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LIGHTEN UP!



Penny for my thoughts: Why did I spend school funds...

Dillon was in a jam, now I am, as school term approaches

It's been almost six months since John Dillon, the former IFA president, was jailed. And still the controversy rages as to who paid the infamous fine, securing his immediate release.

Dillon swore back in March that whoever paid the fine and court costs would become his enemy. He wanted to stay in jail, you see.

Anyway, speaking recently about the saga, Dillon said he was now 99% certain that it was the IFA who trumped up the cash. IFA man Eddie Downey responded by saying that he was just as certain it wasn't.

Being a staunch IFA supporter all my life, it brought a tear to my eye to hear such strong language being exchanged within our ranks.

I felt that there were enough battles to be fought outside in the wider farming world without feuding amongst ourselves.

Therefore I feel it's about time that the issue of the John Dillon fine was finally laid to rest. Today, I am going to reveal who actually paid the bill.

It was paid by me. It was me and nobody else who forked out the €2,200 for John's release back in March.

And before I am hit with a barrage of criticism for doing such a despicable thing, I would like to explain why I did it.

Firstly, can I say that I am a great admirer of John Dillon, I think he's super.

And secondly, when I heard he was to be jailed, I felt I couldn't just stand idly by and watch my hero face a spell in the clink.

John may look like a sophisticated gent, but really he is just a country boy at heart, and I believe he might not be too well acquainted with what can go on in a jail.

I paid the fine to keep my hero John out of harm's way.

Never did I think for a moment that paying the fine would result in such a negative reaction.

I thought I would be carried shoulder high through the streets, like Katie Taylor.

In these tough times coming up with €2,200 was no easy task.

For me, I found the sum in a used jam jar at home.

It was money my missus had put aside for our children's education.

I figured at the time that our children's education was a trifling issue when faced up against the cruel spot that John was in.

So I took the jam jar and tossed the contents in the direction of the courts.

Anyway, the thing is, with school starting next week, and four of our children lining up to go, my missus is looking for the jam jar.

And I don't have the heart to tell her I used it to free John. I don't think she'd understand. In fact, I think she may blow a fuse.

So I was just wondering would it be possible for me to get the money back.

Could the IFA or John simply write out a cheque for the sum and send it onto me, nice and smart?

It's not as if the money has done any good.

Indeed it seems to have done nothing but harm from the very beginning.

Growing ragwort threat on local authority lands Councils urged to act over weeds epidemic

“The problem for farmers is that every roadside ragwort produces 50,000 to 200,000 seeds from July to September”

Stephen Cadogan

Farmers face fines of up to €1,000 if poisonous weeds build up on their land — but the same weeds are allowed reach epidemic proportions on publicly managed land.

Every year, farmers call on bodies such as the National Roads Authority and county councils to control ragwort and other poisonous weeds on public roads. But their calls go unanswered — despite local authorities receiving special maintenance grants for road maintenance, including dealing with noxious weeds.

IFA deputy president and countryside section spokesman Eddie Downey said last week, “The incidence of ragwort and other noxious weeds along many roadside verges and medians has reached epidemic proportions.”

The problem for farmers is that every roadside ragwort produces 50,000 to 200,000 seeds from July to September, mostly dispersed by wind, mainly falling within five metres of the parent plant. The seeds can infest neighbouring farmland, and remain viable for up to 20 years in soil.

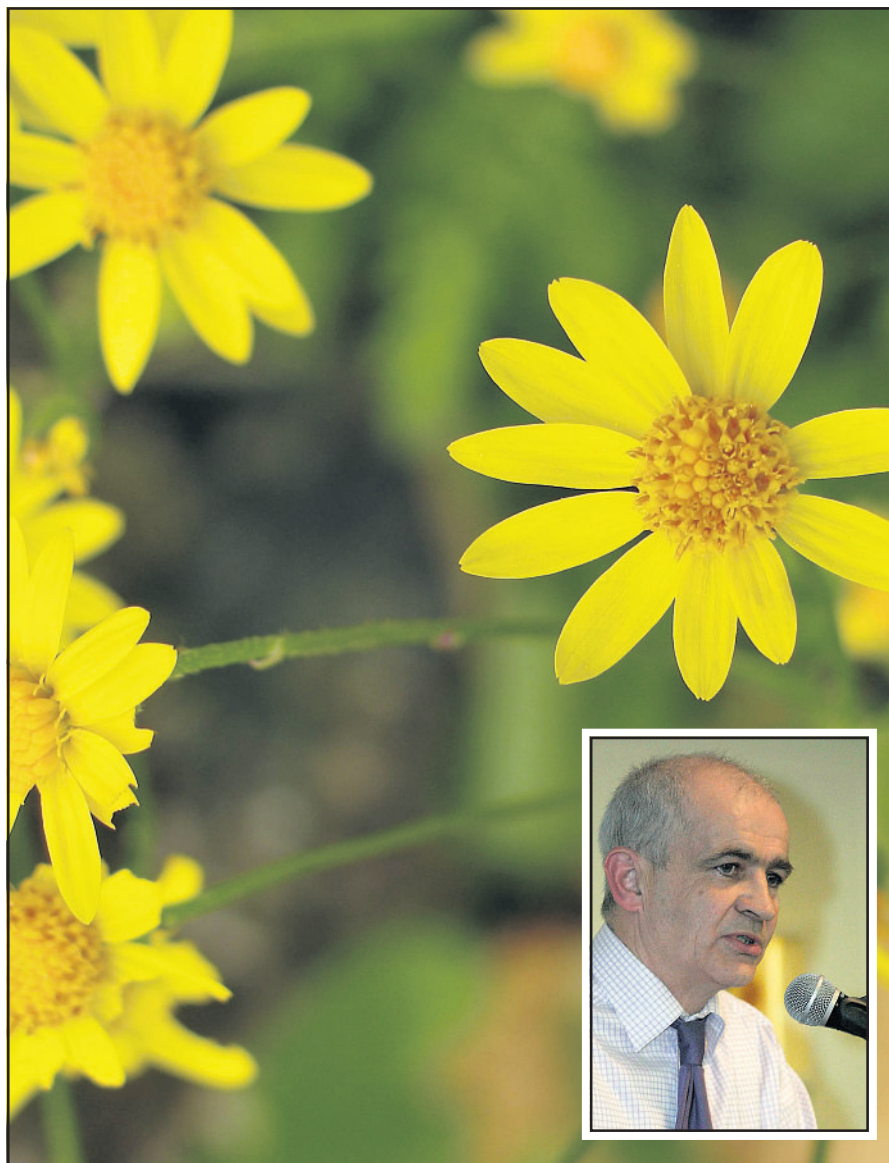
In 2009, 2010 and 2011, Single Payment penalties were applied to 27, 31 and 46 farmers, respectively, for failure to prevent proliferation of noxious weeds.

The Department of Agriculture issued 26 notices to destroy noxious weeds in 2010, and 35 in 2011, following inspections or complaints made by the public.

Ragwort is highly poisonous if eaten, toxic to cattle, horses, deer, goats, pigs and chickens. Farmers can also suffer major financial penalties if it infests their lands, both in prosecutions and penalties for non-compliance with EU farm payment schemes. The only way to eradicate ragwort is by pulling, ploughing or cutting it, or chemical control.

■ Is the harm done by public bodies already, because seeds are spreading, and spring or summer are the recommended spraying times?

>> The issue comes into focus at this time of year because the weed is in flower and its distinctive yellow colouring is very noticeable. Some damage has already been done because the best time to tackle ragwort is earlier in the year before it begins to flower. The best way to get rid of ragwort is by pulling it up, and this can still be done by the local authorities. Unfortunately for farmers who go to the trouble of containing it at the right time of year, their efforts can



There's a colourful show of ragwort flowers on public lands — but it's bad news for farmers like Eddie Downey of IFA, inset, who face fines if this poisonous weed infests their land.

Q&A

Eddie Downey, IFA

be undone if the same work is not done outside their land on the roadside verges, because the seeds from ragwort can spread some distance.

■ Should other plants like Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed which are invading farmlands be included in the Noxious Weeds Act?

>> Anything which is a threat to livestock should be included in the Noxious Weeds Act. The problem with enabling legislation is that if there is no implementation, then it is not very effective. Farmers are very frustrated that they can face penalties, yet a public body outside the ditch appears to be outside the law. Insisting that landowners comply with regulations, while failing to apply the same regulations to public bodies, is very unfair.

■ Should farmers make the Department of Agriculture aware of noxious weed infestations on roads and public lands?

>> It's not like it is difficult to see where the problem is. Anybody from the department who travels our main roads on a frequent basis can see for themselves the verges where there is a proliferation of ragwort. It should not take calls from the public or farmers to force public bodies to clean up their act. Ironically, the NRA has produced detailed procedures for the management of noxious weeds, yet the evidence is there for all to see that they are openly flouting their own guidelines.

Many county councils are just as bad. The law is not being taken seriously. It's time for the gardai and Department of Agriculture to step in and enforce the law against the NRA and local authorities. If you take a look at the road building that has been done under Public Private Partnerships (PPP), they have a much better record when it comes to controlling ragwort. If they can do it,

there is no reason why other public bodies cannot.

■ Has any legal action been taken against public bodies by farmers, over noxious weeds?

>> Not to my knowledge. Again, the responsibility for ensuring road verges are clear of ragwort does not lie with farmers. The costs associated with taking on a public body, given the resources at its disposal, would be prohibitive. It's back to enforcement of existing regulations; if that happens, we wouldn't need to be talking about legal action.

■ Have this year's weather conditions increased noxious weed infestations?

>> The unusual pattern of weather this year has made the problem worse. Everybody knows how difficult it has been to get work done on farms this summer. Even when the rain has stopped, ground conditions have been so bad that getting onto land with machinery has been a big challenge. Spraying is not an option. We have also had warm weather, which has led to more growth of ragwort.