

## **Joint Statement by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Chairperson of the Assembly Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development**

Agriculture Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA and Chairperson of the Assembly Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, William Irwin MLA today issued the following joint statement:

**“Given the urgency of one key aspect of the Fisheries Bill that was introduced in the Assembly on 7 December 2015, and the very short time frame for the Assembly to consider the Bill in detail before the end of the current mandate, we have agreed that the Committee will only undertake scrutiny of certain key clauses, and in doing so ensure that that the EU removes a threat of sanction for non compliance with the Common Fisheries Policy”.**

Minister O'Neill said:

**“The Bill that was introduced in the Assembly would have allowed both DARD and DCAL to fully meet EU and other statutory obligations and commitments. Furthermore, while existing legislation provides a framework for the management of our fisheries, both in terms of inland fishing and at sea, the package of new measures contained in the Bill, if enacted, would have ensured that legislation would remain fit for purpose and would have ensured that we continue to protect fish stocks and sensitive aquatic environments. Any risk to fisheries or aquatic environments as a result of inadequate powers or insufficient deterrents has a correspondent risk to livelihoods or, as the case may be, to the potential enjoyment of anglers. The Bill as introduced would therefore have helped protect legitimate fishing activities”.**

**“However, given that this Bill was only introduced in the Assembly late last year, I recognise that there is limited time for the Assembly to fully consider all the clauses in adequate detail. I recognise the time constraints and while I am disappointed that many of the good things in the Bill will not now make it into law, I have agreed with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee to include in the final legislation only those clauses that the Committee signals that it is content that it has had time to fully consider”.**

The Chairperson of the Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, William Irwin MLA said: **“There is no doubt of the importance of this Fisheries Bill and the issues that it seeks to address. At the same time, the complexity of the Bill, and the very tight timetable for its passage through the legislative process gave me and other Committee members concerns over whether it would be possible to complete the Bill before the May election.**

**“The Committee was concerned that given the time remaining in the Mandate it would have been unable to give proper consideration to the Bill which could have resulted in a less effective Bill.”**

**“After many discussions with the Department and Minister O’Neill, it became clear that the most pressing provision within the Bill was Clause 6. This Clause will enable the Department to enforce EU obligations and regulations as soon as they come into operation; something that the EU Commission has insisted on. Not enforcing these EU regulations could result in serious financial penalties. Focusing on the provisions of Clause 6 gives the Bill the best opportunity of making it into law.**

**“Accordingly, we stand ready to work with the Minister at Consideration stage to ensure that the provisions of clause 6 do make it into law and thus remove the risk of penalties.”**

Mr Irwin and Minister O’Neill and concluded: **“We look forward to working together over the next few months to ensure that the urgent matter in the Bill in relation to enforcement of the Common Fisheries Policy can be enacted during the current Assembly. We hope that any matters that are not taken forward at this time will be brought forward in a future mandate”.**

**ENDS**