

WRITTEN RESPONSE PROVIDED BY WILSON'S COUNTRY AT THE REQUEST OF THE COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOLLOWING THE DEBATE ON THE 8TH OCTOBER 2012 BY THE NI ASSEMBLY ON THE CURRENT "FARMING CRISIS"

Please find below a response to the two questions asked by the Committee.

WILSON'S COUNTRY BUSINESS MODEL

Wilson's Country are a local potato prepacker and peeler, handling approx 1000t/wk of potatoes. The potato sector has no direct subsidies and hence the predominant force that operates across the sector is driven by supply and demand economics. However, Wilson's Country work very closely with a select group of individual growers in NI and ROI, this group is known as our "preferred growers". These "preferred growers" operate their own business but Wilson's Country work with these growers at every stage of the crop development, from the early stages of planning what variety and how many acres the growers should plant, through to seed and land selection, providing technical input at the various growing stages of the crop and finally agreeing when to harvest the crop. Wilson's Country then procure the crop from their "preferred growers" and market the crop to a range of retail and food service customers.

Wilson's Country offer a number of different procurement options to their "preferred growers":-

- the growers can contract a fixed amount of tons at a fixed price with the balance of their crop supplied at the prevailing market price.
- the growers can supply their total tonnage at the prevailing market price.
- for cold store potatoes ie long term storage, whereby Wilson's Country will store potatoes for up to 8 months, Wilson's Country will procure a fixed tonnage at a fixed price.
- some growers have their own cold store and hence will store their own product and offer the crop to Wilson's Country at the prevailing market price.
- if during the planning process Wilson's Country forecast a deficit in their required volume from local growers of specific varieties, the company will operate the same model whereby they will either enter into a contract with other growers or other suppliers outside of their "preferred growers" or procure as and when at the prevailing market price.

PROFITABILITY OF LARGER SUPERMARKETS / RETAILERS

The larger supermarkets / retailers have a very significant market share and it is obviously the place where the majority of the population wish to buy their groceries. Wilson's Country supply many of the supermarkets across N. Ireland and wish to put on record the large volume of local potatoes that these customers order on a daily basis week in and week out. Wilson's Country can only comment of their experiences with potatoes but wish to reinforce the importance of the larger supermarkets having a regional office with a listening and attentive ear to respond to local issues. In our particular sector this has related to having specific local potato varieties available on shelf, reacting to local weather issues, availability, etc. The regional office must be autonomous to make regional decisions and not simply be an office with limited or decision making authority.