

AERA Committee Meeting Update – Thursday 2 July 2020

Food & Farming Group Input

Covid 19 update

Single Application

- Inspections have recommenced across Basic Payment and the Environmental Farming Scheme. Risk Assessments have been carried out and PHA advice is being followed with regards to social distancing and PPE for inspectors.
- The Minister has agreed to reduce the control rates for Direct Payment inspections in 2020. This is in line with action taken by England, Scotland and Wales. The control rates have been reduced as follows: Basic Payment Scheme reduced from 3 % to 1%; Greening reduced from 5% to 3% and Young Farmer from 5% to 3%. The Direct Payments To Farmers (Controls And Checks) (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 were made on the 19 June under the negative resolution procedure. The Environment Farming Scheme control rate has also been reduced from 10% to 5%.
- Applications to the fourth Tranche of the Environmental Farming Scheme Higher level have been prioritised to maximise the environmental benefit and letters of offer (LoO) started to issue on 19 June. Offers will be made to all 232 applicants who submitted either Tier 1 (EU designated, SPA, SAC or RAMSAR) or Tier 2 (nationally designated, ASSI) land. These areas will directly contribute to the PfG Outcome 2 target on Biodiversity. The remaining 734 applications are either considered not eligible or only offer Tier 3 land. This land is considered to be of environmental value but is not currently designated and has a lower priority in terms of the business case objectives of EFS. LoO will be issued to a small number of these applicants (around 20) who are members of the pilot EFS Group projects as the benefits of collaborative and coherent environmental management, supported by a facilitator within a Group, are considered greater than that achieved from individual management.

Covid-19 – Current key issues for Agri-food sector

1. NI Executive allocation of £25m for market interventions to support Farm and Horticultural Businesses.

Position – Minister Poots has indicated that the funding will be allocated to those hardest hit based on the evidence in a fair and equitable way. Officials have engaged with numerous industry representatives and stakeholders, to hear their analysis of the impacts of the pandemic and their proposals for allocation of the £25m. During those discussions, there was a clear acceptance of the need for support to be targeted at those farm businesses hardest hit financially as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. While supply chains are still working effectively there still remain concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly if staff have to self-isolate as a consequence of the new Track and Trace protocols.

Position – Output from the sector remains at 100% of demand, with levels of absenteeism reported as remaining relatively low.

3. Beef prices started to fall during March with the average steer price reaching a low point of £3.15/kg for the week ending 25 April (down 16p/kg on March prices at £3.31). Since then prices have increased to £3.49/kg and it is expected that forthcoming statistics will show further

increases as weekly quotes have been improving and are now well above early March levels. Lamb prices fell by 40p/kg at the start of April but recovered relatively quickly to prior levels. The latest GDT auction (16 June) for milk products showed an increase of 1.9% from the previous auction (skim milk powder up 3.1%, whole milk powder up 2.2%, cheddar up 1.4%, butter down 1.0%). Lakeland dairies announced a base price of 23p/litre for April and May milk (down 0.75p/litre on March and 2.25p/litre on February cumulatively). Dale Farm also announced a base price of 23p/litre for April and May milk (down 1p/litre on March and 2p/litre on February cumulatively). Other firms that have announced price drops include Glanbia Cheese (0.5p/litre for April/May milk), Glanbia Ireland (0.5p/litre for April/May milk) and Aurivo (0.75p/litre for April/May milk).

Position – DAERA is continuing to monitor market conditions, liaise with DEFRA and other DA's, and work is ongoing to develop support schemes for farmers in affected sectors. Work is also ongoing to monitor impacts in other sectors.

4. As with private sector workers, there is concern that a shortage of workers in key roles within Government/Agencies with statutory inspection roles to protect public health, could lead to a slow down or halt in food processing capacity. This would limit not only the amount of product available but also have knock on effects at farm level.

Position – DAERA are reprioritising workstreams in light of the pressures created by Covid-19 to maintain key services.

College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)

- CAFRE plans to commence the next academic year in September 2020 as scheduled, using a blended approach to deliver the education programmes, with face-to-face delivery of the practical elements of the programmes, where space is available to allow social distancing, combined with remote learning for lectures using digital learning technologies.
- CAFRE Knowledge Advisory Service Advisers and Technologists continue to provide advisory support to the Northern Ireland Agri-food industry to assist farmers and food businesses with technical, business and environmental advice during the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Department of Health are to cease use of CAFRE's residential facilities by 24 July 2020 to allow a deep clean of the facilities prior to the return of students in September.

Update on Essential Legislation

- The UKG Agriculture Bill has moved to the House of Lords where its Second Reading took place on 10 June 2020. The first two dates for Committee stage have been published: Day 1 – 7 July 2020 and Day 2 – 9 July 2020. We are expecting more dates to come through.

Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP)

- As advised several weeks ago, a further proposal was being considered by the European Commission to allow Rural Development Programmes to make lump sum payments to farmers/SMEs to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19. There are restrictions such as maximum allocation of the overall budget. The proposal was very recently formally adopted by the European Commission and is being considered carefully by officials.

Veterinary Service & Animal Health Group

Covid 19 update

Delivery of Official Controls

- The delivery of official controls, that is, ante mortem and post mortem inspections, verification of food business operators' compliance with hygiene, animal health and welfare requirements continues in all slaughterhouses. All slaughterhouses are working normally with full throughput maintained.
- VSAHG officials continue to actively engage with the Public Health Agency (PHA), Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) and the industry to ensure adherence with PHA advice and guidance in all food processing establishments.
- Agri-food Inspection Branch (AfIB) are continuing to carry out some pre-notified and unaccompanied on-farm inspections for food safety. The inspections are being conducted in line with government guidance on COVID-19.
- Remote inspection work to implement official control requirements, continues across the dairy meat and egg sectors.
- **Current Position**
- AfIB has recommenced risk-based feed sampling at feed manufacturers in accordance with COVID-19 guidance.
- Preparations are ongoing to recommence further on-farm inspection work, in early July, in areas such as primary production hygiene.

Bovine TB Programme

- From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, revised temporary measures for bovine TB (bTB) testing have been introduced, based upon the principles that:
 - (i) testing should not take place except in exceptional circumstances; and
 - (ii) the primacy of public health requirements.
- The new measures are designed to safeguard the health and well-being of farmers, veterinary practitioners and staff, maintain animal and public health controls and ease the burden on farmers.
- **Current Position**
- Private Veterinary Practitioners and farmers are working hard to catch up with bTB testing that was delayed following the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.
- At the height of the pandemic, in week commencing 13th April 2020, only 44% of herds and 41% of animals were tested, compared with the equivalent week in 2019. In week commencing Monday 8th June 2020, herd and animal bTB testing numbers were back to normal levels when compared with a similar week in 2019.

- The testing of badgers for TB by means of the Road Traffic Accident Survey is scheduled to recommence on 1st July 2020.
- VSAHG officials will continue to monitor the impact of the new bTB testing measures.

Trade Export Certification

- From the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, a number of easements in relation to export health certificates for exports of live animals and products of animal origin to various countries have been introduced. Such arrangements help to minimise the need for face-to-face interaction between private veterinary practitioners, exporters and DAERA staff.
- Third country export health certification easements are currently agreed and in place with Australia, China, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Philippines, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States of America (USA).
- White paper export health certificates now make up approximately 40% of the total of the total third country exports from Northern Ireland.

- **Current Position**

- Following a recent cluster outbreak of COVID-19 in Beijing, Chinese authorities i.e. the General Administration of Customs China (GACC) has written to the United Kingdom signalling a hard line on trading expectations. The GACC
 - has implemented a COVID 19 testing regime on imports from all countries (i.e. a negative test release system);
 - is seeking assurance that food production is taking place in compliance with World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance on personal hygiene; and
 - requires live site inspections by video to demonstrate compliance.
- These developments are concerning to Northern Ireland, as valuable trading relationships have been established by industry, particularly in the pork, fish/shellfish and dairy sectors.
- The Minister was advised of the issues on 19th June 2020.
- DEFRA, as the lead government department for international trade, is co-ordinating the UK response. The UK CVO has written to confirm compliance with World Animal Health Organisation (OIE), WHO, and UK competent authority risk assessments. Officials from DAERA have been providing assistance in the efforts to secure valued business.

Animal Welfare

- **Zoos Funding**

- A zoo funding scheme remains under consideration, however, the recent Ministerial announcement that zoos can reopen from 3 July may impact on the need for such funding.
- Officials will continue to work with the sector to establish whether or not there is an evidence base for providing financial support.

Essential Legislation

- Work on essential legislation continues but at a slower pace given the diversion of resource to COVID related work. This diversion, alongside the potential for additional COVID related absences, means that there is a risk that legislation may not be completed within the required timescales and/or to standard.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

ENVIRONMENT UPDATE

Covid 19 Update

Waste Management Collection, Storage and Processing

- As of the 25 June 2020, there are 68 Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) open across Northern Ireland with further sites expected to re-open in a phased manner over the coming weeks. Many HWRCs are accepting an increasing number of waste streams, signalling a gradual return to a more normal situation.
- Textiles waste and littering (including PPE) are two areas that are now being closely monitored for developments. As movement restrictions are eased, more people are beginning to leave their homes. This has led to a marked increase in the amount of litter reported at beauty spots and at the roadside, both of “on-the-go” food packaging and PPE.
- To add to this, some Councils have reported limited municipal cleansing services due to the ongoing pressures from the Covid-19 outbreak. Communications are therefore currently being developed to target this increase in littering of PPE and “on-the-go” food containers. This will involve dedicated TV adverts to highlight the issue and raise awareness through simple and clear messaging. This will be accompanied by a social media campaign across various online platforms.

Maintaining Drinking Water Quality

- NIEA and Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) have been working with NI Water and DfI in their application for 3 Drought Orders as a result of the prolonged period of dry weather. On 3rd June 2020, NIEA agreed to NI Water’s proposals to increase abstraction rates and reduce compensation flows which will have a detrimental impact on the environment. These are required to protect the raw drinking water supply required to serve water treatment works. DfI published the Drought Orders on 8th June 2020. Work continues to finalise the specific method statements to minimise the impact on the environment.
- There has been some improvement in the situation due to the change in weather and significant work done by NI Water in re-zoning and tankering water to areas at highest risk. Although the treated water storage reserves have returned to normal and demand has reduced, NIEA and DWI continue to work with NI Water in the event that the situation may escalate again. This is critical for maintaining our supply of clean safe drinking water.

- DWI and NIEA have been working with NI Water to agree their Rollback Plan to re-introduce regulatory monitoring of drinking water and waste water again. This represents a return to 90% of their regulatory monitoring for drinking water and 100% of their waste water monitoring from 1 July 2020. NIEA have agreed to extend the Wastewater Sampling Regulatory Position Statement until September 2020 and can be used by NI Water if required.
- DWI have been working with each of the Councils with the aim of recommencing regulatory monitoring of private water supply sites. It has been agreed that monitoring will recommence in 10 out of the 11 council areas in the week commencing 25 June 2020, with monitoring of all 11 Council areas by the end of July. A revised monitoring schedule has been designed to prioritise premises that were temporarily closed or missed due to COVID-19 restrictions. Advice on steps to take to ensure the water quality is maintained is issued to businesses in advance of samples being collected.
- DEFRA have approached NIEA to take part in a research project for Covid-19 in wastewater. NIEA are currently scoping the possibilities of extending the research within Northern Ireland. The research will monitor wastewater for Covid-19. The monitoring results would be used in conjunction with other research to provide early warning of a resurgence in the virus.

Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

- The Minister launched a £800,000 environmental challenge fund competition which will enable eNGOs to bid to deliver priority natural environmental projects for nature recovery and connecting people to the environment.

Country Parks and Nature Reserves

- Vans selling beverages, ice creams and hot food are allowed to operate in country parks. The Woodlands Café at the Crawfordsburn visitor centre is open to provide take away options for customers. Concession holders at the Ritter tea rooms at Roe Valley Country Park have been informed that they are able to reopen for takeaways. We are working with these concession holders to facilitate full reopening of the cafes from 3 July (subject to their preparedness).
- Toilet facilities are open at all DAERA Country Parks, including Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn with the exception of the Dross bay toilets at Castle Archdale Country Park – awaiting legionaries work (other toilets in Castle Archdale Country Park are open).
- We are working towards reopening of visitor attractions, such as visitor centres and museums in Country Parks, from 3 July.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- The Public Bill Committee at Westminster is expected to resume scrutiny of the Bill on 7 July. The Assembly debate on the Legislative Consent Motion is scheduled for 30 June.

Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

FISHERIES UPDATE

Covid 19 Update

Fisheries - Sea Fishing Sector

- On 3 April 2020 the Minister announced that the Department would proceed with a scheme of financial support for the sea fish catching sector.
- Letters of Invitation to apply for the scheme were issued to 171 vessel owners and 81 letters of ineligibility were issued during April.
- After appeals, a total of 172 Letters of Offer and claim forms have been issued, with 168 returned to date. As of 24th June, the Department has made payments to 168 vessel owners totalling £1,308,000.

Aquaculture Sector

- The Aquaculture Financial Assistance Scheme was announced by the Minister on 26 May. This funding is to be delivered through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Programme.
- On 29 May, letters of Invitation to apply to the Scheme were issued to 19 potential eligible businesses. A further 38 letters were issued to potential ineligible businesses to advise of the appeal mechanism.
- While 11 electronic applications have been received to date (25th June 2020), we await the supporting information (accounts and sales information) from a number of businesses. It is hoped that the first letters of offer will be issued to eligible applicants by 3 July. The Scheme will remain open until the end of June.

Lough Neagh Fishery

- There are signs that some sectors within Europe are beginning to reopen and some limited fishing may return on Lough Neagh in July to meet this reduced market.
- EMFF Regulation 2020/560 has recently been amended particularly Article 33 which may provide possible funding opportunities for Lough Neagh Commercial eel fishermen who at this time are unable to work during the short season 1st May until end of October.
- DAERA officials have confirmed that Lough Neagh commercial eel fishermen would be eligible for financial assistance under this amendment. There have been two meetings held with the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Cooperative Society (LNFCS) to discuss the proposals for such a scheme. Work is still ongoing between DAERA officials and the LNFCS to look at the various issues and compile the necessary data. A further meeting has been scheduled for Friday 26 June.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- The Report Stage of the Bill in the House of Lords concluded on 24 June 2020. At Report Stage, Lords agreed on a number of amendments to the Bill as introduced.
- The Third Reading in the House of Lords will take place on 1 July 2020.

- The Bill is expected to have its First Reading in the House of Commons on 2 July 2020.

Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformation Group

Covid 19 update

RURAL AFFAIRS DIVISION

RURAL AFFAIRS RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Rural Affairs continues to focus on payments processing and supporting partners. Work continues on the draft Rural Policy Framework. Work also continues in the DAERA DIRECT Offices both in offices and via home working.

DAERA DIRECT OFFICES

Admin staff continue to work in the 12 DAERA Direct offices on essential services, whilst maintaining social distancing, on a rota basis. The remainder are working from home on PCs and laptops, with secure access to the relevant DAERA databases such as APHIS, NIFAIS and CIS. Recovery plans are being developed to allow more staff to return to the offices and increase capacity.

TACKLING RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION (TRPSI)

These TRPSI funded initiatives continue to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers. To date, under the Coronavirus Community Fund (CFNI) 164 rural organisations have been supported in total with £464,158 awarded. Some 74 of these have been funded from DAERA's £200k contribution agreed by the DAERA Minister. In addition, 19 organisations (10 rural) ineligible for support by CFNI, with eligible projects, have now been grant aided through a partnership arrangement between DAERA, DFC and the Rural Community Network, receiving £56.5k in total.

PROJECT STRATUM

DfE lead on Project Stratum. The tender has now closed (5/5/20) and the bids are being technically appraised and assessed by a specialist team in DfE. At this point, the project is still on target to issue a contract this financial year.

RURAL SUPPORT

Rural Support continue to deal with calls and offer support. An on-line resources hub is in development for the farming community and sectors that support the community.

Rural Support are currently adequately resourced to deal with the increase and DAERA officials continue to liaise with them on a very regular basis. The table below provides a comparison of calls to the Rural Support Helpline between 2019 and 2020.

	2019	2020
Jan	39	68
Feb	31	34

March	33	85
April	34	128
May	40	64
June	37	30 * (1 st to 19 th June)

ROLE OF RURAL COMMUNITY TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP (RCTP'S)

The RCTP's continue to work in a very effective partnership approach with local Councils and Health Trusts, in delivering services to rural dwellers.

By 31 May, 10,500 individual food parcels have been delivered to vulnerable rural dwellers and another 8,195 parcels have been delivered to hubs for onward transmission to households. RCTP's have made 11,825 telephone contacts and these have resulted in 6,879 individual actions such as signposting, onward referral and inclusion into the food parcel scheme.

SPRING SOCIAL PRESCRIBING PROJECT

Some 4,735 contacts have been made to vulnerable people and 1,393 of these people have received other forms of support such as food and medicines.

FARM FAMILIES HEALTH CHECK PROGRAMME (FFHCP) - COVID-19 RESPONSE

Contact made with 286 people in the Northern, Western, Southern and South Eastern Trust areas who are aged 70+. Some 257 of these people have received support and advice.

RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT SERVICE

Councils have identified the Rural Support Networks as delivery partners and all are involved in the community response. DAERA officials continue to meet with the Rural Support Networks on a fortnightly basis to provide support and advice.

In terms of practical activity on the ground, RSN's have been involved in a wide range of community initiatives including the following:

Rural Support Networks Activity.

- 2400 food parcels delivered in conjunction with Community Transport, Easilink and The Loughs Agency
- £46,300 funding provided to 80 community groups for PPE and sanitiser
- £9700 funding provided to provide Covid 19 assistance and Foodbanks
- 4 groups assisted with funding applications
- 1500 NIHE Activity Packs delivered for 6 to 10 year olds
- 880 gloves, 10 litres of sanitiser and 200 washable face masks delivered
- 54 Wellness packs delivered
- 400 activity packs delivered to senior groups
- 24 families support with connectivity
- 600 E bulletins issued detailing funding programmes, covid 19 assistance
- 13 people received Zoom training

- 818 volunteers active in communities
- Facebook posts with a total reach of 11000

RURAL POLICY – RECOVERY

All working groups have now been contacted to review their working group reports in light of Covid-19. The main emerging issue was access to broadband and this has been reiterated in the framework. Given the current pandemic we are examining the possibility of carrying out an online consultation, this will allow us to go out sooner than planned.

EU LEADER PROGRAMME AND TOURISM

RAD continue to monitor progress on the LEADER and Tourism measures. Issues on access for projects remain as previously advised. The Department is aware that many contractors are now back on site or planning to go back on site.

Payments continue to be processed in line with easements set out within EU Commission guidance.

DfE has established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group and Working Group to put in place the structures that will help support recovery and prepare the industry to respond when consumer demand ultimately returns. The Department has representatives sitting on both Groups. The Department has also established a Tourism Recovery Advisory Group; the next meeting is due to take place on 7 July. The Advisory Group will work collaboratively to provide a cohesive response to the issues facing the tourism sector in NI and to encourage the development of a recovery framework that has Green Growth as the pathway to sustainable development.

PROCESSING OF GRANT AID CLAIMS

RAD continue to process claims and make payments relating to TRPSI and LEADER.

Rural Development Programme

Programme	1 st March to 2 nd June		3 rd June to 26 th June	
	No of Payments	Amount	No of Payments	Amount
LEADER	142	£4,519,596.25	20	£558,082.24
Running Costs to LAGS	22	£634,245.40	6	£331,459.28
TOURISM	7	£1,141,399.95	0	0
Farm Business Improvement	12	£1,250,179.00	2	£62,541.00
Other RDP Schemes	9	£69,309.84	1	£41,196.10

Tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation (TRPSI)

Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme 2019		Rural Business Development Grant Scheme 2019	
No. Claims Paid 16/3/2020 12/6/2020	Grant Amount Paid 16/3/20 -12/06/2020	No. Claims Paid 16/3/2020 12/06/2020	Grant Amount Paid 16/3/20 -12/06/2020
467	£575,268.57	126	£420,815.01

Local Community Development Support Service Programme:

£173,000 paid to Rural Support Networks to cover the period 1 April to 30 June 2020.
£70,000 paid in micro grant management fees for the 19/20 scheme.

Forests & Country Parks

Toilet facilities in DAERA forest and country parks reopened on 15 June.

On 15 June 2020, the NI Executive agreed to bring forward the date for the re-opening of caravan parks, camping sites and self-catering tourist accommodation to 26 June 2020. In line with the Executive's decision, Forest Service is re-opening its caravanning and camping facilities on 26 June 2020. Specific risk management procedures have been developed, adopting a precautionary approach based on guidance available.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

No significant change from the position last week.

Questions from Members to DAERA on COVID-19 Update 18 June 2020

Briefing Subject/Area	Question	Answer
Food and Farming		
Agri-food Industry and Horticulture	<p>How is the Minister planning to distribute the COVID market intervention funding?</p> <p>Will beef and sheep primary producers be included in this support package?</p> <p>What 'departmental data' and/or data from other sources does the Minister intend to use to guide the distribution of the COVID funding?</p>	<p>When a final decision is made on the allocation of the funding it is the Minister's intention to ensure that it is administered with ease and at pace so that businesses get the funding into their bank accounts quickly to address cash flow concerns.</p> <p>The aim is to avoid an overly bureaucratic system which would create additional paperwork and complexity for farmers.</p> <p>The delivery mechanisms will rely on data the Department already holds, or is readily available from other sources.</p> <p>Appropriate governance arrangements, and accountability for expenditure of public money will be put in place.</p> <p>From factual monitoring of market data and farm gate prices Minister Poots is aware that losses have occurred in the beef and sheep sectors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is his intention to ensure the funding is targeted towards those most in need and those sectors that can clearly demonstrate tangible losses as a result of COVID-19.</p> <p>Departmental data that is being used to guide the design, allocation and distribution of COVID-19 funding includes, Agricultural Market reporting data, livestock movement records, and analysis from the Farm Business Survey.</p> <p>Minister Poots and officials have also consulted with numerous industry representatives and stakeholders, all have been encouraged to supply factual evidence and data relating to the impact and losses incurred by each of their sectors</p> <p>The Department of Health are the lead Department in relation to COVID-19 restrictions,</p>

	<p>Has DAERA any clarity on the lifting of lockdown restrictions of Open Farms?</p>	<p>however, from discussions with DoH officials, 'Open Farms' can be classed as a Visitor Attraction.</p> <p>Amendments to the COVID-19 Regulations are in development which will allow individuals to travel for recreational purposes from 3 July and this will cover travel to and from Open Farms as a Visitor Attraction.</p> <p>It is the responsibility of each individual business to ensure the safety of visitors, staff and anyone else who enters the premises e.g. suppliers. They must comply with PHA and HSENI guidelines, relating to social distancing, cleaning and hand washing facilities.</p>
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