme, it does not adequately reflect the pressing need to salvage current standing value and regenerate the stands back to positive use (be that commercial, ecological or amenity) with the required level of farmer buy-in.

Review Group Finding 8

The suite of changes consolidated in the new Forestry Programme continues to respond to the 'management' objective but does not adequately address timely clearance and salvage of residual value, rising costs as site conditions worsen, or the impacts of inflation. Critically, it does not enable the objective of realising the remaining value of the standing trees before they deteriorate beyond use, nor the need to enable constructive discussions with landowners about positive uses of the site after clearance.

3.6 DAFM's overall role

A principle that kept emerging in this review and our work on Project Woodland relates to DAFM's approach to its role as both a regulator and a promoter of forestry. This complex role seems to be poorly recognised by stakeholders – even within the Department itself.

In our view, the key responsibilities of DAFM are:

1. to deliver national objectives for forestry
2. to ensure that forestry activity in Ireland is legal and compliant with national and international legislation
3. to ensure that tax-payers money is spent appropriately and efficiently towards achieving clear goals that serve the public good.

From this review and our work on Project Woodland, it appears that the first objective is largely lost behind the regulatory and compliance objectives.

DAFM interventions to achieve these objectives in the context of ash dieback takes place at three different stages in the process: planning, clearance and harvest, and regeneration. The tools it is able to use at these three stages include licensing, grant payments, research and advice, monitoring and review. This role needs to be looked at systemically for example:

Licensing

The improvement of licensing operations within DAFM has been examined exhaustively by Mackinnon and the subsequent work on Project Woodland. All of the issues that we examined in Project Woodland are relevant to the ash discussion, but with a particular slant: this is an emergency situation, impacting a limited area for a limited duration. Therefore, there should be a higher risk tolerance if greater efficiencies can be delivered. We see little evidence in DAFM's approach to licensing that the impact of inefficiency and bureaucracy on the ash response has been identified and dealt with seriously enough. The approach to handling mature ash woodlands appears to contrast negatively with experiences in Scotland and England, where emergency measures to expedite harvesting in the case of tree diseases are regularly implemented.

Support payments

Three types of payments were discussed:

Payment for the cost of clearing and regenerating the site is widely accepted. The recent increase to site clearance rates was welcomed but not widely understood. We saw compelling evidence that more mature sites faced greater costs due to health and safety concerns and encroachment by bramble. The lack of urgency in harvesting over the last 5 years (often underpinned by lack of confidence in licensing procedures and continually changing grant regimes) has also resulted in a deterioration in value, though we heard widely different views on the extent of this. Payment to compensate for the cost of clearance is consistent with international practice and should continue to be adequately funded in any future package.

Annual payments to cover some income foregone were consistently raised. It seems inherently unfair that pioneering farmers who were 'early adopters' of forestry on their farms now face higher costs and no 'premiums' when compared with those who are now considering planting on 'greenfield' sites. Internationally there appears to be a range of approaches to achieve some degree of annual payment (eg. payment of maintenance costs, extension of 'premium' payment periods, carbon credits) that require further serious consideration and investigation. We note an interest by the private sector in payment to farmers for ecosystem services, for example.

Compensation for loss of income was raised by some – but by no means all – stakeholders. Some of those we spoke with made impassioned pleas for parity with cattle farmers and compensation from the State to reimburse them for the lost value from their standing trees. Some went further to demand compensation for the loss of *potential* income. Despite extensive discussions and submissions, we have been unable to find a clear State Aid compliant mechanism to provide for compensation for income lost. This seems inequitable – especially as there is evidence that plantations deteriorated in the effective 'hiatus' between 2018 and 2023. An *ex gratia* payment should therefore be considered, that reflects the hiatus and consequent losses between 2018 and 2023 and the legal and operational difficulties faced by owners to extract value from their trees during this time through no fault of their own.

Review Group Finding 9

DAFM's role needs to visibly extend beyond policy and compliance and into leading the delivery of government policy as expressed in the new Forest Strategy. This includes taking a more systemic approach to intervention as well as the cultural and organisational changes proposed in Project Woodland. As part of this role, the Department could be more creative in our view in how it uses the available policy levers to resolve the issues arising from ash dieback.

4 Feedback from stakeholders

4.1 Introduction

We met with three distinct stakeholder groups – landowners with ash plantations, industry representative organisations and DAFM/Forest Service staff. Many of those we met with also provided written submissions. Although in the time available we were only able to meet with a subset of stakeholders, at the conclusion of these engagements we were satisfied that we had received a rounded and comprehensive perspective on the issue, with sufficient information to enable us to conduct an analysis of the disease and the State's response to date and to formulate a set of principles and recommendations for the consideration of the Minister.

4.2 Owners objectives

The ash plantations covered by the engagement varied in size and were undertaken mainly by farmers with limited background in forest management. Stakeholders recognised that ash growing in Ireland is not comparable with Europe, due to its strong cultural connotations and an associated significant commercial outlet for good quality trees that can be used for hurley making. The decision to plant ash mono-cultures was based on a combination of factors:

- **Commercial:** The commercial case for ash as a valuable crop was clear and was strongly made by government and other advisors. Some wanted a steady income with less physical labour than livestock, others used it as an investment for their retirement or for their children.
- **Operational:** Grant aided development was attractive for those keen to exit other farming activity (retirement, inheritance) or to enhance their holdings with woodland stands (shelter, amenity, legacy).
- **Cultural:** ash was often favoured as a native timber with a strong cultural association with hurling, generally suited to good land (previous pasture & tillage) and offering attractive woodland.
- **Ecological:** Many farmers we spoke to express a strong preference for broadleaves over conifers, or were using ash as a diversification for adjoining spruce crops
- **Innovation:** Early farmer growers (1990's) were 'pioneers', with many wanting to try something different. With limited expertise in forestry, they depended on expert advice which it is claimed positively encouraged ash mono-culture.

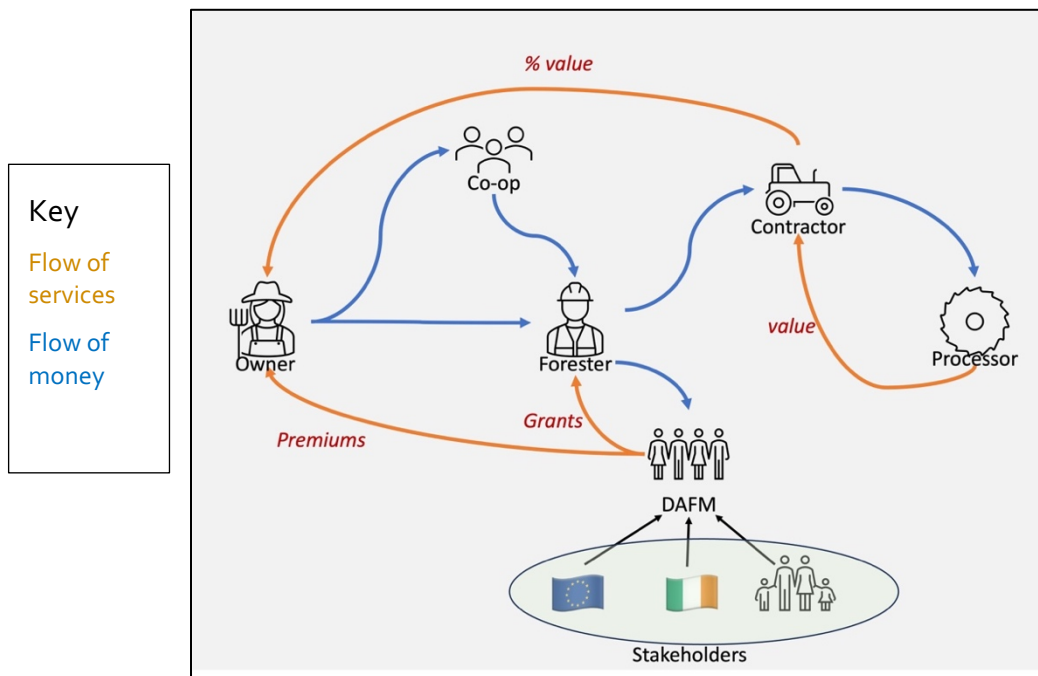
Therefore, farmers who engaged with the state support schemes from the early 1990's took the option of ash trees in good faith with little risk appreciation. Where soil conditions were favourable, the life cycle indicated a good commercial return after 30 years – the only native hardwood to offer this possibility. As the disease progressed and farmers felt ignored and isolated, many have gone from passive ownership to wanting to take control, get informed and represent their own interests. The meetings showed high awareness of environmental factors, carbon ownership and the importance of forestry in climate policy.

Review Group Finding 10
 Although public discourse focuses on the financial ramifications of the disease, we found that owners' objectives – both at the initial planting stage and in the current circumstances - were more nuanced. Many expressed an overwhelming desire to return their land to health but couldn't see how to achieve this without great expense

4.3 Stakeholder experience of the disease and DAFM Response to Date

Landowners who planted ash were pioneers, responding to strong State encouragement. Prior to 2012 it seems that no-one – farmers, professional foresters or the State – were considering the risks associated with monocultures or the disease that had been spreading across Europe since the 1990's. A simplified schematic of the network of actors involved in responding to the disease is shown in Fig 7.

Fig 7: Irish Farm Forestry System (simplified)



Several stakeholders expressed a view that there was a 'liability' with the State for not stopping the import of the disease. Others accepted that there was a certain inevitability that one way or another it would have reached Ireland and once here would have been unstoppable.

The State's initial suspension of ash planting (Circular 12, 2012) and the introduction of a Reconstitution Scheme (March 2013) which focused on taking out infected plants and re-planting was seen as 'fairly straightforward' and got good take-up. Although stakeholders recognised that a scheme designed to eradicate the disease was no longer appropriate by 2018, the suspension of the scheme with the felling license process also in crisis, left landowners understandably feeling abandoned and with nowhere to turn for help or advice.

The introduction of the new RUS in 2020 made things worse for stakeholders, as they found it out of step with both the reality of the disease and the requirements of the growers. In addition, the scheme was complex for applicants and advisors, and was regularly changing. Among the issues of particular concern were:

- Requirement for a 'Damage Assessment Report' which had no value and was later withdrawn
- Limitation to young trees which failed to address the reality of the disease and caused delays in addressing older plantations (with consequential loss of timber value and increased costs of clearing) finally withdrawn in July 2021
- Circular 05 2021 in May 2021 which placed restrictions on the replacement crop and a requirement for planning consent for conifers now also withdrawn
- Inclusion of underplanting as an option which made little sense and could be considered unsafe practice given the state of disease.

The implications of Habitats & Birds Directives had meanwhile led to major delays in afforestation and felling licensing, which led in turn to long delays in processing RUS Applications (2-3 years reported). While this was a serious frustration for the industry as a whole, it had particularly negative implications for those with ash as they watched the devastation of their crops while waiting on approval of RUS with no information on application status or likely date of issue .

Other issues raised include:

- Length of the process (multiple years)
- Lack of transparency, negligible customer service and poor communication from DAFM
- Costs involved and uncertainty about licensing of felling when desired or at all
- Growing trust deficit with Forestry Service, Professional Foresters and contractors as farmers felt isolated, with no advice or update on applications.
- Absence of compensation terms, especially compared to livestock disease
- Environmental degradation as healthy plantations transformed into standing deadwood in dense briars – some very concerned with the fire risk this could present
- "The 2020 Scheme was killed by conditions that made no sense".
- Loss of contractors and skills as no work available
- Loss of income for professional foresters.

Most now feel that opting into forestry was a commercial mistake, especially given the financial benefits of other farming options and the negative impact on land values post afforestation.

Review Group Finding 11

During our interviews we heard a consistent story that stakeholders were supportive of the DAFM response when the disease was first discovered in Ireland. However, stakeholders view the response from around 2017 differently, characterising it as complex, overly bureaucratic and silviculturally flawed. There was no sense that the Department was handling the situation as an emergency from around 2016 and in particular in the period since 2018 (see Fig 6). This period coincided with rapid disease spread and pace of degradation of the ash. It was also unfortunate that the crisis in licensing of forestry activity and the Covid pandemic coincided in this period, resulting in extreme delay in dealing with applications for assistance. Direct interactions between landowners and DAFM are less frequent than we had anticipated, and the role of the registered forester is clearly vital. Most of those we spoke with were positive about the role of their registered forester and of Teagasc advisers.

4.4 Stakeholder views on what should happen next

Most farmers' initial response when asked what they wanted to do with their land was that they would like the option of returning it to pasture, offering better returns and potential sale value of the land. However, on discussion, more nuanced responses emerged, with many conceding that they would like the land to remain under trees. Some wanted to convert to spruce, others to encourage natural regeneration or plant a mix of native trees, while others would be open to exploring agro-forestry. Under-pinning this range of views was a frustration that they were not in control of what they could do with their own land. While recognising that some wish to revert to grassland, we must have regard to the legal position that grant aided forestry is a permanent land-use change. This, however, underlines the case for strong State support for those whose woodlands have been destroyed.

Review Group Finding 12

There is a deep sense of loss and anxiety on the part of ash plantation owners. In many cases this has resulted in a paralysis of decision-making as they opt to wait in hope for better terms and in some cases hoping against hope that some degree of disease resistance will emerge and their trees will be spared. This delay exacerbates reduction in residual timber value, increases the costs of clearance, worsens health and safety risks and increases the wider risks of large numbers of dead and dying trees in the landscape. Given the extent of research underway into resistance, it seems to be in the shared interest of State and growers that dying ash plantations are cleared as soon as possible.

When asked what help they needed, the following points were made (in order of frequency of mention):

1. The new clearance rate of €2000 / ha is welcomed, however some requested additional rates for particularly difficult sites (small or heavily overgrown)
2. Rapid and straightforward licensing for felling and clearing (and roads if needed)
3. Freedom to change tree species
4. Technical assistance with clearance, re-planting and maintenance
5. New premiums that are comparable with planting on bare land
6. Compensation for the loss of value.

The most important objective now should be to enable farmers to clear and re-establish their sites at minimal cost as quickly as possible. Many interviewees made reference to the 'fodder crisis response' and suggested that a task force involving a partnership of actors from across the sector (including DAFM and Teagasc) to deal with the issue quickly would be widely welcomed.

Review Group Finding 13

There was considerable enthusiasm for the establishment of a dedicated, visible and responsive 'ash task force' tasked with expediting solutions across the country, as is warranted by this catastrophic disease. Most considered that 3 years would be a reasonable timeframe for this work

5 Conclusions

We have structured our conclusions around the first four objectives:

1. Review the performance of extant and historic schemes including delivery of objectives, costs and impact
2. Understand the experiences of landowners impacted by the disease with regards to the disease itself, engagement with DAFM and its response and their future aspirations and plans
3. Consider the DAFM approach to support in the context of other plant and animal diseases in Ireland and Europe more widely
4. Consider limits to government assistance such as State Aid rules.

This then leads us to our fifth objective in the next section:

5. Develop a set of principles and recommendations to underpin future schemes or amendments to the current scheme, in line with the draft Forest Strategy emanating from Project Woodland.

In doing this, we have also considered the progression of the disease in Ireland, the various views of stakeholders, key risks and the principles of a fair sharing of those risks, and the delivery of the draft Forest Strategy.

5.1 The performance of extant and historic schemes including delivery of objectives, costs and impact

There is no doubting the success of the original planting scheme. With an average of 688 hectares of new ash plantation per annum between 1990 and 2012, the scheme successfully attracted farmers into forestry. The scheme, and its connection to hurley manufacturing, set high expectations of substantial economic returns for landowners and the emergence of the ash dieback disease was a major blow in this regard. Had the disease never developed, in all likelihood many other farmers would have engaged with the scheme with plantations thriving and producing good quality timber for ash hurley making and other uses in Ireland.

The most common criticism of the early planting scheme was that it promoted monocultures without clarifying the inherent risks that they carry – a criticism that is echoed in current productive schemes. In our visits to affected sites, there was a noticeable difference between sites with ash monoculture and those where ash had been planted as part of a mixed plantation. While ash die-back was evident at all sites, the sites containing other species were still functioning 'woodland'. The disease is therefore a living lesson in the importance of species diversity to build resilience in a forest.

The attempt at eradication between 2012 and 2018 - whilst well-intentioned and initially well-targeted - soon became out of step with the progression of the disease and the increasing need to move to a 'salvage' phase.

From 2018 onwards the response of the State was flawed and ineffective and clearly did not meet the needs of forest owners – or society as a whole. Furthermore, from 2018 onwards, DAFM appears to have stepped back from its leadership role as it moved from disease eradication to disease management. Taking two years to review the scheme, albeit with public and stakeholder consultations, was far too long and had the effect of stalling any momentum that had been built up. This was further compounded by an overly complex scheme introduced in 2020 which coincided with the developing crisis in forestry licensing and consequent McKinnon review. Unfortunately, this two year period also seems to have coincided with a rapid deterioration of many ash plantations and a consequential reduction in timber value.

The eventual introduction of the new RUS in 2020 was roundly criticised. The scheme itself has changed a number of times, and the €1000/ha rate for clearance was described as 'derisory' – especially for older sites. The number of reactive changes to the scheme, coupled with poor communication (exacerbated by the Covid pandemic), the technical flaws and the leadership failure by the State led to minimal uptake and further negativity of farmers towards forestry and the DAFM forestry service.

While the increased clearance rates are acceptable to many of those we met with, there are categories of site that would involve higher costs, notably smaller dispersed sites, sites with need for access improvement and sites with significant public road frontage, where the health & safety risks are higher. In our view the changes to the scheme do not go far enough to address the issue, given the disproportionate impact of the ash plantations on confidence in forestry and the delivery of the forestry strategy and climate change targets.

Once the disease is evident in timber discoloration, it is rejected by the hurley making industry. Initially there is a market for firewood with some residual return to the landowner after clearance and processing costs (nett of grants). When the disease is very advanced, the only outlet appears to be wood chips with a market from Bord na Mona, though the price paid leaves little if any return at that stage after costs.

Our conclusion is that schemes in operation since around 2017 were increasingly out of step with the needs of policy and the needs of individual farmers. The flawed design of these schemes was exacerbated by the way in which they were implemented by DAFM, the concurrent crises in forestry licensing and the covid pandemic. Given the significance of this issue for the wider implementation of the forestry strategy and delivery of climate objectives, we believe that the current scheme within the new Forestry Programme is insufficient to address the issue. This is less about the scheme and associated rates *per se* and more about lack of a systemic response to a "slow burn" national crisis.

Whilst we recognise the significant constraints resulting from State Aid rules (see section 5.4) we believe that more needs to be done with regards to clearance costs for difficult sites, re-planting grant rates and annual maintenance payments to farmers. We have concluded that no resolution of this issue is achievable without recourse to continued annual payments beyond the term of historic premium schemes. State Aid recognises the need to restore 'forestry potential' which will necessitate considerable forest management and maintenance by growers. There may also be scope for innovations such as 'payments for ecosystem services' offered by the private sector.

5.2 The experiences of landowners impacted by the disease with regards to the disease itself, engagement with DAFM and its response and their future aspirations and plans

In our engagement with public and private sector stakeholders, the sense of despondency, shock, sadness and grief for the losses from the disease was palpable. This was overlain with a feeling of frustration and abandonment amongst the landowners we met and anger at the apparent lack of empathy and recognition demonstrated by government. We only heard from a small subset of the more than 6,000 owners who participated in the original scheme but each had their own personal story to tell with common themes throughout.

Many of the landowners we met had either very limited or no direct engagement with DAFM/Forest Service (see fig 7). Their main point of contact on forestry matters was their forestry consultant or contractor and in some cases a Teagasc advisor. The Forest Service is therefore seen as relatively remote. A small number of landowners who fit the 'farmer forester' description were more connected to the Forest Service with observations made that engagement had recently improved but was inconsistent across the country.

Given the dependency on the professional forestry advisor, these professionals must be enabled to have immediate, clear and consistent information on all policy decisions and be facilitated in getting up to date information on the status of applications. Their experience since 2018 has been one of isolation and frustration leading to loss of credibility with farmers and loss of forestry champions from this cohort.

A recurring theme was the complexity of the application and regulatory processes, the length of time it takes to get a decision, and the difficulty in getting up to date information on the status of applications for actions requiring consent. As we saw with Project Woodland, these issues have eroded faith in the service that can and must be restored. Given the sense of detachment from DAFM and the lack of technical knowledge outside of registered foresters, the role of owner groups and co-ops appears to have become particularly valuable for collective knowledge sharing and mutual support.

The current experience of most landowners is a state of limbo while their plantations deteriorate before their eyes. For ourselves, the experience of standing in the middle of dead plantations was shocking, and it was easy to imagine how difficult it must be for a landowner to have to witness the slow death of their trees on a daily basis and be unable to act.

Perhaps surprisingly, many owners we spoke to still want to continue involvement in forestry, provided that they receive 'fair' treatment and that future engagement with forestry was made easier for them. Many of these landowners were pioneers in their own right by being early adopters of forestry and could be strong advocates, if fairly and competently dealt with. To achieve this objective of restoring their faith in forestry and return to positive advocacy for afforestation, a revised scheme is needed that demonstrates a risk sharing partnership model between the State and farmer foresters.

Our conclusion with regards to landowners' engagement with DAFM is that there is much that could be improved beyond changes to the schemes themselves, in particular customer service, a partnership approach, process efficiency and communication. Much of this is consistent with our feedback on Workstream 3 of Project Woodland which remains incomplete.

5.3 *The DAFM approach to support in the context of other plant and animal diseases in Ireland and Europe more widely*

There is a 'natural justice' argument that farmers with tree crops should be treated similarly to other primary producers. However, European (and international) policies and regulations do not follow this principle. In spite of the regulatory framework (which we explore further in 5.4), there are clear epidemiological differences between wind-borne diseases of perennial crops which take years to develop and other diseases of livestock or annual crops. These diseases emerge rapidly, can be treated swiftly and have land returned to equivalent productive use in a few years. In contrast, it took some years to appreciate the truly devastating nature of ash dieback, the crops involved often represented over 10 years' growth, and the costs and practicality of restoring the land to productivity are beyond many farmers.

Looking at ash dieback, there is little international experience to draw on due to the unique commercial value of young Irish ash, the number of pure species plantations and the relative inexperience of growers. As regards other tree diseases, clearer comparisons can be made with *Phytophthora ramorum* responses in England, Scotland and Wales. This disease has multiple hosts but has been particularly devastating for larch species – a valuable commercial and amenity crop. Partnership emergency action was taken (including markets for produce) and compulsory clearance notices issued. Clearance and regeneration payments are made but no compensation is paid.

There are likely to be further potential lessons from the response to the *Ips* outbreak in the Czech republic and Germany, or the serious fires in recent years in plantations in France and Portugal. We strongly recommend that DAFM commissions further work to explore this developing field and work more closely with partners in the UK and EU on forest resilience and restoration.

In conclusion, we accept the logical argument for parity with other schemes addressing plant and animal diseases, while acknowledging the challenges this presents within international policy constraints. Given the likely increase in biotic and abiotic environmental impacts on forests globally, it will be vital for DAFM, its advisors, forestry professionals and the wider sector to build and maintain international links, especially given the natural advantages of the island of Ireland with both a benign climate and maritime borders.

5.4 Consider limits to government assistance such as State Aid rules

We have identified the most significant constraints on the government's ability to act in future as:

- State Aid legislation / single market
- Exchequer limits on use of tax-payers' money
- Organisation and Human resources (capacity and capability)
- Risk of precedent.

We have explored the detail of State Aid above. We note in particular the acknowledgement to fund 'restoration of forestry potential' and draw attention to significant post planting management and maintenance costs for former ash sites over green-field. Among the issues are propensity for ash regrowth, bramble and other undergrowth that has taken hold and will recur. We have been advised that death replacement rates are much higher (20% quoted) compared to 5% typically in greenfield. We note strong advice that significant annual maintenance work is needed for which annual payment recognition is warranted in respect of these costs. We have separately outlined the basis for 'ex-gratia' payments for losses incurred during the hiatus in positive action to effectively enable site clearance from 2018-2023, in addition to the annual payments aligned to the current premiums.

We recognise that Governments have a responsibility to manage tax-payers' money judiciously – especially when making direct payments to businesses. There are, in our view, two overriding principles at play here when determining how far Government should go in helping landowners with ash dieback disease: equity and partnership. To be equitable requires a solution which is seen to respond fairly to those affected. In our engagements with landowners, this desire to be treated fairly was not simply financially but also about the overall quality of the State's response and supports in their plight. The second principle is the need to restore trust and confidence in forestry. This requires a new partnership between state, forest owners and the wider forestry industry.

The ash die-back experience of growers and their industry partners shines a further spotlight on the deficient capability (both technical and cultural) of the regulatory function within DAFM. While the crisis in the general forestry license function is well documented (MacKinnon) and was the main focus of Project Woodland, it is clear from our engagements that the process for handling and processing RUS Applications was an utter failure. We were repeatedly advised of applications extending over several years, with changes in the scheme resulting in requests for further information long after the original application, followed by long periods of further inactivity, with no information forthcoming. The capacity and culture of the DAFM team were looked at in detail as part of Project Woodland, and we won't repeat our conclusions here save that the ash situation confirms and shines a spotlight on weaknesses in culture, leadership, communications and capability. Full implementation of the Mackinnon recommendations brigaded under 'Workstream 3' in Project Woodland is imperative, demonstrating an efficient service culture that reflects the importance of the sector.

Although wider tree diseases are out of scope of our review, it is clear that the threats to Ireland's trees and forests is increasing – from pests and diseases or via other natural disasters such as storm damage or fire. The Department will therefore want to be cautious in setting precedents for future administrations in its response and this needs to be carefully considered. However, given the relatively limited extent of ash woodlands and the particular conditions that applied (strong state advocacy and policy promotion) compounded by the inadequate response from 2018, we believe that there is an onus on the state in this instance. More generally, we believe this situation provides a useful opportunity to consider the wider question of risk-sharing between the State and forestry business in the context of climate change and the carbon sequestration priority (something that is specifically referenced in the State Aid guidance).

The response of the State to ash dieback is of critical importance to rebuilding trust and confidence and requires a pro-active and collaborative approach by the State in partnership with landowners and the wider forest industry. If the State's response is seen to be equitable and developed in partnership, then there is a stronger likelihood that trust and confidence can be restored. In specific terms, this might include:

- Identifying ash dieback disease in its current state as a national emergency requiring a national and State-led coordinated response
- Establishing a Task-Force to manage the emergency with time-bound objectives and targets for the clearance of all ash plantations and their re-establishment as healthy forests
- Identify a dedicated team in Forest Service that will manage the participation of the State in regulation and support, working with stakeholders to re-build a customer centred culture that can provide a model for the enduring delivery of the Forest Strategy
- Accept that the State will need to pay for the full costs of clearance, re-planting and the restoration of the affected plantations and recognises the need to offset losses encountered pending restoration to established status.
- Develop a new partnership and risk-sharing approach to forestry on private land.

In summary, we believe that a comprehensive solution is required to the ash dieback crisis that recognises the obligation on the state to address the inadequate response since 2018 and restore confidence in the sector. We believe that neither state aid rules or exchequer constraints wholly prevent development of an appropriate suite of measures. These need to be supported by an effective organisational response based on Task Force type mobilisation of key stakeholders and dedicated resources, simple clear administration forms and an open and transparent engagement with the applicants and their advisors. The organisational response must be characterised by a partnership approach with strong customer service culture, defining a new paradigm for the relationship between the sector and DAFM Forest Service. In turn, the industry should recognise the genuine opportunity that this represents in its engagement with DAFM.

6 Looking ahead: Proposed principles for improvement

This rapid review has neither the time or resources to fully define the future requirements. However, as well as detailed recommendations, we feel it is important that we provide vital principles to guide future action and define success – all future proposals should be carefully considered against these principles:

- **Speed** and urgency is 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.
- Action must support the principles of the new **Forest Strategy**. Recognising the multiple benefits of trees on farms, confident and positive about the need for trees, and more focused on outcomes than process.
- **Consistent** with Irish and EU law and with other animal and plant health support schemes.
- **Equitable** between farmers who entered the scheme and those starting out in forestry but also recognising the **partnership** that this involves between the State, land-owners and forestry professionals.
- **Support, communications and advice** must be high quality and tailored within a customer centred culture of engagement, characterised by shared interests and objectives.

7 Recommendations for action

1. Given the disproportionate impact of diseased ash on confidence in Irish forestry, the re-establishment of ash plantations should be seen as a demonstration of a new paradigm appropriate to the ambition of the new Forest Strategy and Forestry Programme with forest resilience as a core objective
2. ash Die-Back needs to be treated as a national emergency requiring a State-led national and rapid coordinated response. A Task Force, led by DAFM, should be established involving a dedicated DAFM team, landowners, and forest industry stakeholders to oversee and coordinate the safe and comprehensive clearance and re-establishment of diseased plantations.
3. A co-ordinated approach to clearance should be undertaken at County or Regional level to increase efficiency, led by the Task Force.
4. DAFM should re-examine articles 494-633 of Communication of the Commission 2022c 485/1 to identify the broadest possible scope for the required support to resolve the crisis, mitigate the risks of future tree diseases, and achieve the objective of re-establishing the forestry potential of these lands.
5. A simplified approval process is required for site clearance with appropriate assessments or any other complex assessments conducted by the dedicated DAFM team associated with the Task Force.
6. It should be made clearer that the cost of site clearance and regeneration should be borne by the State with any residual value from the timber remaining with the landowner. The current clearance grant of €2,000 per hectare (ex VAT) appears reasonable in the main, but additional 'exceptional costs' should be considered for particularly challenging sites.
7. Re-establishment and maintenance costs should be reviewed for all ash sites, taking account of the need for more intensive and regular maintenance due to the particular challenges associated with re-establishment.
8. It must be more clearly communicated that plantation owners are eligible for all available schemes in the new Forestry Programme.
9. A be-spoke ash die-back re-establishment annual payment is required. The payment should be consistent with the general rates available under the new Forestry Programme.
10. DAFM should explore the potential for a one-off ex gratia payment to be paid to each landowner as recognition of the absence of an effective scheme between 2018 and 2023.
11. ash die-back should be used as a learning opportunity to plan for future disease and invasive alien species risks. Ideally, this should take place at all-island level, building on the 'Fortress Ireland' approach that underpinned the response to ash die-back disease in 2013 and the Plant Health and Bio-Security Strategy 2020-2025.

12. Learning from the experience of ash dieback disease DAFM, landowners and the wider forest industry, must develop a new partnership and risk-sharing approach to forestry on private land that recognises the inter-dependencies and inter-connections in the system between landowners, forestry consultants, contractors, Teagasc, Coillte, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the DAFM Forest Service in particular. A more collaborative and mutually supportive approach which supports the implementation of the Shared National Vision is needed.
13. Learning from the experience of ash dieback disease and building on Project Woodland, a key priority for DAFM is completing the organisational review that started during Project Woodland to create an upgraded forest service organisation with a strong customer focus. The organisation needs a clearly articulated vision, purpose, strategic goals, operating culture and implementation model covering promotion, license management and decision making. This should recognise the excellent staff in the service and empower them to deliver on the shared national vision.

8 Implementation and governance

Our expectation is that this report will be published and DAFM tasked with rapidly developing and implementing a delivery plan. This work should be incorporated into the new governance structure for the Forestry Programme. We cannot over-emphasise the need for rapid action as standing trees become more dangerous and less valuable with each growing season.

9 Other issues warranting further discussion but out of scope

Other issues have been raised in consultation with the stakeholders that are worthy of noting:

- ash trees outside plantations – especially along roadsides, trainlines and in public parks – presents a growing public health and safety risk. Our understanding is that responsibility for this rests with local authorities who should be carrying out a risk assessment. Currently the liability for costs lies with landowners and there is a strong lobby for financial support towards addressing what will become a pressing and dangerous issue as the trees decay.
- There is a heightened awareness of disease risk in woodland and 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.
- Expanding deer populations are having significant impacts on the costs of woodland establishment and ecological quality – particularly with regards to native woodland. We understand that there is separate work being undertaken on this and would encourage strong engagement with forestry stakeholders.
- While the delays in licensing are widely commented on, there was notable recognition of improved engagement more recently (inspectorate and DAFM). This is encouraging and needs to be built on in the context of the governance of the next forestry programme.
- Continued research and international collaboration on genetic resistance and alternatives to ash as a tree and a timber is essential and must continue to be prioritized.

10 References

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Appendix 1

Terms of reference for independent review of DAFM support schemes for landowners impacted by ash dieback

Purpose

To review the DAFM approach and supports for landowners affected by ash dieback since 2013 and provide the Minister with advice on a way forward in line with the draft Forest Strategy

Scope

The design and implementation of the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme for ash.

Membership

Jo O'Hara, Jerry Grant, Matt Crowe

(secretariat provided by DAFM)

Timeframe

June – September 2023

Objectives

1. Review the performance of extant and historic schemes including delivery of objectives, costs and impact
2. Understand the experiences of landowners impacted by the disease with regards to the disease itself, engagement with DAFM and its response and their future aspirations and plans
3. Consider the DAFM approach to support in the context of other plant and animal diseases in Ireland and Europe more widely
4. Consider limits to government assistance such as state aid rules
5. Develop a set of principles and recommendations to underpin future schemes or amendments to the current scheme, in line with the draft Forest Strategy emanating from Project Woodland.

Deliverables

Report and presentation to the Minister of State

Process

- The review group will meet in person and online between 22 Jun and 15 September.
- To assist in its deliberations the group will meet individually with selected stakeholders including individual landowners, representative organisations and DAFM officials, and will carry out one or more site visits to different parts of Ireland to see the impact of the disease and explore future options.
- The final report will be published following acceptance by the Minister.

Assumptions

All submissions will be handled confidentially with 'Chatham House' rules applying (i.e. comments can be referenced but not attributed).

Appendix 2

List of organisations engaging with the Review

Limerick & Tipperary Woodland Owners

SEEFa – Social Economic Environmental Forestry Association of Ireland

Environmental Pillar

IFA – Irish Farmers Association

Coillte

Society of Irish Foresters

Forestry Owners Cooperative Society

FII – Forest Industries Ireland

ITGA – Irish Timber Growers Association

AIFC – Association of Irish Forestry Consultants

IFO – Irish Forest Owners

Bord Na Mona

Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Forestry Inspectors

Forestry Section management