



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Agriculture Bill: Ulster Farmers' Union
and Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association

20 February 2020

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr John Dallat
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin

Witnesses:

Mr James Lowe	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association
Mr Sean McAuley	Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association
Mr Wesley Aston	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr David Brown	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr Ivor Ferguson	Ulster Farmers' Union

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I welcome Ivor Ferguson, president of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU); David Brown, the deputy president of UFU; Wesley Aston, chief executive officer of UFU; James Lowe, the chairman of the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA); and Sean McAuley, the vice-chairman of NIAPA.

Mr Ivor Ferguson (Ulster Farmers' Union): I will kick off. First, I want to thank you, Chair and members, for giving us the opportunity to discuss the issues today. I also welcome the fact that the Assembly is back up and running. It is a great opportunity for us now to shape agricultural policy that delivers not only for farmers but for the agri-food sector in general.

We have lots of concerns, but I just want to concentrate mainly on two issues: one is agricultural support, and the second is standards in a new trade deal going forward. When it comes to support, we certainly need a policy to replace the common agricultural policy (CAP) system now that we have left the EU. Over the past two or three years, we have had many discussions with George Eustice and, before that, Michael Gove. They assured us that it would be difficult for them to argue the case for an area-based payment to the Treasury; in other words, we, as farmers, would have to earn any support that we get.

Bearing all that in mind, three years ago, when that was first discussed, we went round our members throughout Northern Ireland. As you know, we are a lobby organisation with 11,500 members. We wanted to get their views on area-based payments and where they would actually want to be positioned in the future. As a result of that, we produced a discussion document, which we made available to all the political parties at that time. One of the main points that came out of that was that farmers were not happy with area-based payments because they felt that it was a system that rewarded large landowners and did not reward the people who were necessarily doing all the work and producing the goods. What they said to us can be summed up as this: farmers want to be rewarded for activity whether it is production or environmental activity.

As has already been mentioned by you, Chair, in the previous session, we certainly cannot be disadvantaged with our farming colleagues south of the border. We need a level playing field on the Island of Ireland. We certainly need to track the payments south of the border, but that does not mean that we pay it out in exactly the same way, as long as farmers are supported. The need for support has been brought home to us recently by the figures that have just been produced about farm incomes of around £290 million, which equates roughly to the amount of payments that comes in. It is a stark reminder of the importance of payments. Our farmers need to be supported, but not necessarily in an area-based payment.

Standards are very important to us. We, in Northern Ireland, produce our products to a very high standard. The Red Tractor quality assurance scheme is our baseline. We also need to bear in mind that at least 50% of what we produce goes across to the mainland market. In some of our sectors and products it is a good bit more than that. The major retailers on the mainland recognise the high quality of the food that we produce under the Red Tractor standards. More importantly, consumers recognise the high quality of our produce. If there was a change to the standards, it would have a major impact on us here, and that comes down to the trade deal that is going to be negotiated — or any trade deals with Australia, the US or wherever. Any lowering of standards would leave farmers in a very poor position here in Northern Ireland. Lowering of standards automatically means a lowering of costs, and we must bear in mind that our cost of production will still be linked to the EU, as we are linked to the EU regulations. We would be in a poor position, with one arm tied behind our back, if we had to work to certain standards and yet try to market food in an area where the standards are lower.

If the trade deals work well for us, that will be one thing, but if they work against us, we would need access to support to contend with the difficulties we will face in the marketplace. If we diverge away from where we are, there will be restrictions and bureaucracy with export certificates on products going from Northern Ireland into the UK mainland market, and vice versa. It all adds to costs, and unfortunately there is evidence that some mainland companies are starting to source product on the mainland rather than coming to Northern Ireland. It is not just something that might happen in the future; it is happening at the moment and is a major concern for us.

Those are our two main areas of concern: support and standards in the trade deal. I will try to answer any of your questions.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you, Ivor. James.

Mr James Lowe (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association): Thank you, Chair. I am not very familiar with many on the Committee. My name is James Lowe, and I am chairperson of NIAPA, which is a second voice for farmers in the Six Counties. I have been in post for a couple of years. My daytime job is as an ordinary beef and milk farmer. I am very aware of what is going on with our members. There are a lot of concerns, and Ivor has touched on a few of them. We have major concerns about funding. I know that we are here to talk about the Bill, but we are concerned about future trade deals. I overheard a couple of you making points to senior civil servants, who, I would add, are doing a good job; you can appreciate what they have been doing in the absence of a Government.

Food security is another concern. The level of income has depleted over the last two years; farmers' income has decreased by 26%. Without the £290 million of support, there would be no farm income. We have all families to rear. The income is not there.

If you want me to elaborate on anything, I am happy to do so.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Thank you very much, James. I thank both of you for that presentation. I recognise the powerful voice that the organisations have provided for the farming and rural communities here in the North. I have been following a lot of the work that you have been doing.

This is almost an open question. I know that there are varying views on what form a future farm support should take. Do you have any views on what form that should take? I am conscious that, under the withdrawal agreement, there may be an upper cap on what can be spent from the budget on, say, coupled payments. I think that the Minister said in the Assembly this week that the cap on what can be spent on coupled payments from the pot available here is between 8% and 15%. Bearing in mind the requirements under the withdrawal agreement and the protocol for here, do you have a vision of what shape future payments might take for the North?

Mr Ferguson: One of the things that we mentioned was that we did not want to come away from area-based payments altogether. We would like to think that we will retain some sort of an area-based payment. We could call it a resilience payment or a volatility payment. We did not set any figures on that, but we envisage that being anywhere from 30% to 50% of what we get at the moment. A farmer could build in various schemes, such welfare schemes or environmental schemes, so that he could add to that and come back to what his original payment was. Again, that would be open to the farmer's own decision. If a young farmer wanted to get very involved in animal welfare schemes or animal health plans for, say, his dairy cows or suckler cows or whatever, or environmental schemes, we would like to think that there would be a possibility, given the effort that was made, to maybe get back even more of a payment than he would have had in the past.

That is how we envisage our schemes going forward. We certainly fully understand that we have vulnerable sectors like suckler cows and sheep, and we know that we are restricted to an average, as you say, of maybe 13% — somewhere between 8% and 15% — of a cap payment. We will have to revisit all of those things with our members and get a discussion started about to put figures on all those details that we have in place.

Mr Wesley Aston (Ulster Farmers' Union): We do not want to rush into designing a policy until we see how the protocol rolls out and how the trade deals roll out. We may need extra support, never mind the existing level of support, depending on how those happen. We could design something at this stage — we and the Agriculture Department have ideas — but it would be wrong until we see the outcome of those. I certainly think that we need to try to go back to the issue of productive efficiency, environmental efficiency, activity and all of those key principles as part of the process.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Can I take it from what you said that, rather than us rushing to try to put together our own Bill for here, your position is that we should continue on the legislative consent motion (LCM) route until such time as we have the time to do our own Bill?

Mr Ferguson: There are a couple of points, Chair. First, the trade deals that are going forward are going to have a major bearing on what support we need. Secondly, as regards any of the new plans and schemes, such as those for the health of our soil, there is no reason why we cannot start that process now. We are keen to pilot some scheme going forward. Overall, we need to wait and see how our trade plans go forward.

Mr David Brown (Ulster Farmers' Union): We should not lose sight of the fact that based on 2018 figures, the single farm payment was 80% of income. In the current year, 2019, it is 100% plus of income. In effect, the single farm payment is, at present, the farming income. Therefore, if it is moved to other measures it is, in effect, reducing the income directly to farms.

Mr Sean McAuley (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association): Declan, we need to link climate change into trade deals. We cannot have companies running to the other side of the world to import food when we have a supply on our own doorstep, and our farmers could lose out because of that. Therefore, this idea of trade deals may be fine, but you cannot go to a climate change conference in Paris or Japan or here, sign-up to green measures that you are going to put in place, and then bring food from the other side of the world when you have food on your own doorstep. Wesley is right, when we talk about trade deals, we need to wait and see where they are going. However, the Government must be held to account if they are going to do trade deals for food on the other side of the world and clearly contravene climate-change and other agreements they have signed-up to.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): You are saying it is an absolute contradiction to enter into a trade deal where you will import food from the other side of the world, which has a far higher carbon footprint than food that can be produced locally.

Mr McAuley: Within the EU we are almost self-sufficient. I know we have to export a lot to the GB market, and it is vital for us to have that market, but the GB market needs our produce. Therefore, why would we lose out to a product coming in that may not meet the standards? Earlier, we heard from Norman about clearly staying to those standards. We do have to stay to those standards, and we produce some of the best food in the world. We would very much like to see the climate change and environmental issues being brought into discussion on trade deals.

Mr Ferguson: The Ulster Farmer's Union works very closely with the other unions in England, Scotland and Wales on the standards which cover these environmental issues. We have organised a major rally in Westminster where we will be highlighting standards and the climate-change conditions relating to those standards, and we will bring a number of farmers across from Northern Ireland to take part in the rally. We did write to the Prime Minister about standards and the climate change issues. We got 63 environmental groups to stand beside us and sign up to the letter. I emphasise again the importance of the quality and standards of our food.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I will move to the members who want to ask questions. Maurice.

Mr M Bradley: You have alluded to what I was going to ask you about food standards. I think that we have the highest food standards, not just in Europe, but in the world. I am keen to see our high standards maintained. I worry, that under the new protocol, the standards will be lower than what we actually have now. How can you be flexible and work towards your market, while maintaining your very high standards and not succumbing to EU standards which may be lower or market-driven standards from outside, for example from the World Trade Organisation, which could be a lot lower?

Mr Ferguson: We certainly do not want to see the standards drop in any way. That is our major issue in Northern Ireland. If those standards were to fall in any way, it would be a problem for us. As I mentioned earlier, it would be a double problem because we would be linked to the EU regulations and could not drop our production costs, so it would be a major issue for us. It is something that we have been lobbying Government for continually in this last 12 months. When the Agriculture Bill came out, there was no mention of standards in it. We have been pressing for some legislation round our standards, but, to date, the Government have always had very good reasons why they do not put that in place. That is a major concern for us.

Mr M Bradley: I will ask a wee supplementary question. Do you see any impact on animal traceability or identification systems that could cause dilution in the high standards we have here?

Mr Ferguson: As you say, we have a very good traceability system. We do not see why that should change. It would have to continue. From that point of view, I do not see that that would be a major issue.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Sean, have you something to say on that point?

Mr McAuley: I see that the Department says that there are potential issues with the Bill. On the identification and traceability of animals, we are concerned that the Secretary of State does not need to see consent from the devolved Administration before making regulations in relation to the new statutory role of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB). We have difficulties with AHDB because, obviously, it is based in the UK and might not take into account our situation here. I also make the point that the food security report would be every five years and we feel that, whilst there is no need for a report every 12 months, there needs to be an update. That matter needs to be looked at on a regular basis. We cannot leave food security for a period of five years. Something may happen along the line, and we will not have the ability to go in there and deal with it. We have concerns about that five-year period and would like to see at least an update or a review every 12 months.

The Department says that it has potential issues with the Bill to do with the identification and traceability of animals. The animal and public health information system (APHIS) that was set up here was ahead of the pack in tracing animals. We do not want to let go of what we have. We have concerns with an organisation like AHDB coming in.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Are you OK, Maurice? Have you —?

Mr M Bradley: I am happy enough, Chair.

Mr Irwin: You are very welcome to the Committee. As you said, it is good to see the Assembly up and running again. It is somewhere to come to to air your issues and concerns. Some sectors are struggling more than others on coupled payments. This side of trade deals and all the rest, have you any major issue with coupled support for some of those sectors?

Mr Ferguson: No, I do not think so. I have to say that we have not really gone back round our farmers again to discuss it, but it is something that our beef and lamb committee are looking closely at. We will have to go back and revisit it. It will be up for discussion, and it is very important point because they are vulnerable sectors. We have other vulnerable sectors too, such as arable.

Mr Irwin: Absolutely.

Mr Brown: If I can add to that, I sit on both the beef and lamb committee and the hill farming committee. I would say that there has been a fair movement amongst the hill farmers. They are concerned that the areas of natural constraint (ANC) scheme has been lost to them. That is something that UFU has campaigned to have reinstated. There may be a movement, whether a percentage movement or whatever, away from an area-based payment. Going forward, something is needed to support sucklers and sheep, which have been mentioned. The figures from DAERA, even in the past year, show total income from direct payments at £29,000 on those farms whereas the actual profitability or margin on those farms is £16,000. In effect, those farmers are using half of their single farm payment to keep farming. Those farmers are saying, "If there is something that can bring money towards cattle and sheep, we are in a different place to where we were previously". It was to their benefit to have the payment based on acreage. If there is going to be movement of money from acreage — as I said, perhaps a percentage movement — there is certainly an openness amongst those farmers to look at the possibility of payments towards the suckler and sheep sectors specifically.

Mr McAuley: Whilst we fully endorse support coming to the sectors that need it, we need to be careful with subsidies going directly into livestock. We had suckler cow subsidies before, and others in the food chain were too quick to adjust the price of the beef to reflect the support that the farmer was getting. We have seen that recently in the South, where various schemes have been brought in and their beef price has slumped. Some of the organisations there, whilst they cannot directly link the two, are saying that the support is having an impact. I am not saying for one minute that the suckler industry does not need support, but we need to be careful and think of the long term — is this a long-term solution for the industry? We have the opportunity to start anew, and we have to be looking at the long-term situation.

Mr Dallat: I have a question for both Ivor and James. Ivor, you have put a lot of emphasis on standards. As you will be aware, the people who wrote this Bill might never have heard of Northern Ireland or perhaps thought it was Rockall, because the opportunities for us to market our own products are so limited. Standards were, at one time, about the houses in which the animals were slaughtered, but today they mean far more than that. Since we sat down here this morning, several acres of the Amazon will have been cleared to provide grazing for animals that will pass all those standards. Of course, Britain, with a 70 million population will welcome that. You are going to Westminster. How do you intend to get across the message that agriculture in Northern Ireland is quite different from that in Britain?

Mr Ferguson: When it comes to quality assurance, like the Red Tractor quality assurance scheme, the same standards apply in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. So, we are on the same page as regards quality assurance schemes. Quality assurance takes into account animal welfare and all those standards. So, we are on the same page, and the major retailers, as I said earlier, respect the Red Tractor assurance scheme and support us in that respect.

When it comes to looking at the standards going forward, as I said, that is one of the major concerns we have. In the past, we had to go directly to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, which was chaired by Neil Parish and fed our concerns directly to the Government. Now, we have the Assembly up and running and our own Minister and elected representatives, so we have to rely on everybody around the table to support us. Those are the messages that we are getting across to try to support our standards.

You rightly say that the standards are so important to us. We want to make sure that any future trade deals take our standards fully into consideration, whether they involve beef from the Amazon basin, the US or wherever. In a trade deal, we want to make sure that our standards are in it; they cannot lower our standards, because doing so would be so detrimental to us in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dallat: OK. Standards are one part of the story. Another part is marketing, so that the consumer understands and is better informed of why he or she should buy Northern Ireland produce. Would you encourage cooperation between the different groups involved in our food industry?

Mr Ferguson: When it comes down to marketing our product, one of the things that we are looking closely at is a marketing body for Northern Ireland. That proposal has been sitting on the shelf for the past three years. A marketing body is important to us not only for the 65 million or 70 million people on the mainland, where the bulk of our product goes but as a way look for new markets and try to shift some product outside the mainland GB market. It is a very competitive market, with retailers competing with one another. Looking forward, we hope that having a marketing body will be a big help to us. We are looking very seriously at that proposal at the moment. As I said, we produce evidence of meeting Red Tractor quality-assurance standards. Red Tractor has been spending a lot of money on the home market to try to increase awareness of its products. That is uppermost in our mind.

There is another point that I want to mention. Until the past few years, the major retailers supplied a large percentage of the shopping basket for consumers. It used to be at 70% or 80%. The amount of product that the major retailers sell has been dropping, and the food service sector is taking up the slack. There are now more ready meals and more convenience foods being sold, and processors in the food service sector do not necessarily support the Red Tractor quality-assurance scheme, but that is something that we would like to see. We would like some more legislation on the governance of our food service sector so that, just as the major retailers have to do, processors have to point out where the meat in the product has come from. Those are things that we will be pushing for.

Mr Dallat: Before I move on to James, I endorse what you have said, Ivor. I hope that you support the Assembly in ensuring that our rather limited marketing role is considerably enhanced, because, as I say, we are quite different here from Britain.

James, I was reading the other day that experts have said that 25% of farmers will disappear. How many of those are your members?

Mr Lowe: We have in excess of 3,000 members across the six counties. We get it every day. Guys are at their wits' end and struggling. For example, this year, they cannot pay last year's tax bill. That is one immediate issue. The quality of the produce that they present, as Ivor said, is second to none. In the market, quality is vital, and our members are being hammered for it all the time by the bigger corporates. Whatever the corporates say seems to be the be-all and end-all. When they say, "Jump", you say, "How high?".

Regarding the Assembly, I echo the point that it is great to see locals here, because I have sat in many a Committee meeting with Whitehall officials and previous Environment Ministers — Villiers and Gove, to mention two — and it is embarrassing how little they know of the workings of this place. For the Minister here to be able to put in place things that will work, the profile of this place is very relevant.

A lot of our members' product is going further afield. As Ivor said, milk products are going to England. Bord Bia and Red Tractor work closely. Milk on the island is just so intermeshed that it is nearly impossible to separate, as you yourself said, Chair. It is a work in progress. You seem to be demanding more and more quality, but there is little net gain for the farmers, who are struggling.

Mr Dallat: Finally, James, I live in the rural community. I am not a farmer, but I am very aware that everything around me — the environment, the wildlife and the idyllic setting in which I am privileged to live — happened not by accident but was created by farmers. What do you see in the future?

Mr Lowe: That is a very relevant point that I hear from, like you, non-farmers. They are very appreciative of the Sperrins, the Mourne, beauty spots and whatnot.

Mr McGuigan: The glens.

Mr Lowe: Absolutely, Philip. Again, that has not happened by accident. Sheep farmers and hill farmers are paramount to keeping the landscape in the condition that it is in, and we do.

Mr Irwin, you raised the issue of cross-compliance in the previous session, and that is vital. In the past, we have had members, as has the UFU, harassed for an alleged breach of cross-compliance, yet they see their neighbours down the road in industry getting away with a pittance of a fine.

I do take your point, Mr Dallat. That is very relevant, and it certainly has not happened by accident. Generations of work have gone into that, and it is vital that we think about how the countryside is maintained. To go back to what the Chair said, I do not see how a cap of 8% to 15% for a small farmer will pan out. If you take, for example, a hillman with 10 cows who is getting a 10% cap for one cow, there is no incentive.

Mr Dallat: No.

Mr McAuley: John, I agree totally with what you said. The family-farm structure that we have in Northern Ireland is best placed to deliver for the environmental issues that are coming, but, for that to happen, we need to see profitability at the farm gate. As some of you will know, our organisation along with others has been working on farm-gate prices. The other issues that we are dealing with today are vital, but if the farm-gate price is not dealt with, you are right, John, that more farmers will disappear.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I am going to move on, folks. I am conscious that we have about 15 minutes left, and five or six members still wish to ask questions. Can we therefore keep them quite focused?

Mrs Barton: You are very welcome to the Committee, and thank you for your presentations.

Do you think that it would be better to make a case for having a stand-alone Northern Ireland agriculture Bill and base it on something similar to the UK Agriculture Bill's provision for Wales, for which there is a sunset clause? We could then gradually work towards having our own legislation, especially given that we are dealing with two jurisdictions. With this border down the Irish Sea, we have to satisfy the rules and regulations of the UK mainland, but we also have to consider the Republic of Ireland (ROI). We are trading with both, and both are very important to us.

Mr Ferguson: First, we certainly acknowledge that farming in Northern Ireland is very different from farming in England and Scotland. From that point of view, we want to see our own policy developed for Northern Ireland farmers, and for it to include the agri-food business in general. We have to come up with our own scheme for here.

When it comes to looking at following the Welsh model, we have to be open-minded at the moment. We have already talked about the implications of any future trade deals for us. We have to consider the difficulties that we may face in trading produce across the Irish Sea, from here to England and back again. We must always recognise that, if there are extra costs in the system, it will usually be us farmers who end up paying them. Those are all things that we will have to bear in mind and be open-minded about.

Mr Brown: I will add one short comment about the fact that aspects of the Bill were described on a number of occasions earlier as "reserved matters". As was mentioned, that causes difficulties for migrant labour, for example. We do not have the ability to have regional variation, and that is a problem. There are many examples that we could go into in detail. In truth, we have lobbied and campaigned about that. Northern Ireland needs to have the ability to have some variation in aspects of the Bill. In some of those examples given, we do not.

Mr Ferguson: From discussion with other unions in England, Scotland and Wales and bearing in mind that we have a land border with the Republic of Ireland, we believe that we need a framework by which we can work together so that there is no economic impact, on the food market or whatever else, across all the regions. We will have to have long discussions on having an overall framework.

Mr Lowe: We very much feel that what the Bill is articulating leaves a lot to be desired for this region. What goes on in GB is not relevant to day-to-day farming and small farms here. David mentioned migrant labour. What goes on over there is not relevant to here, in certain aspects.

Ms Bailey: Thank you very much for being here. At the outset, I want to apologise for my ignorance. The agri-food sector is new to me. I am well aware of the Ulster Farmers' Union, but I was not aware of your organisation, James. It is nice to know that you are out there as well.

Mr Lowe: I appreciate that. You are still a consumer of agri-foods —

Ms Bailey: I certainly am.

Mr Lowe: — so you are playing your part.

Ms Bailey: The more local, the better.

We heard that a discussion paper between the Department and the sector was produced in August 2018. Am I right to assume that you were part of those conversations?

Mr Lowe: Yes.

Ms Bailey: Great. That paper looked at a potential framework for moving forward. I mentioned earlier that it is notable that the Bill does not address sustainability issues, our climate or our already agreed targets. We hear a lot about productivity. Can you give me a sense of what that productivity will look like? We cannot move back to models such as those contained in Going for Growth. Are we looking at the intensification of farming or at diversification?

Mr Lowe: First, one of the previous witnesses spoke about a "global event". It is important to remember that, if there were a global event, it would be only a matter of days before there was food scarcity. It is no coincidence that food security is so high up the agenda. A lot of our members would prefer to be paid for productivity as opposed to working for, in layman's terms, a brown envelope, but the returns from the consumer are not there.

There is no stimulation in agriculture at the moment to bring a new generation into the industry, and that is sad. I have three kids, and I would not recommend farming to any of them. I started 25 years ago. We were getting 25p for a litre of milk back in 1995, and we are still getting that today. There has been no talk of input inflation at all, and the cost of inputs has skyrocketed. It is not a one-sock-fits-all scenario. Perhaps some of the rest of you want to throw a bit of light on it.

Mr Ferguson: You referred to Going for Growth. Farming is like any other business. Farmers have to be able to expand to survive. If we are not expanding but sitting still, we are, in real terms, going backwards. We have to be able to expand our businesses. How we do that is the main question. We are very aware of the environmental issues, and, as we speak, we are working with environmental groups such as Nature Matters. We have on our agenda the notion that we should be able to produce more with fewer inputs. We will therefore do more with less.

We also fully recognise that new farming technology and techniques will allow us to look after the environment even better than we are doing at the moment. We believe that we have been looking after the environment pretty well. We have been part of the Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership (GHGIP) in Northern Ireland for 10 years and, as has already been mentioned, have three farmers who sit on the sustainable land management committee. We are looking closely at ammonia issues at the moment.

Looking forward, we believe that, although we are looking after the environment today, there is an awful lot more that we can do, and we have plans to do so. For example, we are looking at new technology to handle slurry and ammonia emissions; in fact, we will discuss that with DAERA and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) very closely. I can foresee that we will be able to increase production but do so in a more environmentally friendly way. That is what our ambition has to be.

Mr Brown: May I add to what Ivor said about our desire to have a more sustainable agriculture industry? When it comes to supplying the marketplace, the UK is currently about 55% self-sufficient in pork and 75% self-sufficient in beef and poultry. To go back to the earlier point, all those environmental organisations supported the case that we made, which is that we do not want to see the remaining percentage being imported from parts of the world where standards are not at the level of those in UK agriculture.

Somewhere in the region of 50% of what we produce in Northern Ireland goes into the GB market, with a percentage going to the Republic of Ireland and on into the rest of the EU. Ultimately, what we produce is to a standard that is not matched elsewhere. The level of greenhouse gases in the UK and ROI is two and a half times less than the world average. If we were to export production to somewhere else, we would not be doing the world any favours, because we would be producing food to a standard that does not match what we produce.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Will you be brief, John?

Mr Blair: I will be brief, Chair. A lot of stuff around standards has been very ably covered. I wish the panel of representatives well when they take the conversation about standards to Westminster and to the Prime Minister.

The question that I want to ask has not been covered in this session, but you heard me ask it earlier. You will have heard some of the questions to the Department about North/South versus east-west and about trying to get the framework right. Separate from tariffs, which are fairly self-explanatory, and the risk therein, are there any other issues with ease of movement in both directions that you would like to highlight to the Committee so that we can bear them in mind as we monitor the progress of the Bill and other factors?

Mr Ferguson: North/South issues are pretty well covered in the protocol. We had major concerns in the past with some products, particularly milk, but the situation has been resolved to a certain extent. For example, 30% of our milk goes south of the border. Our concern was over whether Southern milk processing plants could then access the 52 trade deals that the EU has with other countries all around the world. However, we are now being told that, when the milk is substantially changed from liquid to a powder, that should solve the problem. Having said that, I will add that the processors in Southern Ireland would still want to make sure that customers, whether they be in China, Saudi Arabia or wherever, will accept the product with an ROI label on it. There is still a slight concern, but we are generally happy enough.

We certainly have concerns about east-west and west-east trade. As I said, we realise that some companies on the mainland with whom we have been doing business are not now doing the same level of business in Northern Ireland because of bureaucracy. They are concerned about form-filling etc going forward. That issue has been brought home to us by some haulage companies. In the past few weeks, for the first time, they have had difficulty securing backloads back to Northern Ireland. That is a major concern for us, because that would add to costs. As I said, when it comes to costs, we farmers usually end up footing the bill.

We would like the Assembly to voice those concerns on our behalf in Westminster. Of course, as I have already mentioned, if trade deals go against us, we will need even more support so that we are not disadvantaged here.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): The final question is from Philip. You will have to keep it very short, because we need to get out of here.

Mr McGuigan: I will have to get my hand up earlier. I am conscious of time. In fairness, the questions that I was going to ask have been answered. I just want to thank you for your contribution. It has been extremely useful in all its parts, and sometimes very informative. You are talking to an open ear here when it comes to support. We are all acutely aware that the levels of support for your industry, and the local economy, need to be maintained, if not improved on. The North is a rural economy driven by agriculture.

I sense the concern about trade deals and standards. Given the earlier conversation that we had, for which you were present, when we were talking about migration and the policies that seem to be being imposed on us, you are probably right to be concerned. I see a lot of what is happening here being driven by — I will be careful with my words — Tory party policy. We are well aware of the things that the likes of Boris Johnson and other Conservatives said about migration and trade deals in the run-up to the election.

We certainly share your concern, and you are probably right to be concerned. I have the opposite concerns to Maurice on standards. I suspect that there are lots of establishment Conservatives who would be quite happy to import food that meets lower standards. That would cause havoc here. It is great that you are working with environmental groups and that you are doing all that you are doing.

Without delaying us any longer, I want to say that we support you in your endeavours and hope that decisions are made that support the industry in the North and help it continue.

Mr Ferguson: Thank you very much for your comments. I will just make the point that, although your support and standards in the marketplace are very important to us, at the end of the day, we, as farmers, would really like to earn our money in the marketplace. The situation is so competitive at the moment that we have to rely on outside support in order to do that. Ultimately, we want to be able to stand on our own two feet without support, but, unfortunately, that is a long way away.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Folks, we have to suspend now for lunch, because we need to get out of here. Thank you very much for making the trip up here to give us your briefing.