

PROTECTED ZONES

A protected zone is defined in the Plant Health Directive as a zone in which a harmful organism which is established in parts of the EU, is not endemic or established despite favourable conditions. A harmful organism is considered as established in an area if it is known to occur there and if either no official measures are being taken towards eradication, or such measures have proved ineffective over a period of two successive years. Member states must carry out regular and systematic official surveys to support protected zones and must immediately report any findings to the Commission.

To maintain protected zones it is therefore important to take prompt eradication action against all findings and to demonstrate that this action is proving successful. There is also an annual review process whereby survey reports for current protected zones are considered by the EU Plant Health Standing Committee, to ensure that such designations remain justified.

In considering whether to pursue protected zone status for a particular organism, it is important to think about the associated costs as well as the benefits of maintaining freedom from the organism. Ongoing surveillance and inspections are necessary to establish that the territory remains free of the organism concerned. For those involved in commercial trade this will often mean annual inspections by the Plant Health Service to be authorised to issue plant passports, with recovery of costs from the business concerned. Government also carries out surveillance of non-authorised premises, and wider environment areas where appropriate, which involves a cost to the taxpayer and means that resources need to be made available for this specific purpose.

In cases of outbreaks there is an obligation to eradicate these, if the protected zone is to be retained. This involves costs for the landowner/occupier in terms of loss of the plants/products concerned and disposal costs, and there are costs to Government in terms of inspection, advice, sampling and testing. Depending on the nature of the organism and the hosts it affects, eradication can be a costly and lengthy process, which may not always be successful.

The practical requirements associated with maintaining pest freedom also need to be considered. Where pests move naturally, or on pathways where detection is not straightforward (e.g. in latent form, or in soil), this makes it difficult to identify requirements which give a reasonable degree of assurance of ensuring pest freedom. This could result

in requirements which are very costly to implement, or which involve compromise, meaning that the protected zone will be more difficult to sustain with a higher likelihood of having to deal with outbreaks.

Protected zone status means that there will be restrictions on suppliers in countries where the relevant organism is present. This has implications for importers and customers in the UK.

In terms of the benefits of maintaining freedom from the organism concerned, such benefits include trade benefits of avoiding yield loss and lower pesticide use, as well as often wider environmental and social benefits of keeping the UK environment free from harmful plant pests. In plant health terms, Great Britain is in a privileged position of having the opportunity to protect against certain threats which could spread by natural means on continental Europe. Therefore, there is the opportunity to consider protected zone status for some pests, where it would not be realistic to do so elsewhere in the EU.

Where there is the opportunity to exclude a pest this is generally a better approach than trying to deal with outbreaks as they arise. It is also the case that, should outbreaks in a protected zone prove too difficult or costly to manage, protected zone can be revoked and a new policy adopted.