

Turf cutters remain defiant

■ Pauline Scott

Turf cutters in the West of Ireland remain defiant and have vowed to continue cutting turf despite this week's announcement that a derogation allowing the cutting of turf on 32 bog complexes stretching across huge swathes of County Roscommon, is to end.

Chairman of the Turf Cutters and Contractors Association (TCCA), Michael Fitzmaurice from Strangeforth, Williamstown, slammed the fact that, despite having partaken in every consultation process available, the first that the TCCA heard of the Minister's decision was when he was contacted by local radio station Shannonside.

He also noted that he has received calls from turf cutters all across the west of Ireland vowing that they will continue to cut turf and warned that he is fearful of civil disobedience.

"The Turf Cutters and Contractors' Association is extremely disappointed

'Publish the report' – Naughten

Local TD Denis Naughten has called on Environment Minister John Gormley to publish the report used as the basis to close down turf cutting in the West of Ireland.

"Minister Gormley claims that his decision is based on the Interdepartmental Working Group Report what has been on his desk for a number of months. If that is the case he should publish the report in full," stated Denis Naughten. The turf cutters' committee had put forward a cost effective solution in its detailed proposal and that should have formed the basis of a long-term agreed solution. There is now no doubt that this issue will be tied up in the legal system over the coming years, which will not benefit the Government, turf cutters or the environment."

Kelly slams turf ban

"Sadly once more, this Government has shown scant regard for the ordinary person and is now leaving many of them in a very difficult situation as regards providing fuel to heat their homes in the winter months," Labour councillor John Kelly said this week.

"The way Minister Gormley has handled this situation is appalling and has unnecessarily put the turf-cutters on a collision course with the authorities," he said.

"Turf gatherers have already vowed to fight a ban, even if it lands them behind bars. I would hate to see anyone jailed over this matter and it's something that concerns me greatly. What is particularly annoying is that Minister Gormley failed to show a basic understanding of the issue at all."

that, after partaking in all of the process for the last year, it's sad to see that up to today, we never got a press release of what Minister Gormley had to say. They couldn't even be bothered contacting us, but given the arrogance they have shown to date, we are not surprised. We have gone into every part of the consultation process and we partook in every-

thing. "It is a shame for Michael Finneran to come out with something stating that bog owners were responsible for flooding. What bogs around Cork caused the flooding? Minister Finneran would want to live in the real world and not talk Government tactics. The Government has rolled out people to try to defend the indefensible."

"I got phone calls from Roscommon, Galway, Mayo, Leitrim, Sligo and all over the West of Ireland and the midlands and there seems to be a bigger determination than ever that people will continue to cut their turf. People

are not standing back and letting this go through. To paraphrase Churchill, 'it's the beginning of the beginning of the end'.

"West of Ireland TDs are very quiet on the subject and I am calling on Enda Kenny and Fine Gael TDs, who have spoken out on the issue, they need to take a stance to support domestic turf cutting for people for their own use."

"It is incredible to see Minister Gormley saying that 23 more bogs will be ruled out in 2011. The information I have from the National Parks and Wildlife Service is that that will be in 2012, and a further 75 in 2013."

"The Natural Habitat

Areas (NHAs) that are being rolled out are totally under the Wildlife area, so this is Irish Government policy. Minister Gormley, whether he doesn't understand or is incompetent, is mixing up Irish legislation and European legislation."

"The Government has started a war on the West of Ireland. They have hit the first shot in the battle but people in the West of Ireland are standing together and will win this war. Minister Gormley has made the decision, whilst not publishing the inter-departmental report. I also have to state that at this stage, the 1997 baseline maps have never been

forwarded to us. There will be one end result, that turf cutting will continue in the West of Ireland because people will not lie down. It will also effect certain West of Ireland TDs when they go to the ballot boxes the next time and people will have to ask 'have these people or their parties policies that back turf cutting?' People entrusted TDs to represent their needs, but the Government is not listening and is not aware of the situation.

"It's like a kettle coming near the boil. We have tried to harness this, but I have a big fear that civil disobedience is not far away," concluded Mr. Fitzmaurice.



'Lot of misinformation' - Finneran

Following the announcement last week that the derogation allowing turf cutting on Special Areas of Conservation bogs has now ended, there has been a lot of misinformation on the issue, according to Minister Finneran Michael Finneran.

Minister Finneran added, "Bogs are important in flood prevention, water quality and carbon reduction. These factors must be considered and the long-term consequences of destroying this natural habitat must be respected."

The Minister pointed out that nine bogs are affected in County Roscommon. "The European Habitats Directive which necessitated this ban was signed into law in early 1997 by the then Labour Party Minister Michael D Higgins, who was part of the Fine Gael-led Coalition Government at that time."

"So for the leader of the Labour Party, Eamon Gilmore to be calling on the Minister for Environment John Gormley TD to reverse 'his' decision to ban turf cutting it completely hypocritical. The Irish Peatland Conservation Council has moved to correct Deputy Gilmore on a number of misinformed comments he has made on the issue, in fact.

"Statements being made now by

Fine Gael regarding the ban are also very disingenuous as they were in Government when this Habitat was signed into law. A derogation, or a grace period, was introduced by the new Fianna Fáil Government in 1999 to allow people affected by the ban to source alternative methods of fuel. That derogation has now come to an end.

"This Habitat Directive is necessary to protect the small number of bogs that are classified as Natural Heritage Areas, because continuing to cut them will have very negative consequences.

"We witnessed the effects of flooding around the country last year. We have to do what we can to prevent these kinds of events becoming more commonplace and that means taking the necessary precautions.

"Some 32 bogs are affected by the ban which comes into effect from last week, and a further 24 SACs will be affected by the end of next year and 72 by the end of 2013. In total this will represent just over four percent of all peat lands in the country which can be used for turf cutting.

"Commercial turf cutting has been restricted on these sites for many years. In the case of the 32

bogs for this year, commercial turf cutting has been restricted since 1999. The State has already acquired a third of the 32 bogs affected by the ban this year. Bog owners availed of the Voluntary Bog Purchase Scheme operated by the Government.

"In announcing the end of the derogation, Minister Gormley said that the Government will also provide interim funding next winter to address the immediate needs of those who have been relying on these bogs for their fuel needs.

"Minister Gormley will be writing to be the people affected by the implementation of the ban on the 32 bogs to advise them about the compensation scheme and work has already begun on identifying alternative sites and turbary rights for the affected people where possible.

"The Government will do everything possible to meet the needs of the people affected by this ban, but there is no way it could be avoided, and any claims to the contrary are untrue. Ireland receives significant funding from the EU in agri environmental funds and we have a duty to meet requirements laid down in the Habitat Directive as they are in the best long-term interests of our environment," concluded Minister Michael Finneran TD.

Gormley announces end to turf cutting derogation

News that a derogation allowing turf-cutting on 32 bog complexes is to end, was announced this week by Environment Minister John Gormley.

A derogation granted in 1999 allowed a continuation of non-commercial turf cutting on 32 raised bog Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). Further turf cutting or associated drainage works on these sites cannot proceed without the express consent of the Minister. It is estimated that about 750 people have been harvesting turf from these bogs in recent years.

Similar derogations will end for a further 24 SACs at the end of 2011 and for 75 Natural Heritage Areas at the end of 2013, according to the Minister, who added that in total, these sites make up less than five percent of peatlands in the state where turf-cutting is feasible.

The Minister also announced that his Department would provide interim funding to address the immediate needs of those who have been relying on these bogs to source their fuel. The scheme will offer an interim financial contribution towards the fuel costs of affected turf-cutters for next winter.

The Minister said his Department will be writing to affected parties in the 32 raised bog sites in the coming days providing the details of the interim compensation scheme. In addition work has begun on identifying alternative and suitable turbary rights for the affected parties, where appropriate and available.

The Minister also announced the closure, for the time being, of the Voluntary Bog Purchase Scheme to new applicants but confirmed that applications currently with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government or Office of the Chief State Solicitors Office would be progressed.

Precious bogs to be saved – An Taisce

"Some of the richest environments in Europe are to be finally saved by a move by The Department of the Environment to be completed over the next three years," according to An Taisce.

The move to end the 1999 derogation, was this week warmly welcomed by An Taisce the National Trust for Ireland. "Peat bogs are a rare habitat throughout Europe and provide extremely valuable ecosystem services, including flood prevention and long term carbon storage. Despite international and national commitments to protect at least a selection of our best peat bogs, there has in fact been a loss of 92 percent of our raised bogs and 82 percent of our blanket bogs. This loss is due to extensive peat harvesting for fuel and horticulture as well as drainage for agriculture and forestry. What little remains has also been badly damaged and so the few pristine sites that remain have had to be protected as special areas of conservation (SACs) and Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs)."

More dialogue needed – Feighan

Environment Minister John Gormley should facilitate discussions between all relevant stakeholders in the disagreement over the ban on turf cutting to find a solution agreeable to all parties, according to Deputy Frank Feighan.

"The complete cessation of turf-cutting for domestic use is resulting in problems for those who have relied on turf all their lives for domestic heating. For some the practice goes back generations and it has deep roots in Irish rural society. Many in rural areas have complained that no attempt has been made to truly work with stakeholders on the ground.

"It is clear to see that Minister Gormley does not recognise the fact that people who are reliant on the land for a living do not want to destroy the land. Continuing along the current path will lead to an impasse as the interests of those who wish to carry on turf cutting for domestic use and the proposal to ban it altogether cannot be reconciled at the moment. Mediation is needed. I would like to see the Minister initiate meaningful dialogue between all the stakeholders.

"The turf cutters are willing to co-operate and achieve an outcome which is satisfactory to all parties, and are very keen to work closely with the cross-departmental group. I am calling on the Minister to revisit his decision and to take into account the views of both sides in this debate."