



**IFA Submission
to Ash Dieback Policy Review**

18th May 2018

Introduction

Ash dieback has a devastating consequence for the survival, growth and wood quality of ash trees, and therefore has devastating consequences on the commercial value of the timber crop.

Farmers were encouraged and supported to plant ash by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine through higher grants and premiums. They feel aggrieved that while being incentivised to grow ash, the Department did not have adequate controls in place to stop the importation of infected plants and as a result put their investment is at risk.

Ash trees suffering with the infection have been found widely across Europe since trees were first reported dying in large numbers in Poland in 1992. The Department had an obligation to inform farmers of the potential disease risk at the time of planting and to ensure that robust controls were in place to stop the importation of infected plants under the Afforestation Scheme.

Furthermore, farmers are disappointed with the level of communication, information and advice that has been provided to assist them to deal with the impact or potential impact of the disease on their investment.

It is accepted that the best hope for the long-term future of Ireland's ash trees lies in identifying the genetic factors that enable some ash trees to tolerate or resist infection, and using these to breed new generations of tolerant ash trees for the future. However, IFA is concerned that this may not be in line with the best interests of individual farmers affected by the disease. The best interests of the forest owner affected must be the priority in the review of the ash dieback policy.

IFA proposes that a national survey is undertaken to determine the extent of ash dieback disease in the private forest sector in order to provide appropriate management advice for forest owners.

Reconstituting infected plantations

The management of ash dieback is very challenging. There is no scientific evidence that thinning infected plantations is beneficial in the long-term when ash dieback is present. Where dieback is severe, research suggests that the best approach is to harvest remaining commercial timber before value depreciation and to replant the area with other tree species. Therefore, farmers must have the option to clearfell and replant with a species of their choice. The option not to replant, without penalties, must also be available under certain circumstances.

IFA proposes that all infected grant aided plantations are eligible for the Reconstitution Scheme (Chalara) and that owners can replant with tree species that satisfy their management objectives.

IFA also proposes that forest premiums are paid on replanted land for 15 years according to GPC rate.

Managing infected plantations

The production of high-quality timber was the main management objective for the farmers that planted ash. Managing infected plantations will result in additional management costs and added safety risks due to the loss of structural integrity in the wood, as well as timber devaluation. The production cycle is disrupted by the occurrence of ash dieback, which makes it difficult to plan future management interventions.

IFA proposes that a dedicated scheme be established to support farmers with ash dieback to thin and manage their plantations safely to potentially identify disease tolerant ash trees.

An Agro-Forestry Conversion grant should also be introduced to support farmers to cover the costs of transforming a plantation to an agro-forest.

Research, education and awareness

There is a requirement to develop a training module for farmers and foresters that provides clear and practical guidance on the best management approach according to the management objective, the site type (moist or dry), the stand type (pure or mixed stands, even-aged or uneven-aged stands), the age and the degree of dieback.

IFA proposes that a series of training courses/field days be organised for farmers and foresters to provide information, advice and guidance on managing ash plantations with dieback.

Another proposal is that a COFORD Connect is produced to provide guidance on the best approach to determining the extent of the disease in the plantation, as well as best management options based on studies and research undertaken in Europe.

Conclusion

The Government's proposal to provide more management options to farmers with ash dieback is welcomed however it does pose a significant financial risk for forest owners. Farmers must be able to choose the management plan that best suits their objectives; this would include the option of support under the Reconstitution Scheme (Chalara) to clearfell, whilst replanting must be available if the disease is confirmed in a plantation.

If it is the long-term policy of the Government to conserve ash as an important tree species in Ireland then farmers will need to be educated and supported to work together to modify management objectives from high quality timber production to identification of tolerant or resistant trees.

Finally, it is vital that there is ongoing monitoring to ensure that infected ash dieback plantations are not having any unintended impacts on the health of neighbouring plantations or particular tree species.