

* Ash dieback scheme update

Since last week's piece on the ash dieback reconstitution and underplanting scheme (RUS), the Department of Agriculture has confirmed that "191 applications have been registered and acknowledgement letters are being issued". The spokesperson said 117 have been issued to date and added: "Registration for approximately 25 more applications has commenced. The total number of active applications is therefore 242." So far, no application has been approved.

The RUS was introduced last June. It provides funding for site clearance or partial clearance, reconstitution and/or underplanting. The scheme applies to

infected ash woodlands under 25 years of age. Trees must be less than 17m top height and under 18cm breast height diameter.

The scheme has been heavily criticised by the IFA, while Donal Whelan of the Irish Timber Growers Association (ITGA) said it does not address growers' loss of future income.

"The full range of silvicultural options should be made available for all infected plantations," he maintained.

The most vocal critics are members of Limerick-Tipperary Woodlands Owners Ltd (LTW) whose spokesperson Simon White said farmers and other ash growers are blameless for the introduction of ash

dieback and need to be adequately compensated.

"The RUS must be redesigned immediately," he said.

"Farmers affected by ash dieback must be assisted and granted the right to return their land to grassland or tillage if they request it."

White added that "all schemes to aid affected plantation owners must contain adequate supports to cover the cost of removal and replacement of the affected plantations along with a premium payment for 15 years consistent with the present afforestation payment, or similar to any new support payment system which might be introduced".