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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOMHSHAOL AGUS RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Joint Committee met at 2.30 p.m.

#### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy J. Cregan,	Deputy J. Moloney,
Deputy C. Cuffe,	Deputy D. Moynihan,
Deputy E. Gilmore,	Deputy M. J. Nolan,*
Deputy N. Grealish,	Deputy F. O'Dowd,
Deputy S. Haughey,	Senator J. Bannon,
Deputy J. Healy-Rae,	Senator C. Brady,
Deputy P. McCormack,	Senator M. Brennan.

\*In the absence of Deputy B. Kelleher.

#### Election of Chairman.

**Clerk to the Committee:** The first item on the agenda is the election of a Chairman. I invite nominations.

**Deputy Cregan:** I propose Deputy Haughey.

**Senator Brady:** I second that nomination.

**Clerk to the Committee:** As there are no other nominations, I declare Deputy Haughey elected as Chairman of the committee. I call on him to take the chair.

*Deputy Haughey took the Chair.*

**Chairman (Deputy Haughey):** I thank the clerk for conducting the election procedure and members for electing me as Chairman. I have been a member of the committee for a number of years and was Vice-Chairman during the last Dáil. I look forward to assuming the role of Chairman. I thank the Vice-Chairmen for stepping into the breach in recent weeks. I also welcome Deputy Moynihan to the committee. We look forward to working with him.

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** I compliment Deputy Haughey in a very special way. There is no one here more delighted to see him installed as Chairman. He was Vice-Chairman of the committee after the general election in 1997 when I was Chairman. He co-operated with me in every way possible. If I was unavailable for meetings, he was always there and it is an extraordinary turn of events that he is now Chairman. I wish him the very best of luck. As Vice-Chairman, I will engage in the same trading with him when we were in the reverse positions. I wish him many long years of happiness and success. This is only the start of great things for him. That is what he deserves.

**Chairman:** My thanks to the Deputy.

**Deputy McCormack:** On behalf of Fine Gael, I compliment Deputy Haughey on his election. I served with him previously. I am sorry that Deputy Healy-Rae is still not in the position.

**Senator Brennan:** I offer my congratulations to the Deputy and wish him every success for the future. I also wish to be associated with the words of thanks offered by Deputy Healy-Rae.

**Chairman:** In the last Dáil, Deputy Healy-Rae had urgent business to attend to from time to time in south Kerry and it was always a pleasure to step into the breach when he was unavoidably absent.

### Business of Joint Committee.

**Chairman:** We are nearing the end of the year and there are a few ongoing inquiries, particularly with regard to EU directives on genetically modified products, a matter we will deal with today. House prices will be placed on our agenda, as will the price of building land, two issues on which reports are due. The report of the All-Party Committee on the Constitution has been published. We will need to examine the forthcoming reports — the NESC report and the Goodbody report commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government — at some stage in the future in considering the various issues arising from house prices and the price of building land. At the end of the meeting I will also make a proposal regarding the M3 motorway, a matter we have been considering and to which we will return at a later stage.

### Scrutiny of EU Proposals.

**Chairman:** We will now deal with Commission proposal COM (2004) 572. At the last meeting the committee heard submissions from officials of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and today we will hear the views of interested parties.

Before I introduce the delegation, I advise the committee that the clerk was contacted last night by solicitors representing Monsanto, inquiring if the committee would be agreeable to hearing a contribution from Dr. Patrick O'Reilly who represents Monsanto in Ireland. It was also suggested that the Irish Bio-Industries Association under the auspices of IBEC might like to contribute to the debate. Members will recall that following our last meeting, officials from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government undertook to provide additional information on this issue. This information has since been circulated to all members. I thank the officials for providing it. If members agree, I can arrange for a meeting to be organised before Christmas to interview the additional representatives who want to contribute to the debate on this issue.

I welcome Mr. Mark Deary from Friends of the Earth, Mr. Michael O'Callaghan of GM-free Ireland Network, Mr. John Heaney of the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association and Dr. Pat O'Mahony from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland who is accompanied by his colleagues, Ms Jane Ryder and Mr. Alan Reilly. They are all very welcome. I will invite each to speak in turn. Each has about five minutes because of time constraints. The first person whom I will ask to address the meeting is Mark Deary from Friends of the Earth.

**Mr. Mark Deary:** I congratulate the Chairman on his appointment. On behalf of Friends of the Earth Ireland, I thank the committee members for inviting me and Michael O'Callaghan to outline to them our position on GMOs and in particular on the GT or glyphosphate tolerant 73 rape seed variety, which is the business of the day.

I am a director of Friends of the Earth Ireland. With me is Michael O'Callaghan, with whom Friends of the Earth are working on the range of GM issues. Michael will carry forward in more detail the outline position that I will put to members in the next few minutes. Friends of the Earth Ireland was launched in Dublin in October and expects to build the most effective environmental NGO to date in Ireland. At our launch we expressed the hope that we would quickly begin to engage in debate on the environment in fora such as this, and so we are gratified to be doing so today. We note that the chair of the Environmental Protection Agency, Mary Kelly, has welcomed our arrival into the wider debate, and we welcome her comments on Friends of the Earth's reputation for sound research and rational positioning on the issues.

On GM, our research internationally is particularly strong. The GM campaigning around Europe has been led over the past few years by the Brussels campaign and research team, and it is its work on which we in Ireland have drawn heavily. As we develop capacity over the coming months, the particulars of the Irish position will become more nuanced. Members should have received a copy of our position on GMOs, and so I will not delay further but cut straight to the issue at hand.

Directive 2001/18/EC of the EU Parliament and Council deals with the release of GMOs into the European environment. It details the management regime for those releases, covering areas such as molecular characterisation, safety as an animal feed, post-market monitoring, traceability and labelling. In certain of those key areas, GT73 has not complied and should not be imported into the EU. We are aware that on 11 February 2004 the European Food Safety Authority adopted GT73 as safe as a conventional oilseed rape for humans and animals. That is contradicted by the competent authorities in a number of countries, including the UK, who list a number of shortcomings in Monsanto's application with which Friends of the Earth concur.

In particular, we are concerned by Monsanto's inadequate monitoring on seed spillage and the validity of its assumptions on the spread of feral oilseed rape populations that may also exhibit glyphosphate resistance. We can all observe that oilseed rape is a particularly promiscuous breeder and any spillage is likely to find purchase. Mr. O'Callaghan will say more on that presently. Such spillage is illegal according to Article 4.5 of Directive 2001/18. We are also concerned that liver enlargement in test rats fed a 15% diet of GT73 has not been adequately explained. The UK advisory committee on animal feedstuffs is of the view that this "adverse response in rats [...] requires further explanation". Consequently, the UK advisory committee on releases into the environment, or ACRE, which takes its advice from the animal feed committee, was still holding out in late 2003 for more detail and the development of an emergency plan stating that GT73 is not equivalent to other imported oilseed rape.

I will end with a few general observations. The European Food Safety Authority, in recommending the importation of GT73, has ignored important concerns raised by member states and independent scientists. It appears satisfied with a 28-day feed trial period when, according to the French competent authority, 90 days is usual, and it sends very mixed signals on how many processors will be allowed handle the material, should it enter the EU.

That undermines the European Food Safety Authority's position. Its research must be its bedrock. However, the impression that Friends of the Earth has is that the European Food Safety Authority recommendation is not consistent with the hard science and monitoring regimes that normally apply and gives the impression of a Commission in favour of easing Monsanto's path and avoiding further conflict with the US over GM foods. The safety of this animal feed is not proven, and the onus is on the producer to do so. One must remember that it is they who wish to sell their product to us. In accepting their proposition, Ireland's GM-free status is for ever changed, and current markets, especially with UK multiples, will be imperilled. I urge this committee to side with the consumer and with the conclusions of strictly conducted assessments by several highly regarded competent authorities that have serious reservations about the importation of this product into the EU.

**Mr. Michael O'Callaghan:** Perhaps I might first pass on to my colleague, Mr. John Heaney.

**Mr. John Heaney:** I represent the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers' Association, or ICSA. We were formed in 1993 to represent the interests of Irish cattle and sheep farmers. We now have a membership of around 10,000. We see ourselves as a very proactive organisation. That was shown in the recent debate on CAP reform, when we were the only farming organisation consistently to support the decoupling of farm supports, the policy then adopted by our Minister.

It comes as no surprise that the ICSA is now the only main farming organisation to have adopted a stance on the GM issue. The basic position is that Ireland should develop its green and environmentally clean image by adopting a GM-free island strategy. That would of course require close co-operation with the Northern Ireland authorities, but it would be a logical evolution of the current Bord Bia mantra of "Ireland, the food island". The policy that we have adopted is based on a recognition of market research that shows widespread consumer unease with GM technology. For example, the 2003 GM nation survey in the UK showed that 86% of respondents were unhappy with the idea of eating GM food, and 84% believed that the technology would cause unacceptable interference with nature.

On a recent ICSA trip to Italy, Bord Bia representatives told us that GM is a major consumer concern there. That cannot be ignored, since the Italians annually import 320,000 tonnes of chilled beef and 1.4 million live cattle. There is ongoing and growing resistance to GM crops and production methods across Europe. While we are not out to deprive consumers of choice, we believe that Ireland, as an exporting nation, should offer the consumer the option of higher-quality food from an island with a credible GM-free policy. In 2004, the obstacles to that have become even greater. We have seen a considerable change in the EU approach to GM. In practice, there was an EU-wide *de facto* moratorium on GM, simply because no licences were issued. Five member states also had national GMO bans, based on Article 16 of Directive 90/220/EEC.

However, that directive has been supplanted by Directive 2001/18. Moreover, the EU is now apparently facing a legal challenge at WTO level from the USA, Canada and Argentina. At the May Farm Council, BT11 maize was licensed and, more recently, MK603 maize got the go-ahead because member states could not agree on a definitive position. It is fair to say that there is growing hostility emerging from the Commission towards the anti-GM sentiment of its citizens. I can only ascribe that to the need to pander to the WTO. On the other hand, member states seem to lack a coherent approach.

The Government should stand up against the bullying of EU citizens, whether it is coming from multinational interests or the Commission itself, and reaffirm the right of a region or member state to declare itself GM-free. Second, it should move towards a GM-free policy for the island of Ireland. The logic is clear-cut. If consumers want GM-free food, that is what we should produce. Dr. Patrick Wall of UCD recently pointed out that Ireland could compete with countries that have economies of scale, cheap labour and no environmental protection and that we had no business competing in a race to the bottom of the barrel. We concur with that view.

We believe that Ireland must defend and develop its competitive advantage as an island producing quality food with an authentic green image. Being GM-free is a logical extension of that. We know that the affluent EU consumer is interested in naturally produced quality food. We must go after that market, which is discerning and will not be fooled by a shambolic GM policy of co-existence where one field is GM and the other side of the ditch is GM-free. Our green image is our competitive advantage. We cannot mortgage it for the interests of multinational corporations. Farming should be under the control of those who work the land and tend the stock, but the control of our industry is at risk of being taken away by faceless and unaccountable boardroom executives.

We find ourselves in a peculiar position. GM food is being imposed on us in Ireland against the wishes of the two main stakeholders, namely, the consumer and the farmer. Therefore, we must ask the following questions: why has there been no public debate on an issue of such national importance? As Ireland is a traditional food producing nation, why has the Government no apparent policy or strategy on such an important issue? Why is the European Union foisting GM food on us against our will?

I see the introduction of GM oilseed rape feed as a direct attack on the future of Irish farming. Our food products will be tainted; we will miss out on the growing market for GM free food and be reduced to selling into the global commodity market in which we will be forced to compete with producers whose competitive advantage is the exploitation of cheap labour and the environmental destruction of vast areas of the under-developed world. The main loser will not just be the consumer. Our traditional farming structure will also be wiped out. Intensive industrialised farming will take its place. This will have an enormously detrimental effect, not alone on our natural environment but also on our rural, social and cultural heritage. We have a deep obligation to our fellow citizens not to allow this to happen.

To sum up, there is no message from consumers to the effect that they want GM food. There is no demand from farmers to be allowed grow GM food. However, there is no initiative on the horizon from our legislators that reflects these views. I urge the committee to recommend that GT73 oilseed rape is not accepted in Ireland.

**Mr. O'Callaghan:** I am honoured to be here, particularly because my grandfather was among the founders of the first Dáil. It is a nice feeling to be back.

I am speaking on behalf of GM-free Ireland Network, an association of 20,000 farmers, food producers and consumers engaged in consultations with the Department of Agriculture and Food on the national strategy for the so-called co-existence of GM crops with conventional organic farming. The stakeholders I represent see Ireland's GM free status as a national asset which can provide low cost premiums for food exports and animal feed production in the European market. It can create more jobs and revitalise rural communities as well as conserve our cultural biodiversity, an important strategic direction to bear in mind. Maintaining our GM free status will in the near future position Ireland as a sustainable agriculture leader.

We believe Ireland's GM policy in general and the upcoming votes between now and the end of the year, including this one on Monsanto's GT oilseed rape, are matters of national security. GMOs released into the environment, including this oilseed rape which is a living seed, can never be recalled once allowed in. Any decision to allow the environmental release of patented GMOs on this island, north and south of the Border, would rob farmers of the right to plant their own seeds because the seeds would be patented; have irreversible impacts on farm income, food exports, bio-diversity, food safety, public health and consumer choice, and compromise Ireland's renowned image as Europe's clean green food island.

We should bear in mind that the market in Europe is going against the GM trend. In the briefing document which members of the committee have received they will find, *inter alia*, a list of the leading major food brands in Europe which refuse to include GM ingredients, as well as the leading retailers. They include major food brands such as Coca-Cola, Heinz, Campbell, Tesco, Sainsbury, Marks & Spencer etc. Consumers do not want products with such ingredients and the brands mentioned are refusing to include them, as are retailers. In this context, the European Joint Research Centre admits that the co-existence of GM and non-GM crops would be difficult and expensive.

National governments and regional and local authorities throughout the European Union have established thousands of GM free regions in 22 member states. Furthermore, the European Association of Regions recently launched a political campaign for new legislation in Brussels that would clearly recognise the right of local governments to ban crops, as is now the case in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom where Wales and Cornwall are already GM free.

Many European observers, as well as members of our network in Ireland, are absolutely baffled by the Government's pro-GM voting record, by the various GM crop approvals the former Commissioner for Health and Consumer Affairs, Mr. David Byrne, issued in Brussels and by the ongoing denial of the scientific evidence of GM risks, some of which is included in the document circulated. Government sovereignty derives from the duty to protect its citizens. If the Government places the vested interests of biotechnology corporations or the US Government above the interests of its citizens, it loses sovereignty and the people will vote for another administration.

There is a vote on 29 November when Ireland will be asked to vote against GMO bans and restrictions which Austria, France, Greece and other countries have put in place. On 10 December there will be a vote on Monsanto's GT rape seed. A deadline has been set by the Department of Agriculture and Food of 31 December by which stakeholders in Ireland must complete their submissions on the so-called co-existence of GM and conventional crops. As I had to prepare this briefing with one week's notice, I have put most of information in a brochure which the committee has received.

My final point is that genetic engineering marks a watershed in the evolution of life on earth. If we choose to allow GT73 oilseed rape into the country, we will never be able to rid ourselves of it. It is clear policymakers in the Government, the private sector, the food industry and civil society need more knowledge and time to fully grasp the inter-related biological, agronomic, social, political, legal, health and security implications of this choice. There is a low level of public awareness on these issues compared to other EU countries. Many Irish politicians, regulatory authorities, civil servants and farmers still believe there is no evidence of either a health or environmental risk from these dangerous products.

The Government wants to do its best for farmers. It seems to us the promise GM technologies made ten years ago sounded credible at the time. However, the new scientific evidence and the consensus of all the major non-governmental organisations, including the independent science panel on GM crops, the members of which are top professors from universities around the world, strongly indicate we should not opt for this technology which is inherently dangerous for a variety of reasons which I have gone into in some detail.

One of the main problems is contamination. I would like members of the committee to consider an interview included in the brochure with Percy Schmeiser, a Canadian farmer who was growing oilseed rape for 50 years. His crop was contaminated by a neighbour and he was sued by Monsanto which wanted the profit from all his crops, a licensing fee for using its crops and €1 million in court costs. There were hundreds of lawsuits by Monsanto against farmers whose crops had been contaminated. That is what would happen in Ireland.

I ask members of the committee to ask the Government not to place GT73 oilseed rape on the market for a number of reasons, the first being that although it is intended as animal feed, it would most likely be imported in the form of living GMOs, prior to being crushed or otherwise processed. It is certain that spillage of seeds would occur in shipping through harbours, road transportation, storage and eventual distribution to farms. This seed dispersal is guaranteed to result in millions of oilseed rape plants proliferating throughout the countryside in a matter of years. This will in turn rapidly contaminate conventional oilseed rape and other brassica relatives with their trans-genes and will also result in herbicide tolerant super-weeds.

I urge the Government to consider that the time has come for a proper democratic national consultation process, including an expert conference on these issues, to enable all stakeholders to evaluate the relevant information, to think about the economic impacts, to exchange views among its members, to consult independent experts and to shape a final national GM policy for Ireland according to the principles of participatory democracy which are legally required by the biosafety protocol and the Aarhus Convention. The time has come for the Government to rethink its obsession with GM crops and to forge a coherent strategy to give Irish farmers and consumers the right to choose a sustainable future. Future generations will hold the Government accountable for these decisions.

**Dr. Pat O'Mahony:** I thank the committee for inviting the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, FSAI, to participate. I wish to introduce my colleague, Mr. Alan Reilly, the director of food science and standards and deputy chief executive officer of the FSAI.

In preparation for this meeting, I reviewed the transcripts of recent meetings. As the FSAI is a food authority and the issue does not simply concern food, I concluded that some misapprehensions may remain as to what the FSAI does. I intend to outline what the authority does and to provide specific information on GT73 oilseed rape and the insignificant impact we have had on it.

The FSAI is an independent, science-based consumer protection body which commenced operation in January 1999 and operates under the aegis of the Department of Health and Children. The mission of the FSAI is to protect consumers' health by ensuring that food consumed, distributed, marketed or produced in the State meets the highest standards of safety and hygiene. As a science-based organisation, the FSAI relies on the best scientific advice available in Ireland, which is provided by its scientific committee and associated sub-committees, comprising members of the academic community, Departments and agencies. To facilitate transparency and maintain the integrity of the process, all committee and sub-committee members submit declarations of interest so that conflicts of interest can be avoided.

The FSAI is the competent authority for GM food in Ireland. GM food was governed by the novel food regulation, Regulation EC 258/97, until April of 2004 when the new GM food and feed regulation, Regulation EC 1829/2003, came into force. The main responsibilities of the FSAI under GM food and feed legislation are to assess the risk to human safety of new GM foods in the authorisation process, to ensure that only authorised GM foods are on the market in Ireland and that they are appropriately labelled. The FSAI provides technical advice to the Department of Health and Children which has the remit for policy matters on GM food and, as such, is the Department that votes at the level of the standing committee, the EU regulatory body with power to authorise new GM foods.

To gain a place on the EU market, new GM foods must go through a rigorous safety assessment and authorisation procedure and, if successful, be subject to strict labelling requirements to facilitate consumer choice. The FSAI is satisfied that any GM food or ingredients currently authorised for the European market are as safe as their conventionally produced counterparts. Regular surveys carried out by the FSAI ensure that only authorised GM food or ingredients are on the market and that consumers are allowed to purchase or avoid these products by virtue of accurate labelling.

While specific labelling of GM food is required, it is undertaken without prejudice to the general labelling directive which requires that labelling of a food should not mislead the consumer. The current labelling threshold for GM food is 0.9% per ingredient. Above this level, a food must carry a GM label. However, if a food contains 0.9% or less, its presence must be technically unavoidable, which can happen through mixing during production, processing, transport or storage. Many foods in Ireland now carry GM free type labels which are permitted if there are no GM ingredients whatsoever and provided the food could not possibly be labelled as GM under current legislation.

Under the labelling directive, a label may not mislead the purchaser. One of the stipulations of the directives is that a label cannot mislead by suggesting that the foodstuff possesses special characteristics when all similar foodstuffs possess such characteristics. For example, it is not permitted to label milk as GM free milk as there is no GM milk available and to label it as such might lead the consumer to believe all other milk was GM.

During development of the GM food and feed regulation, there was little support among EU member states or the Commission for the notion that food derived from animals fed GM feed should be labelled as GM. As a result, food from animals fed with GM feed does not fall within the scope of this legislation and therefore does not require specific authorisation or labelling under the GM food and feed legislation. Under the GM food and feed regulation, member states have the right to remove from sale any product deemed a risk to human or animal health, or the environment. The competent authority must notify the Commission and provide evidence of the risk involved so that the Commission can have the risk independently assessed and take further action if necessary.

The FSAI sub-committee on GMOs is charged with providing scientific advice to the FSAI on the safety aspects of foods produced from, containing or consisting of GMOs. In addition, the sub-committee, because of its expertise and as a matter of courtesy, provides scientific advice to the EPA on limited aspects of applications under Directive 2001/18/EC, which is relevant to deliberate release. FSAI toxicology and medical experts, on behalf of the Department of Health and Children, also review deliberate release dossiers from the EPA and provide an opinion on possible effects on human health.

The FSAI GMO sub-committee was asked by the EPA in February 2003 to provide a scientific opinion on GM oilseed rape, GT73. The EPA stipulated the oilseed rape was for importation, processing and feed use but not for cultivation, and asked the sub-committee to consider animal feed aspects of the feeding of live GMOs to animals and human health aspects such as toxicity and allergenicity related to the importation of

this GMO into the EU. The FSAI responded to the EPA in March 2003 to the effect that no sub-committee members had identified any reason to object to the import and use of the GM oilseed rape, GT73. The FSAI also reviewed the information provided by the EPA and did not identify any significant toxicological disadvantages of the GM rape over the non-GM variety.

Refined oil from a number of GM oilseed rapes, including GT73, was placed on the EU market in 1997, before the FSAI came into existence, through the simplified procedure pursuant to Article 5 of the novel food regulation. This simplified procedure, which is not provided for in the new GM food and feed regulation of 2003, allowed for a food or ingredient to be placed on the market if it was shown to be substantially equivalent to another food or ingredient already on the market. The scientific advisory committee in the UK, ACNFP, reviewed the information provided by Monsanto and concluded that refined oil from GM oilseed rape line GT73 was substantially equivalent to refined oil from other oilseed rapes already on the market.

The FSAI is the competent authority in Ireland which ensures compliance with GM food legislation and assessment of technical dossiers, while the Department of Health and Children has responsibility for policy matters such as authorisations and new legislation. Environmental aspects of GMOs are the remit of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the EPA, GM feed and seed are the remit of the Department of Agriculture and Food, while GM medicines are the remit of the Irish Medicines Board. Representatives from all these Departments and agencies, with other stakeholders, are in the process of preparing a guidance note for industry which will explain and interpret the legislation covering all aspects of GMOs in Ireland and the EU.

**Chairman:** Mr. O'Callaghan provided the committee with a number of dates, which he might reiterate.

**Mr. O'Callaghan:** There are several upcoming dates on which Ireland must make choices. The first is 29 November 2004, the date when Ireland, with all other member states, will be asked by the European Commission to vote against eight national GMO bans or restrictions. These were put in place by Austria, France, Greece, Germany and Luxembourg to protect the citizens of those countries from the perceived health and environmental risks of GM crops. The restrictions were introduced under the old safeguard clause, Article 16 of EU Directive 2001/18. They represent the core of the WTO-GM dispute initiated by Canada, Argentina and the United States against the EU. If Ireland votes in favour of prohibiting the relevant member states from retaining these bans, it will send a strong signal to the WTO that we are preparing the ground to let the United States and Canada win the trade dispute against Europe.

The second upcoming date is 10 December 2004, when the second vote by EU member states concerning the Monsanto GT73 rapeseed will be taken. The third important date is 31 December. This is the deadline which the Department of Agriculture and Food's interdepartmental inter-agency working group has set for stakeholders to submit their final submissions on a national strategy and best practices for the so-called co-existence of GM crops. Some five of the stakeholder groups do not accept this deadline. It is outrageous that many of the groups which will be affected by a co-existence policy have not been invited to the table to discuss the issue. We ask that the deadline be set back to 31 May 2005 to give such groups an opportunity to contribute. For instance, there has been no discussion between the Irish Farmers' Association, IFA, environmental farmers, consumer groups and the Federation of Irish Beekeeping Associations, FIBKA. All the groups involved must gain an understanding of each other's positions so that we can develop an intelligent strategy that works for everybody. This is very important.

**Deputy McCormack:** I have two questions for the delegation. Mr. Heaney said there is no demand for GM foods in Ireland, from either the farmer or the consumer. If this is true, are we entirely safe in this matter? If nobody is looking for the products, they will not be consumed.

I address my second question to Dr. O'Mahony. How many EU-authorized GM foods are now on sale in Ireland and are they clearly labelled?

**Deputy O'Dowd:** I welcome all the contributions the committee has received on this matter, although I have not had time to read them all. Is Dr. O'Mahony absolutely satisfied there is no risk to health in any GM product currently on sale in Ireland? This is the core of the issue. Do these products affect our health? On the second page of the delegation's submission, it is stated, "The FSAI is satisfied that any GM foods or ingredients currently authorised are as safe as their conventionally produced counterparts." That is the nub of the issue. If Dr. O'Mahony can answer as to the safety of these products, I will be satisfied.

**Deputy Cuffe:** I also ask Dr. O'Mahony whether he is satisfied as to the safety of GM products available in Ireland. Is he satisfied that the FSAI has the resources to consider adequately not only the primary effects but the secondary and knock-on effects that may arise from the significant introduction of GM foodstuffs into Ireland? Many of the health concerns regarding GM foods seem to emanate from effects down the road, perhaps affecting animal life which is located in proximity to GM crops and microbes present in the soil in which the crops are grown. Concern appears to be focused not on the direct effect of ingesting GM foodstuffs but on the possibilities of problems in the future. I welcome Dr. O'Mahony's comments on this.

The literature supplied to us today indicates that there were concerns about enlarged livers in rats. There has been a debate as to whether one should consider a 90-day time horizon or some longer period. Is the delegation concerned about these issues?

Regarding decision-making at EU level, can Mr. O'Callaghan confirm whether it is the Commission or the Council of Agriculture Ministers which will make that significant decision at the end of this month?

**Dr. O'Mahony:** I will first address the relatively easy question regarding the number of GM foods on the market. The simple answer is that maize, soya, oils from oilseed rape and cottonseed oil are the categories available. A list of 18 GM lines can be accessed on the website of the EU Commission.

We have conducted surveys since 2000 on the issue of labelling. Those few which have been completed and reported indicate that no foods with a GM of more than 1%, as per the old rules, were not correctly labelled. We discovered, however, a number of foodstuffs labelled as GM-free but containing trace levels of GMOs. These labels were incorrect and would be illegal under the EU directive on general labelling provisions. This is an issue we are trying to rectify with the assistance of more surveys.

**Deputy McCormack:** What happens when the FSAI encounters such instances of incorrect labelling?

**Dr. O'Mahony:** We have pursued an educational policy because the industry is confused by the legislation which has been changing rapidly. It should remain stable for the next number of years, however, and the FSAI is formulating guidance which will be one means of education. For instance, if our latest survey indicates irregularities and inaccuracies, we shall write to the industry, including retailers, producers and processors, to get our message across. Soya is not grown in this country, it is all imported. Soya and maize must be carefully sourced. As more GM products come on stream, we will have to consider them also.

**Mr. Heaney:** Deputy McCormack made the point that there is no problem if the demand is not there for GM products from consumers or producers. However, the problem is that 90% of the food produced on this island is exported. The issue is not as simple as Deputy McCormack suggests. The FSAI recently conducted some research in Italy, where there is a significant and growing market for GM-free beef. Ireland exports to this market, which involves feeding the animals a GM-free diet.

When I bought cattle feed earlier this year at a co-op, an assistant assured me that it contained no GM product. However, on checking the label, I found this not to be the case. It is virtually impossible to get GM-free feed in Ireland this autumn and that is a significant issue for the FSAI.

Farming is not exactly booming and we must calculate how to make a future for the industry. There is no future in selling into a low-value commodity market. The industry will only survive through a high-value market. Ireland has the competitive advantage of possessing a fabulous growing environment that is exceptionally clean, which becomes apparent when one travels around the Continent. We are in a unique position to give ourselves a chance from within farming to do something for our industry rather than whingeing and shouting for more money, as many have done over the past few decades. Those times are gone. We must be proactive and try to secure our future by aiming our product at a high-value market on our doorstep in Europe.

The educated public want good food, not processed rubbish. We want a short food chain whereby fresh food goes from the field to the plate. That is the market we are aiming for and we offer no apologies for that. We are firm in the stance we have taken. We think this is a fabulous opportunity for us to do something for our industry, which up to 50 years ago was the backbone of our economy.

**Deputy McCormack:** Mr. Heaney said he could not get GM-free feedstuff in his co-op. How does that correspond with what Dr. O'Mahony said about the number of GM modified foods allowed on sale in Ireland?

**Mr. Heaney:** I do not understand the question.

**Deputy McCormack:** Could Mr. Heaney not get barley meal or crushed oats?

**Mr. Heaney:** I am feeding my cattle barley this year.

**Deputy McCormack:** What Mr. Heaney said about not being able to get GM-free foods does not correspond with what Dr. O'Mahony said is available in Ireland. What is the situation with regard to feedstuff for cattle?

**Mr. Heaney:** I do not have the label with me. The Deputy should go to a co-op and look at beef rations. I rang six or eight different co-ops to see if I could source GM-free rations, but they were all contaminated. My only option was to feed straight barley, but I would prefer a more balanced ration.

**Deputy McCormack:** I apologise, Chairman, for interrupting. If that is the option, and if every animal feedstuff already contains GM product, we will have no business growing barley. The horse has bolted.

**Mr. Heaney:** I do not like that. I like to be the master of my own business.

**Deputy McCormack:** I do not like it either.

**Mr. Heaney:** Apparently this situation has existed for a number of years. It is imposed upon us by stealth. There is no wish or demand from farmers for GM feed. There are some sources of GM-free feed. Chickens reared in Ireland are fed GM-free feed. Superquinn started that trend, and the feed is imported specially. It can be done, but the Government is ambivalent towards the issue. GM feed can be sourced for a few euro less, somebody makes some money out of it and the farmer gets something he has not looked for. He is probably not aware of it because very few people read content dockets. The scandal has been highlighted. The system has been foisted upon us and we do not want it.

**Deputy McCormack:** We are closing the stable door now the horse has bolted. How can we redress the situation that you find yourself in when looking for feedstuff?

**Mr. Heaney:** Perhaps we should get some leadership from the powers that be. It would be simple; it can be done for chicken. The feedstuff is available, but it is difficult to source.

**Mr. O'Callaghan:** The brochure I supplied includes an interview with Mr. John Heaney in which we talked about the issue in detail. I also spoke with Mr. Rory Deasy of the Irish Farmers' Association about the matter. I asked both men whether it would be possible for Irish farmers to produce GM-free animal feed in sufficient quantities to meet the needs of our current export markets. Both of them said it is possible. Mr. Heaney is growing his own animal feed.

**Mr. Heaney:** I am not. I buy it locally, and it is produced locally.

**Mr. O'Callaghan:** It can be grown in Ireland, and this would provide an added advantage in creating a strong Irish market for rolled oats, barley and lupins. This would keep people on the farm and create more jobs. I was in Italy at the Slow Food conference, and the Minister for Agriculture said they will have

banned GM crops a year from now. In the province of Piemonte, which is famous for its parma ham and cheese, not only have they banned the cultivation of GM crops but they have also passed a new law whereby if the Government catches anybody growing such crops the crops will be destroyed. In European regions where food, agricultural tradition and agri-tourism are important, people are adamant they do not want GM crops and they will not import our food. If GM salmon is allowed in Ireland, we will lose a premium market. It is the same situation with regard to beef.

As a farming nation, we could produce our own GM-free feed. It is a disgrace that we have eaten bacon, eggs and meat for the past ten years which came from animals fed GM ingredients without farmers being aware because the feedstuff was not labelled.

**Mr. Deary:** I wish to bring the focus back to GT73, and the additional complications which will arise if it is introduced. Oilseed rape is particularly promiscuous, and there is a high chance of the seed escaping, finding its way into feral oilseed rape, and transferring a resistance to glyphosphate. Other countries are already readying themselves for the prospect of court action. New liability laws have been introduced recently in Denmark and Germany to assist in judgments when farmers take each other to court over liability for pollution of their crops. It is a nightmare scenario for a country as litigious as Ireland, and we must draw up similar legislation and watch it grind its way through an already-overburdened jurisprudence system. We will arrive at such legal nightmare scenarios if we allow this particular oil seed rape. In all likelihood, it will create situations where liability cases are taken.

**Deputy O'Dowd:** The public is looking for reassurance as to whether GM foods are safe. If they are safe, is there any reason we should not have them in Ireland?

**Chairman:** Deputy Cuffe also asked whether the Food Safety Authority has adequate resources to police this matter.

**Deputy Cuffe:** I was not asking so much about policing, but whether the authority could engage in rigorous research in order to assess the potential dangers.

**Dr. O'Mahony:** The Deputy is referring to my point about GM food on the market in Europe being as safe as its conventional counterpart. That terminology is used worldwide, because no food or drink is absolutely risk-free. If a new GM maize exists, the authority compares it scientifically to conventional maize in terms of composition, toxicants, anti-nutrients, etc. The authority produces a profile of both. If the GM maize has an identical profile to the non-GM maize, there is no difference between them as far as the authority is concerned. Depending on the trait, they can look for allergenic and toxicological problems. However, there is no such thing as risk-free in terms of food.

**Deputy O'Dowd:** How does Dr. O'Mahony respond to Mr. Heaney's assertion that it is impossible to get GM-free animal from the co-ops?

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** It seems crushed barley is the only safe animal feed. Otherwise, there is a risk. Could I get a straight answer? Is there a risk it might be in any other ration from a co-op other than crushed barley or wheat?

**Mr. Heaney:** There is a company in County Meath that supplies feed to the K Club which supplies the Italian market and, therefore, it must guarantee its feed is GM free. That is the only one of which I am aware. I could not source GM-free feed in any of those suppliers down south that I tried. Anything is possible but I am just feeding crushed barley at the moment and the cows are doing fine.

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** It is a hell of a long journey from Kilgarvan to County Meath if we want a tonne of ration.

**Mr. Heaney:** I presume there would be more suppliers if there was enough demand.

I do not like the fact that there is no public debate. The public have not been made aware and farmers have not been asked. It is worrying that something as important as this can happen by stealth.

**Deputy McCormack:** If a farmer is selling his heifers at the market, the auctioneer does not shout out that these have been fed on GM-free crushed barley. Almost 90% of winter feed products contain some GM ingredient.

**Mr. Heaney:** That begs the question why this is not asked — because the consumer is unaware. In England, there was a huge response to the GM debate and the public were very much against the use of GM food. Over 20,000 people attended 60 meetings and 93% of respondents believe GM technology is driven by profit rather than public interest and it is not farmers' profit. A total of 85% thought GM crops would benefit the producer rather than the people, 84% believe they would cause unacceptable interference with nature and the environment and 54% never want to see GM grown in Britain, with 86% unhappy with the idea of eating GM food. Would it not be great if we had a debate like that?

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** The trouble is that no one knows what is happening.

**Mr. Heaney:** We must ask why not.

**Deputy McCormack:** Maybe this is the start of that happening.

**Dr. O'Mahony:** We did not have an issue with regard to GMOs for food because the legislation was clear. It does not include feed for animals. If we eat meat from a cow that is fed GM maize, that meat is not regarded as GM. It is not an issue so I cannot answer the question.

It was asked if the Food Safety Authority of Ireland has enough resources. We are a law enforcement agency so we do not carry out research. We make use of the best scientific knowledge available. The people with whom I work, however, are up to speed on all aspects of the technology involved. We have professors in toxicology and molecular biology working alongside us.

We consume food every day that contains toxins, poisons and carcinogens. Ours is a risk management procedure. It would be difficult to get the common potato through the novel foods process because it contains glycoalkaloids. Coffee is the same; it contains tens if not hundreds of cancer causing chemicals. We look at these things in context, we look at the risk and manage it. Labelling is a risk management procedure. If people do not want to eat GM foods for whatever reason, that is their choice if the labels are accurate, which we try to ensure.

We have enough resources for what we are doing at the moment but new GMs are coming on to the market. Companies in America and other parts of the world are putting pharmaceuticals and medicines into plants and that is a different ball game. We are looking seriously at that because it involves food crops becoming tablets, although it is still at the research stage.

**Deputy Cuffe:** Is the role of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland that of promoting debate and discussion of these issues or is it simply an agency that vets a product?

**Mr. Alan Reilly:** We rely on scientific opinion from the European Food Safety Authority. It was established recently to assess and communicate risk and some of the scientists in the Irish advisory structure also sit on the European structure. We have the resources of all of Europe working on our behalf when it carries out risk assessments. The European network of scientists working independently of the system is also a great resource for the FSAI.

For new food legislation, we have a public consultation mechanism. We put the legislation on our website and invite comment from all stakeholders, industry and consumers. We try to stimulate debate. We regularly take part in debates around the country with staff getting involved. Broad consultation with all stakeholders is key so all stakeholders can put their opinions with respect to new legislation.

**Deputy Cuffe:** A tremendous debate took place in Britain that was initiated by Government and its agencies. Does the FSAI watch that debate or does it see a role for itself in initiating such a debate here?

**Mr. Reilly:** The Food Safety Authority of Ireland is involved in such debates.

**Deputy Cuffe:** Does it initiate them?

**Mr. Reilly:** Not particularly, unless we are requested to initiate them. If we are requested to lead on the issue, we will consider it.

**Deputy Cuffe:** As a scientist, is there an acceptance that we are making a quantum change in what we are doing to the food we eat through genetic modification?

**Mr. Reilly:** Our role is to look at food from a safety point of view and ensure that food on the market is safe. That is a much broader debate but the Food Safety Authority of Ireland has a remit to protect consumer health and ensure food is safe.

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** If we can feed barley, wheat and oats to cattle, what can we recommend to thousands of sheep farmers?

**Mr. Heaney:** I am not sure what goes into the ration for sheep so I cannot answer that. I only researched the ration I wanted to give to my cattle. The situation has existed for a number of years but labelling was not required until this year. I was talking to some people in the Department of Agriculture and Food and they said that there may be a chance the labelling is not fully correct and some millers are covering their backs by labelling it as GM just in case. That is not good enough either. The 0.9% tolerance confuses everything because the feed may be categorised as GM content feed, feed with nothing, and GM free feed. If it is categorised as GM free feed, it cannot have any GM content. The Department for Agriculture and Food would prefer two categories, GM content feed or feed with nothing, which would mean that the GM content was less than 0.9% and below the tolerance level.

I think Sweden is insisting that feed is labelled properly and if it does not have a GM content, it should not be labelled as having a GM content, in order to cover the manufacturer. We are very lucky that the Department is very efficient in testing all the feed that comes into the country and we were delighted with the discovery of bone content in some of the imported pulp.

It may become easier to source feed that does not have a GM content. As has been said, GM feed for animals has no effect on their meat. However, the market in Italy insists that meat must come from animals fed on a GM free diet. The consumer is obviously concerned about the animal's diet. There is a major debate in Wales about milk from cows fed on a GM diet. There may be no recognised danger from animals fed on GM feed, but consumer awareness of GM fed animals is negative. At the end of the day if the industry wants to survive, it must produce what the consumer wants.

The EU makes it more difficult for us to do that. The consumer does not want the meat from GM fed animals. We do not want to use GM feed, so why is it happening? It seems there are forces making this happen, which do not have the best interests of Ireland at heart, because we see ourselves as proactive and as trying to save our industry. Whingeing will not save our industry and does not work. We are positive and proactive and try to produce a product which the consumer wants. We see blocks being put in our way.

**Deputy O'Dowd:** I wish to clarify the points made by Dr. O'Mahony, and perhaps he will correct me if I have misinterpreted him. I understand that the Food Safety Authority of Ireland is satisfied that GM food or ingredients currently in use are as safe as conventionally produced food. However, the concern for the future is that products could be produced that would have additives which would alter the product chemically. I am not quite clear if Dr. O'Mahony meant that the crop would be resistant to a certain type of bug.

**Deputy Cuffe:** Added vitamins?

**Deputy O'Dowd:** I do not think Dr. O'Mahony was referring to vitamins.

**Dr. O'Mahony:** What I said in my statement is that we are happy from what we can see that GM foods are as safe as their conventional counterparts. That is not to say that tomorrow morning -

**Deputy O'Dowd:** What about concern for the future?

**Dr. O'Mahony:** Research is well advanced and one company is applying already to the Food and Drug Administration and the USFDA to put pharmaceuticals in plants, the reason being that plants will be easier and cheaper to grow than putting them in contained uses in large vats with bacteria. There are medicines and pharmaceuticals, in other words pharmacologically active compounds, that will be grown in these plants.

The idea is that down the road, if an AIDS vaccine was produced and put into bananas or some other crop that is grown widely, it could be widespread in Africa to combat the AIDS epidemic. These are just some of the reasons put forward but they are pretty advanced. I am aware of at least two chemicals that were put into rice. A company called Ventria is seeking permission from the FDA in California to grow these crops. Our issue with that is that at present genetic modification is inert and as far as we can see the proteins have no impact on human or animals. However, the introduction of pharmacologically or medically active compounds into what are essentially food crops is a different ball game.

**Deputy O'Dowd:** How would that be policed? Will it be policed in the country where the company applies for the licence to add the compounds to the crop? Could somebody affect the food chain by introducing a compound without notifying anybody?

**Dr. O'Mahony:** No, in Europe, we have the strictest regime for authorisation and labelling. We must label all our GM products here, whereas that does not apply in Canada, the US and other countries. In the US, people are taking a second look before they allow these products on the market because what my colleagues over here say is quite true — some plants are promiscuous and can get into the wild or feral communities. From what scientists can see at present, what is genetically modified are herbicide tolerant or pest resistant strains and will not damage people in general. However, if one has a pharmacologically active or medicine compound in a plant which is consumed and if it interacts with human beings, that is a different ball game.

The Deputy asked how one would manage that. We manage it in the first instance by not letting it happen, which the Americans are doing at present. I think Europe would be very slow to let it happen, considering how it looks at current GMOs. We keep a watching brief.

**Mr. O'Callaghan:** I wish to address the issues of health and the secondary effects on the food chain of animal feed. It is very important for everybody to understand the big picture. Companies such as Monsanto had patents on products such as Roundup, the weedkiller. The patents have expired and the company must come up with something new. The idea of patenting crops was identified as a new way to make money and stay in the market.

The company is using what is widely believed to be outdated science and a simplistic rudimentary method of thinking about how the genetic process works. A book written by the independent science panel on GM, and another book entitled *Seeds of Deception*, expose corporate and government lies about the safety of genetically engineered food. What is happening globally is that an industry, which is completely unethical and desperate to stay in business, will stop at nothing and will tell lies on television and radio and say there is no scientific evidence of any risks, which is not true.

There are hundreds of studies that have shown all kinds of problems, both in food and within the food chain. There are genetically modified plants that have the capacity to produce antibiotics or weedkillers and that capacity has been found to be passed on to bacteria living inside the gut of the animal or human stomach, after eating these genetically modified foods. There is evidence of cover-ups, including some in the United States, such as a famous case of the genetically modified food supplement called L-Tryptophan

from which 100 people died and between 5,000 and 10,000 people became seriously ill. When the link with the GM aspect of the food supplement appeared, the top scientists in the Food and Drug Administration in the United States who reported this were fired by the White House.

The European Commission and the Food Safety Authority of Europe, as well as the Irish Food Safety Authority and the food safety authorities around the world, refer to their scientists and independent scientists. What they mean by independent scientists are scientists who are not working for the government. Many of these scientists are working for Monsanto or Aventis and they are paid to tell them what they want to know. They provide flawed research, not the full information. I am not just talking off the top of my head here. This is documented in this book, *Seeds of Deception*. There are seven pages of information about the health risks in this brochure which I circulated, but there is a problem here.

There are real concerns about animal feed. With this genetic engineering process, they take a gene, for example from a fish that produces anti-freeze to live in cold water, and put it into a strawberry so that the strawberry will not suffer from frost damage. To make the gene work inside the strawberry, they must insert something that will activate it all the time, and they take that from a virus. Viruses really get in there and spread diseases. They will attach an anti-biotic piece of DNA from a bacterium. Therefore one has these very novel packages that are being put into living creatures. Soon they will be put into animals. Soon GM salmon and sheep will be on the market.

When they get into the animal, they have a completely unpredictable effect on the body of that animal. The human body is not made to know what a fish anti-freeze gene is or what a virus that comes from some strange thing is. There is no way of predicting what effect the proteins and enzymes will have on the body.

Novel proteins and new types of molecules have been found in genetically modified foods which have never been part of the food chain before and which the human body does not know how to deal with. These do have effects. There is a direct correlation, for example, with the rise of allergies. There is a huge pandemic of food allergies in the UK and in the US. It happens to coincide with the introduction of GM foods. Maybe there is a connection. There have been no long-term health studies done in any country and there has been active suppression of scientists who have reported on health risks. It is quite extraordinary.

We really need public consultation. If the committee will please forgive me, I want to quote President George Bush. He stated: "In times of national security, let us all get together and unite against the common danger." We do face a common danger. Regardless of what party we are from, it would be really good to keep this country GM free. Everybody in Europe would like us for it and we would get a great deal of political support.

**Mr. Deary:** I thank the committee for its time. Dr. O'Mahony outlined some of the quantum leaps involved in the GM technology. What we are doing to our food is of a different order from anything that has happened previously. The brief of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland is not to examine that quantum leap but to examine whether the foods that result from it are safe. It is a confined brief. Another forum needs to be found to discuss the bigger issues.

Mr. John Heaney identified clearly the need for a national debate on the subject. I would point out that such a debate is happening in Europe, in the run up to a Commission decision on co-existence legislation which needs to be made by July of next year. The high point of it will be a conference which is being run in the European Parliament in the spring of next year and organised by Friends of the Earth Europe and the Assembly of European Regions. It is important that many of the bodies represented here and this committee should be represented at that debate in Brussels next spring and that the process is backed up by a debate in Ireland throughout that period until the Commission decision next July.

**Chairman:** I thank you for addressing the committee this afternoon. We will be continuing our meetings with various interested parties and we will also have a meeting with the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in this context. I am grateful for your participation. It is an ongoing debate and we look forward to keeping in touch with you.

### **Business of Joint Committee.**

**Chairman:** The committee has received a letter from Mr. Gerry McCaughey, chief executive of Century Homes, who is seeking a meeting with the committee to outline his concerns about the application of CO2

emissions regulations to the concrete industry. Mr. McCaughey's company specialises in the construction of wooden homes. If it is proposed to consider this, I would suggest that he be asked to make a detailed submission to the committee. We can decide if and when to meet him once the submission has been made. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Members will recall that we circulated a submission from Mr. Peter Brennan of AL Goodbody Consulting on Ireland's national allocation plan. The clerk has been in contact with Mr. Brennan and he has confirmed that he is not proposing to come before the committee but will nominate three of his clients who would like to address the committee in the near future in connection with the submission. We can pursue that in the context of the other submission.

I understand that it is probably too late for this committee to make any further meaningful contribution on the national allocation plan prior to its agreement by the Commission. Nevertheless it might be useful to conduct a short series of meetings, perhaps towards the end of January, to consider the impact of the plan on certain sectors. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Before I come to any other business, are the minutes of the meeting of 10 November agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** Under any other business, could I mention Mr. Michael O'Sullivan of the Atlantic Bar, Kenmare? He is building elaborate timber-framed houses. I would like his name noted because I would like to give him a hearing, not immediately but at some stage in the future. He is doing a fantastic job. These houses are being built all over Munster. They have a fantastic finish and are a great house.

**Deputy O'Dowd:** I understand there is a European directive on the energy audit of houses or construction generally which comes into force in 2006. If it is in order, perhaps the committee could look at that issue in the context of this type of home. It is an important issue which we as a nation must address.

**Chairman:** Perhaps Deputy Healy-Rae would ask Mr. O'Sullivan to make a submission to me and then we can consider it in that context.

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** Yes, I will.

**Chairman:** We received a request from the Meath Archaeological and Historical Society for a further hearing into the M3 motorway project. I propose to agree to this request. However, I suggest that it would be useful to pay a visit to the site and to meet with representatives of the National Roads Authority and Meath County Council in advance to inform members of the committee of the proposals for this motorway and of the historical importance of the site, as well as the impact of the proposals on local communities. I suggest that we hold this on-site meeting first, on Wednesday, 15 December, subject to the agreement of the NRA and Meath County Council, and then we will be in a position to interview further witnesses on the project. Is that agreed? Agreed.

**Deputy Healy-Rae:** Chairman, you will be aware that we met them here previously.

**Deputy O'Dowd:** It is still a current hot topic.

**Chairman:** That is correct. They have come back to us since then and they want to make further points to the committee. In view of the fact that it is an ongoing debate and that the Minister will make a decision in due course on rerouting or otherwise, we need to consider this matter on an ongoing basis. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government will attend the next meeting of the joint committee at 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 9 December 2004.

**Senator Brennan:** There is one matter the committee might examine at a future date, that is, the standards being set by the Department for waste water treatment plants for one-off housing. There is ongoing discussion on what criteria have been laid down by the Department. This committee should seek clarification when the Minister is with us.

**Chairman:** I will certainly ask the Minister when he comes in. In January, we will be reviewing the issues we might pursue in 2005. If it needs further discussions, we can decide on it at that stage.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.01 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 9 December 2004.