

AERA Committee Meeting Update – Thursday 11 June 2020

Food & Farming Group Input

Covid-19 update

Single Application

- On 30 March 2020, the Minister confirmed that the closing date for the 2020 Single Application would remain as 15 May 2020. However, the period during which farmers can amend claims without penalty has been extended to 09 June 2020.
- The Direct Payments to Farmers Amendment Date (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (NI) 2020 will provide for this extension. They were made under the negative resolution procedure and came into operation on 31 May.
- The deadline for the Single Application has now passed. By midnight on 15 May, 24,494 applications had been received compared with 24,432 in 2019. An additional 170 late applications were received in 2019. To 1 June, 65 late applications had been received.
- A derogation has been announced to remove the Greening crop diversification requirement for 2020 because of adverse weather conditions earlier in the year. This is in line with action taken by England, Scotland and Wales. Other Greening requirements remain.
- The Direct Payments to Farmers (Crop Diversification Derogation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 will provide for this derogation. They were made under the confirmatory procedure and were approved by the Assembly on 19 May 2020.
- All inspections have been paused until at least mid-May. Consideration is being given to how these can begin again on a phased basis whilst minimising any potential risk to staff or customers. Whistleblower inspections have recommenced in relation to potential breaches of cross compliance, site visits are considered on a case by case basis.
- The fourth Tranche of the Environmental Farming Scheme Higher level, opened for applications on 24 April 2020 for 3 weeks. 966 applications were received by the deadline on 15 May. Applications are being prioritised.

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 – On Friday 22 May 2020 the AERA Committee received an update from Minister Poots on the £25m funding for market interventions to support Farm and Horticultural Businesses and sought the views of Committee members. Officials are also engaging with industry stakeholder representatives to discuss how best to allocate the funding to those impacted most by Covid 19.

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 £3.37/kg and it is expected that forthcoming statistics will show further increases as weekly quotes have been improving and are now 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 (2 June) for milk products showed an increase of 0.1% from the previous auction (skim milk powder down 0.5%, whole milk powder up 2.1%, cheddar down 5.3%, butter down 4.4%). Lakeland dairies has announced a base price of 23p/litre for April 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 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 milk), Glanbia Ireland (0.5p/litre for April milk) and Aurivo (0.75p/litre for April 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.

4. Financial pressures continue to impact across supply chains as markets adapt to the changing trading environment. For example, loss of food service markets, certain export markets, reduced productivity in processing plants and increases in some input costs like animal feed. Industry has called for financial support measures including grants, rates relief, loans and EU (CMO) schemes.

Position – DAERA continues to work closely with industry to assess the potential impacts on the supply chain, and to explore mitigation measures if required. DAERA has announced a £25m funding support package.

5. Many horticulture businesses producing and selling spring bedding plants, cut flowers and ornamentals rely on sales at this time of year. There is a narrow window for sales and a short shelf life for the product with 60% of annual sales occurring in spring.

Position - Enabling people to visit garden centres while remaining safe, has provided a much needed injection of cash to these businesses and their suppliers and has gone some way towards helping the sector recoup some of its loses. DAERA Officials continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on the horticulture sector to assess the level of financial support required.

6. 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.

- The majority of the education programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) have concluded for the 2019/20 academic year, with assessment and examination marks currently being verified with the external examiners and awarding bodies.
- The Minister will deliver an address to all CAFRE students at an online student engagement event scheduled for circulation on 19 June 2020. As a result of the current COVID-19 restrictions the annual graduation ceremonies due to be held at the end of June at each of the CAFRE Campuses have been postponed. However, it is intended that the events will be rearranged at a more appropriate time, depending on Government advice on large group gatherings, to celebrate the students' success in the presence of their friends and family.
- CAFRE Knowledge Advisory Service Advisers and Technologists are available 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. Technical articles, videos and webinars have been made available online and promoted through social media channels to support those sectors of the agri-food industry most impacted by COVID-19.
- CAFRE are progressing the development of recovery plans, in line with the Executive's five stage plan on the lifting of the COVID-19 restrictions, for the future delivery of education programmes during the next academic year and the enhanced provision of knowledge advisory programmes to the agri-food industry.
- CAFRE's residential facilities continue to be used by the Department of Health as part of their contingency planning with health workers using Enniskillen and Greenmount Campuses for overnight accommodation.

Update on Essential Legislation

- The UKG Agriculture Bill has moved to the House of Lords where its Second Reading will be on 10 June 2020.

Veterinary Service & Animal Health Group

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.
- Following the reported development of Covid-19 clusters in meat establishments, 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.
- **Current Position**
- In line with government guidance on Covid-19, Agri Food and Feed Inspectorate are preparing for the resumption of certain aspects of physical on and off farm inspections for food and feed safety controls, to begin in June.

- Remote inspection work is also being progressed across a range of food and feed safety official controls including the dairy, meat and egg sectors.

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.
- Following implementation of revised temporary measures on 30/4/20, which included an exemption from the requirement to test young calves under 180 days old, the number of herds and animals receiving a bovine TB test has increased. This temporary exemption permits the safer handling of cattle herds and improved public safety.
- **Current Position**
- At the height of the Covid-19 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 25th May 2020, TB tests were completed for 118% of herds and 120% of animals were tested when compared to the equivalent week in May 2019. This indicates that TB herd testing is currently exceeding 2019 levels and that the backlog from April is starting to reduce.
- In line with the steady increase in the total number of herds and animals undergoing TB tests, the percentage of 42 – 180 day old animals not presented for bTB testing is increasing week by week.
- In the week commencing 4th May 2020, 6% of 42-180 day old animals were not presented, increasing to 9% in week commencing 11th May and 16% in week commencing 18th May.
- VSAHG officials continue to monitor the implementation 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. In addition, all commodities from the United Kingdom (UK) to China will be accepted on the basis of a digitally transmitted copy of the Export Health Certificate (EHC) issued in advance of the arrival of the consignment.
- Such arrangements help to minimise the need for face-to-face interaction between private veterinary practitioners, exporters and DAERA staff.
- **Current Position**

- Negotiations in relation to further easements are ongoing with up to nine countries.

Animal Welfare

• Zoo Funding

- The Department is continuing to consider the development of a possible funding support scheme for licensed zoo establishments in Northern Ireland. On 29 May, it issued a detailed questionnaire to these establishments in order to establish an evidence base for providing support. The deadline for completion of the questionnaire was 5 June and the Department is currently analysing the responses received.
- Officials also met with representatives from the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums to discuss a potential support scheme here.

• Coronavirus Amendment

- The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (NI) Regulations 2020 have been amended to permit individuals to leave home to attend to the care or welfare of animals. This will provide the owners of companion animals with the welcome clarification that they can travel to access a range of services, including boarding, stabling, grooming and can exercise and train their animals. The relevant amendment came into force on 7 June.

Disposal of Animal By-Products

- VSAHG officials have recommenced inspections of high risk animal by-product establishments. These inspections will be carried out in accordance with social distancing guidelines and in consultation with the management of the establishments.

Update on 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.

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. This required secondary legislation made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981. The Statutory Rule was made and laid at the

Assembly on Monday 4 May 2020 and came into operation on 5 May 2020. The Scheme is known as the Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) Scheme (NI) 2020.

- A motion to confirm the Scheme must be debated by the Assembly within 3 months, which in effect is by summer recess. The date for the Motion will be determined by the Business Committee, at some date subsequent to the report on the SR by the Examiner of Statutory Rules, and then consideration by the AERA Committee.
- The Examiner of Statutory Rules has alerted the Department to an incorrect reference in the definition of “length overall” in Article 2 of that Rule. The Department made an amending regulation (the Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) **(Amendment)** Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 on 4 June 2020 which comes into operation on 8 June 2020. This was laid at the Assembly Business Office on 5 June 2020. The amendment has no material effect on the administration of the Scheme.
- Letters of Invitation to apply for the scheme were issued to 166 vessel owners and 81 letters of ineligibility were issued during April.
- 166 Letters of Offer and Claim Forms have been issued, with 155 returned to date. As of 5th June, the Department has made payments to 146 vessel owners totalling £1,150,000.

Aquaculture Sector

- On 26 May during a visit to Movanagher Fish Farm, the Minister announced a financial assistance scheme of up to £360,000 to support the aquaculture industry. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme will be used to deliver the funding.
- A grant payment, covering the three month period, March to May 2020, based on up to 50% of the income lost from sales of aquaculture products due to COVID-19, will be made to eligible businesses. The average monthly sales over the past three years for each business will be used as the baseline. The maximum payment per undertaking will be capped at £27,600.
- 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 38 potential ineligible businesses to advise of the appeal mechanism. It is anticipated that completed applications and supporting documentation will come in w/c 9 June.

Public Angling Estate

- The DoH has confirmed that private angling enterprises can now open. However under the regulations these businesses may not sell or hire angling equipment. Businesses have been alerted.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- The next stage (Report) of the Bill in the House of Lords will begin on 22 June 2020.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group

ENVIRONMENT UPDATE

Covid 19 Update

Waste Management Collection, Storage and Processing

- As at 5 June 2020, there were 63 Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) open across Northern Ireland with some further sites expected to re-open in a phased manner over the coming weeks.

Maintaining Drinking Water Quality

- NIEA and 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.
- 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.

Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

- DAERA has worked with Northern Ireland Environment Link to issue a second survey to get an update of the impact of COVID-19 on the eNGO sector. Responses to the survey are due by the 8 June.

Country Parks and Nature Reserves

- DAERA and many other organisations including councils began to reopen the car parks at many of their outdoor properties on 27 May. The reopening coincided with very good weather and easements in COVID-19 restrictions allowing groups of up to 6 people to meet outside.
- Advice for people to plan ahead, check what facilities were available before travelling and to be sensible about how far they travel was ignored by many.
- Pressures were experienced across DAERA properties and other outdoor sites including: sites exceeding reasonable capacity; breaching of social distancing; high litter levels; anti-social behaviours; fires; and problem parking. Concerns have also been raised about facilities, in particular toilets, remaining closed.
- DAERA are actively considering risks and mitigation options in relation to the reopening of public toilet facilities in our Country Parks, however we cannot commit to a precise opening date at this time.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- The Public Bill Committee scrutinising the Bill at Westminster suspended all activity until further notice on 19 March 2020. Although not yet confirmed it is now considered likely that Committee Stage will resume before summer recess.

Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformations Group

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.

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) 154 rural organisations have been supported in total with £419,462 awarded. Some 74 of these have been funded from DAERA's £200k contribution agreed by the DAERA Minister. Also, 13 organisations (7 rural) deemed ineligible by CFNI have now been grant aided through a partnership arrangement between DAERA, DFC and the Rural Community Network, receiving £42,635 in total, an average of £3,279.

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

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.

Some 3,804 individual food parcels have been delivered to vulnerable rural dwellers and another 4,361 parcels have been delivered to hubs for onward transmission to households. RCTP's have made 7,016 telephone contacts and these have resulted in 3,833 individuals receiving support including signposting, onward referral and inclusion into the food parcel scheme.

SPRING SOCIAL PRESCRIBING PROJECT

Some 3,301 contacts have been made to vulnerable people and 673 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:

- 1500 food box referrals
- 762 food parcels delivered
- 600 boxes of PPE gloves, 700 disposable aprons, 200 face masks and 30 pump bottles hand sanitiser delivered
- 120 sensory packs supplied to Autism group
- £7,400 Small Grant funding provided to 44 community groups
- £2,000 of hardship funding provided
- 1070 volunteers identified and currently providing assistance
- 370 volunteers involved in Resilience fund
- 906 referrals Mental Health Awareness week
- 126 telephone contacts with shielded residents

RURAL POLICY – RECOVERY

Work continues on a draft Rural Policy Framework. We still intend to go to consultation later this year.

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 the majority of contractors are now back on site.

Payments continue to be processed using the easements granted by the EU Commission.

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 is also establishing a Tourism Recovery Advisory Group that will inform and support the work of both the Steering and Working Groups. The Advisory Group will play a key role in contributing to the Tourism sector's recovery post Covid-19. The Advisory Group will concentrate particularly on the emerging issues, facing the Department, in relation to the rural tourism sector. It will 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 30 th April 2020		1 st May to 2nd June 2020	
	No of Payments	Amount	No of Payments	Amount
LEADER	93	£2,973,251.84	50	£1,551,219.41
Running Costs to LAGS	17	£561,249.45	5	£72,995.95
TOURISM	5	£781,770.40	2	£359,569.55

There are an additional 9 LEADER project payments valued at £175,224.01 are being processed for payment.

Tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation (TRPSI)

Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme 2019			Rural Business Development Grant Scheme		
No. Claims Paid	Grant Amount Paid		No. Claims Paid	Grant Amount Paid	
16/3/2020 - 29/5/2020	16/3/20 - 29/5/2020		16/3/2020 - 29/5/2020	16/3/20 - 29/5/2020	
424	£524,644.45		119	£394,926.16	

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.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

Covid 19 update

AFBI Testing

- AFBI in collaboration with Queens University Belfast and Ulster University are supporting the Department of Health's efforts in respect of Covid-19 testing
- An SLA with the Belfast Trust has now been signed.
- Live testing commenced on 21 May 2020.
- As at 4 June, AFBI are still being sent 94 samples (one microplate) per day for testing.
- Tests have been run and results provided in line with agreed targets.
- Testing capacity remains at 200 samples per day, for 10 days, rising to 500 for 7 days and ultimately 1000 per day (full capacity) thereafter.
- The release of staff to work on Covid-19 testing is currently planned so as not to impact on the priority animal health and food safety testing programmes. This will, however, be kept under close review.

STAFF ENGAGEMENT DIVISION/COVID COMMS TEAM

The Department held its first online 'Take a Break' session on Wednesday 27 May. The session on Wellbeing and Resilience was delivered by Anne McMurray, an independent facilitator who specialises in leadership and organisation development. Polls were used throughout the event to record the challenges currently being posed to staff. More than 400 staff joined the event and the feedback was extremely positive. It is anticipated that a further sessions will be available to Staff in June.

The Permanent Secretary continued his series of staff engagement sessions with a further Webinar on 27 May.

Preparation for the resumption of Mentoring Circles is underway and it is hoped these will recommence in the near future.

The Task and Finish Group on Resilience and Wellbeing continue to meet (via Webex) on a weekly basis, working to identify ways of providing support to our Departmental colleagues working both at home and in offices/Plants.

Questions from Members to DAERA on COVID-19 Update 4 June 2020

Briefing Subject/Area	Question	Answer
Waste Management	Has the department seen any change in household recycling behaviours since the reopening of Recycling Centres, compared to pre-Covid behaviours?	<p>As there are no official statistics yet published for household recycling rates during this pandemic we cannot definitively identify whether there has been any impact on recycling behaviours as compared to pre-Covid behaviours.</p> <p>The Department have however been involved in a communications campaign to continue to drive positive recycling behaviour change throughout this crisis which included, highlighting the importance of householders continuing to recycle, the important role of waste workers and the need to protect and respect them. This behaviour change communications campaign will continue to ensure the good work the Department have done in driving up recycling rates over the past decade and in influencing positive recycling behaviours continues.</p> <p>Whilst many HWRC's are still operating on a restricted basis, kerbside collection services have been maintained through effective working between the Department and our local councils which has ensured recycling largely continued as normal practice with householders being advised to store any larger items until HWRC's were reopened.</p> <p>With more people working from home or furloughed, anecdotal evidence suggests a rise in recycling at the kerbside, coupled with an overall rise in household waste arisings.</p> <p>It is too early to tell if this will translate into higher recycling rates but we will continue to monitor the situation closely.</p>
Water Monitoring	Can the department provide any update in relation to the current quality of freshwater bodies?	<p>The Department ceased all statutory river and lake water quality monitoring on 23 March 2020. However a small investigation was undertaken at the end of May to assess possible impacts of lockdown on water quality. River invertebrate monitoring was undertaken at nine sites. A mix of Urban and Non-Urban/Agricultural situated sites was used. Only two sites, both urban, showed a significant change from previous surveys; one improved and the other declined.</p> <p>It is difficult to draw conclusions on the impact of the Covid19 lockdown on water quality from a small one-off survey. In addition the prolonged spell of dry weather over the lockdown period will have an</p>

		influence. However, based on this investigation, it appears that there has not been any step change in water quality as a result of the lockdown.
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