

AERA Committee Meeting Update - Wednesday 29 April 2020

Food & Farming Group Input

Food and Farming Group

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. Northern Ireland is the only region in the United Kingdom which makes direct payments in October. Any extension to the application period could delay payments in October 2020. However, the period during which farmers can amend claims without penalty has been extended to 09 June 2020.
- To 22 April, over 11, 700 had submitted their SAF, over 44% higher than the same period last year.
- DAERA Direct offices are closed to the public. Area-based Schemes Division staff are working from home to provide an enhanced SAF Advisory Service. Action is being taken to give additional staff the ability to work from home to ensure continuity of this service. A service has also been put in place for DAERA staff to submit Single Applications online for applicants who have no broadband or access to I.T. equipment who would have availed of a Digital Assistance appointment in their local DAERA Direct office in the previous scheme year. This service is also available for farmers who wish to transfer payment entitlements.
- 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 will be made under the confirmatory procedure and, subject to the necessary clearances, the intention is for them to be considered by the Committee on 14 May and by the Assembly on 19 May.

Covid 19 – Current key issues for Agri-food sector

1. While supply chains are still working effectively there remains significant concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly as fear of contracting the virus remains within workforce. Calls have been made by industry for Covid-19 testing to be made available for key workers within the Agri-food sector to ensure adequate numbers of staff are available to maintain the food supply chain.

Position – DAERA raised this request through the C3 structures and FSA also raised this directly with DoH. DAERA is working with agri-food stakeholders to identify the type and number of key workers (private and public sector) that could be tested to help inform Government planning exercise. NIFDA estimate output from the sector remains at around 100% with levels of absenteeism reported as having reduced to 8.5% on average (22/4/20) from a high of 14% (3/4/20). PHA issued further guidance on 22/4/20 in relation to the Coronavirus National Testing Programme for frontline workers who are having to self-isolate due to having coronavirus-like symptoms or because a member of their

household has symptoms. This information included who is eligible for testing and how they should go about arranging it, which DAERA officials have shared with Agri-Food stakeholders.

2. In addition there was concern at the lack of specific advice for agri-food sector workers on Covid H&S measures and calls were made for suitable protocols to be developed. NIFDA and NIMEA have developed and implemented protocols with input from FSA, HSE, DAERA and other agencies.

Position – Businesses are each putting their own measures in place to protect and reassure staff in line with current guidance on the GOV.UK website. DAERA is continuing to monitor the situation and impact, and will liaise with NIFDA, NIMEA and Food Processors.

3. Agriculture price slump or product flow disruption - Large and sudden fall in incomes is a significant threat to otherwise viable farm businesses. Farm incomes could fall due to covid-19 related slump in market prices, or if farmers can't get product to market or can't get feed, and animals have to be culled for welfare purposes. No problems with flow of product from or to (non-horticultural) farms has arisen yet. The most likely source of disruption to flow of produce from farms is food processing production lines having to close due to high levels of absenteeism (currently 8.5% on average). Industry representatives have raised concerns that a sharp fall in beef price is on the way. The latest market statistics shows beef prices had been stable since the beginning of the year but have started to fall. The quoted prices for beef this week are around 17p/kg (5%) lower than those of five weeks ago. Lakeland dairies has announced a base price of 23.75p/litre for March Milk (down 1.5p/litre on February), whereas, Aurivo has announced a base price of 24p/litre (down 1.25p/litre on February).

Position – DAERA is continuing to monitor market conditions, liaise with DEFRA and other DA's, and work is ongoing to develop schemes to support farmers if significant problems arise.

4. Financial pressures are increasing rapidly in businesses 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 is calling for financial support measures and Government have made available grants, rates relief, and loans

Position – DAERA are working closely with industry and banks to assess the potential impacts on the supply chain, to keep products moving where possible and to explore mitigation measures where this is not possible.

5. While supply chains have been functioning, there remains the potential for a build-up of livestock on farms (particularly in the intensive sectors) and or products e.g. milk. A combination of reduced processing speed (due to implementing social distancing measures in plants), lack of market outlets (including for animal by products) and lack of storage availability for finished product means that pressure could be put back on farms to hold stock and/ or dump product.

Position – DAERA are alive to all the issues and are in regular contact with industry representatives and with DEFRA and the other Devolved Administrations to assess risks and explore options.

6. Many horticulture businesses producing and selling spring bedding plants, cut flowers and ornamentals rely on sales at this time of year through Garden Centres, DIY stores and other outlets that are currently closed. There is a narrow window for sales and a short shelf life for

the product with 60% of annual sales occurring in spring. These businesses face huge financial loss.

Position - Minister Poots has asked for Executive colleagues to consider how sales of such produce could be facilitated by for example, re-opening garden centres. This would not only contribute to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the population but also save many otherwise viable businesses. DAERA is exploring what support can be provided to the ornamental horticulture sector.

7. Industry raised concerns regarding Brexit, stating that they are struggling to cope with the challenges of both the current Covid situation and the expectation from UK Government that Brexit will continue as planned. Businesses have called for a 'pause' to current Brexit plans. DAERA informed businesses that current UK Government position is that Brexit is continuing as planned, and DAERA too are not immune to this.

Position - Minister has been made aware of industry concern regarding additional pressure of Brexit.

8. 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 processing capacity. This would limit not only the amount of product available but also have knock on effects at farm level, e.g. animal welfare issues due to build-up of livestock or non-collection of milk.

Position – DAERA are reprioritising workstreams in light of the pressures created by Covid 19.

9. NI livestock markets took the decision to shut voluntarily (initially for 2 weeks) in an attempt to raise the importance of social distancing among farmers. This followed continued high numbers of farmers attending markets despite warnings and pleas from farming unions. Other means of sale have been explored including virtual sales, buyer only markets and specialist sales.

Position - DAERA has worked with the markets to ensure livestock movements can be facilitated by a combination of Aphis on-line and telephony services. Robust operational protocols have been agreed that will permit the gradual and phased reintroduction of sales in a limited way for particular categories of livestock. A number of marts are planning to implement these protocols with sales w/c 27th April. During the past week some individual marts facilitated livestock trade through online video sales. These sales were well received and there was positive feedback from the PSNI in relation to implementation of the protocols.

College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)

- Education programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) are continuing with remote delivery of learning materials and currently all students are actively engaging with college lecturing staff to ensure the academic year is completed and students achieve their qualifications.
- 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.
- The European Innovation Partnership (EIP) scheme closed for applications on Monday 27 April 2020. EIP aims to support a collaborative approach between farmers, researchers, advisers and industry representative organisations to drive forward innovation uptake on-farm.

- Arrangements have been agreed to facilitate the use of CAFRE's residential facilities by the Department of Health as part of their contingency planning with a number of health workers already using Enniskillen and Greenmount Campuses for overnight accommodation.
- CAFRE have made available over 20,000 coveralls and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the Health and Social Care Trusts and colleagues in Veterinary Service Animal Health Group some of which have already been collected.

Rural Development Programme

- Officials are assessing the impacts of Covid-19 on Rural Development Programme schemes and considering advice from the European Commission. The DAERA website will be updated regularly. In the meantime, applications can continue to be made subject to individual scheme deadlines.

Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

- The Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment Food and Rural Affairs met on Monday 27th April. Ministers discussed hot topics in relation to Covid-19 and planning for the recovery phase including implications for the EU Exit transition period and challenges with delivery by 31 December 2020.

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.
- The pausing of routine food and feed inspections will, over time, impact on meeting targets for risk-based delivery of official controls. To mitigate, alternative methods to deliver checks on compliance with legislation are being developed in consultation with industry and the FSA NI.
- While routine food and feed inspections have paused, essential work including the sampling of raw milk and eggs for the National Residue Control Plan (NCP) and inspections of raw drinking milk facilities continues.
- FSA NI has agreed further flexibilities in relation to meat and poultry inspections.

Current Position

- All slaughter house establishments are working normally and full throughput is being facilitated.
- Essential sampling work in compliance with the National Residue Control Plan (NRCP) sampling is on track to be fully completed for the month of April.
- FSA NI has approved the emergency authorisation of suitably qualified individuals to carry out official controls and reduced official attendance in low capacity establishments. In relation to poultry inspections, ante mortem inspections can now be conducted on a representative sample of a flock, rather than on every load received.

Bovine TB Programme

- On 30/3/20 the Minister moved to update the approach to bovine TB (bTB) testing. In general, bTB testing should not take place except in exceptional circumstances, which are based upon the primacy of public health requirements.
- In a further move on 9/4/20, the Minister announced that herd restrictions would not come into effect until 35 days after a test has become overdue. This is an extension of 28 days from the existing grace period of 7 days and is intended to **help those herds that are not currently under a TB restriction to continue to trade as normally as possible during these difficult times.**
- Until further advised, keepers will not be referred to the paying agency for overdue TB tests if they and/or their Private Veterinary Practitioner (PVP) advise DAERA that the test could not be completed during the testing window for reasons associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Bovine TB surveillance is continuing for all slaughtered cattle in meat plants and through submissions of samples to the Agri-Food and Bio Sciences Institute (AFBI) laboratories.

Current Position

- VSAHG has received requests from industry for further changes to TB testing rules in order to maximise the levels of TB testing and food production. It should be noted that currently, TB testing levels have decreased by around 55% compared to same period last year.
- Officials are actively considering further changes to TB testing rules in order to facilitate safe testing and the essential movement of cattle. Such measures must be proportionate and take into account the long term impacts for disease control and international trade. DAERA's approach will continue to be based on the advice of the Public Health Agency.

DAERA Offer of Respiratory Units

- Veterinary Service has made an offer to provide 30 powered respirator units to local health trusts to protect frontline health workers when dealing with high-risk COVID-19 patients.

Current Position

- Thirty powered respiratory units were delivered to Belfast City Hospital on 23 April.

Trade Export Certification

- Trade Programme officials continue to work with UK government – Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) on the development of contingency plans for third country export certification to streamline the process and facilitate remote working. As these arrangements require bilateral negotiations with many third countries, this area of work is both sensitive and challenging.

Current Position

- A number of easements have now been agreed with several third countries and will be implemented as soon as possible.
- Contingency measures have been agreed for exports to Great Britain and the European Union which require export health certification by authorised veterinary inspectors (AVIs) in private veterinary practices.
- In both of the above, all relevant documentation will now, where at all possible, be provided electronically to minimise the need for face-to-face interaction between exporters, AVIs and DAERA staff, whilst continuing to work with delivery partners to provide veterinary certification to support trade.
- Information on the changes will be issued to exporters and certifying officers in advance of the changes being implemented.

Import Controls

- Essential official imports controls at Northern Ireland's ports continue to be delivered to ensure that disease risks from imported goods, animals and plant material are minimised.

Current Position

- Officials have engaged with authorities across the UK to agree low-risk easements for EU import procedures to enable business to continue when social distancing is necessary.
- The significant reduction in domestic and international flights has permitted an increased focus on the risk of disease from parcels imported from overseas.

Epizootic/TSEs Surveillance and Response to Suspects

- VSAHG maintains capacity to investigate and respond to potential outbreaks of epizootic disease.
- Carcase testing for Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs) including bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) continues.
- Any suspect BSE cattle will be investigated as a requirement for the continuation of BSE Negligible Risk status for Northern Ireland.

Disposal of Animal By-Products and Fallen Stock

- While there is currently sufficient rendering capacity for the disposal of animal by-products, industry has reported insufficient storage capacity for an accumulation of tallow and hides. This issue has arisen because of the downturn in international markets for these products. VSAHG officials continue to liaise with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and industry representatives to facilitate a solution.
- In the event of significant disruption to current rendering capacity, contingency plans for the disposal of fallen stock have been developed. Officials continue to engage with industry and NIEA to monitor the situation.

Animal Welfare and Identification

- VSAHG's Welfare and Enforcement Branch continue to monitor welfare during transport issues. Serious welfare complaints and enforcement investigations are also continuing.
- Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division continue to respond to queries from animal organisations directing them to potential funding sources as well as government and business guidance.

Current Position

- Identification, Registration and Movement controls of farmed and non-farmed animals continue to be delivered with increased emphasis on the use of on-line and telephony facilities.

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 along with 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

- DAERA continues to deliver the key public health and environmental protection messages around waste management during the pandemic including bin hygiene, respect for key workers, the importance of recycling and warning against fly-tipping.
- Waste industry workers have been designated as key workers. This week the Minister issued a letter to all working in the waste industry thanking them for their continued work through such difficult times to ensure public health and the environment are protected.
- The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) are supporting DAERA, the Council's waste services and the waste sector through daily updates of the municipal waste tracker which makes provision for tracking kerbside collection services, household recycling centres and fly-tipping. Situation is stable with no significant changes to report.
- In supporting the waste sector, DAERA has published a number of Covid-19 Waste Regulatory Position Statements (RPS). These RPS only apply where it can be demonstrated that the requirement to operate outside the normal regulatory conditions (e.g. that specified in a waste authorisation for a temporary period) is as a direct consequence of disruption caused by Covid-19.
- RPS are designed to ensure continued protection of human health and the environment whilst assisting key industries, such as the waste and wastewater industries, to continue operating during the Covid-19 pandemic period. These regulatory positions statements are available to download at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/waste-regulations-temporary-covid-19-waste-regulatory-positions>
- DAERA has engaged with WRAP NI to help them develop communications around managing waste in the home, bin hygiene and contaminated waste to ensure their messaging is consistent with our own. A communications plan has been agreed with the Councils, delivered by Recycle Now and funded by DAERA. From 27 April 2020, a series of social media assets will be launched for Councils and the wider waste sector to use. These will focus on three main messages, bin hygiene; managing your waste (minimisation and prevention) and how to deal with waste that may potentially be contaminated.
- In addition to the social media assets, there will be two 30 second radio adverts, which will run on local stations for a four week period, reaching approximately 70% of the population of Northern Ireland. A flyer has also been developed covering all the key messages outlined above. It is anticipated that 800,000 flyers will be printed and delivered to households across Northern Ireland w/c 11 May 2020.
- DAERA is also continuing engagement at the UK four nations level across the range of waste management activities, including waste transfer and transport, processing and disposal.

Maintaining Drinking Water Quality

- NI Water's ongoing provision of safe drinking water and effective waste water treatment continues to be prioritised and regulated by NIEA and its Drinking Water Inspectorate.
- NI Water continues to maintain the required drinking water standards. It has implemented its major incident plan and Analytical Services Contingency Plan to manage its resources.
- Commercial (e.g. food producers) and public buildings (e.g. hospitals, nursing homes and hotels housing NHS staff) that use a private water supply continue to be regulated using a risk based approach and ongoing contact with the Drinking Water Inspectorate in the absence of monitoring due to social distancing restrictions.

Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

- The Department has continued to engage with eNGOs regarding the impact of the COVID-19 and further meetings between eNGO representatives and senior officials have been arranged.
- The Department is also engaging with other NI Departments and with other UK administrations to consider what COVID-19 related monies may be available and options for ways forward for the eNGO sector.

Country Parks and Nature Reserves

- NIEA visitor centres, cafes, mobile concessions and public toilet facilities remain closed. Where possible vehicle access to sites has also been closed. No significant incidents of note have occurred recently.
- NIEA has initiated correspondence to seek information from and engagement with, other key stakeholders to help inform, the partial and complete re-opening of outdoor recreation properties such as parks, nature reserves, walking routes and associated facilities in the future.
- This does not indicate an imminent change in restrictions, it simply helps us start the process of sharing information and considering the practicalities of any future reopening of sites and the potential to help distribute public pressure on the use of these properties and provide consistent messaging and coordinated information to the public.

Wildfires

- There continues to be a spate of wildfires in the countryside. NIEA are attending these incidents as required at the request of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. Additional communications have been issued urging people not to start fires in the countryside. The wildfires themselves are not Covid 19 related but have the potential for deployment of essential services.

Regulatory Position Statements

- Published Regulatory Position Statements relating to emissions monitoring, waste and the extension of existing cemetery sites can be accessed from the DAERA website at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/daeras-and-nieas-regulatory-response-covid-19>.

- The published Regulatory Position Statements have also been shared with the operators and organisations directly affected.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- The work of the Parliamentary Bill Committee will not resume until 28 April, at the earliest. The UK Parliament website indicates that all scheduled meetings of the Committee up to and including 5 May have been cancelled. Clarification is being sought.

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 will require secondary legislation made under section 15 of the Fisheries Act 1981. The SR has been drafted and DSO has examined the draft SR. Initial comments on the legislative process have been received and are currently being responded to. At present the SR is still on track for the end of April.
- Letters of Invitation to apply for the scheme were issued to 155 vessel owners on 22 April and 90 letters of ineligibility were issued on 23 April to the remaining active vessel owners
- The Scheme was considered by the AERA Committee on 9 April and the Committee raised queries that have been responded to.
- Some vessels continue to fish where there is a market for the catch but overall activity is greatly reduced due to the market collapse for fish.

Aquaculture Sector

- There has also been a severe drop in sales of aquaculture products as a result of COVID-19. DAERA officials have been gathering the relevant economic information to examine what measures might be necessary to support the aquaculture sector and how to deliver this. A submission, outlining a proposals for support to the aquaculture industry is being finalised and will be forwarded to the Minister for consideration shortly.
- Consideration is being given to the recent amendment to the European and Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), which provides the possibility of granting financial compensation to aquaculture farmers for the temporary suspension or reduction of production, where it is the consequence of the coronavirus outbreak.
- As a result of the drop in sales, increased stocking densities may increase welfare and disease issues. The Department continues to engage with the sector on this matter.

Inland Fisheries

- Lough Neagh Fishing Co-operative Society has suspended its fishing operations due to the markets closing down and also in response to concerns over the health and welfare of staff.

- The Department has considered what additional measures can be put in place to support the Lough Neagh fishermen, other than those already outlined by the Government. The fixed costs for these fishermen are not the same as sea fishermen (lower) and many are unlikely to reach the required income threshold. Therefore no additional help can be provided in respect of these.
- Any help for additional storage costs cannot be met under the current criteria for the EMFF programme, with the only possibility the provision of additional storage facilities which is not what is required at the moment. The Department is keeping the situation under review.
- Angling at the public angling estate waters remains closed and anglers have been advised to stay at home at this time.
- Further Inland Fisheries queries were raised by the Committee in week commencing 20 April and these have been responded to.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- Position remains the same as report last week, that is:
- DEFRA expects the Devolved Administrations to have had the Legislative Consent Motions debated in their respective assemblies before the Final Reading of the Bill in the first House at Westminster.
- The Minister laid the Legislative Consent Memorandum for the Fisheries Bill in the Business Office on 23 March 2020. No date has been scheduled for its Legislative Consent Motion in the Assembly.
- The dates for the Report Stage and Final Reading for the Fisheries Bill at Westminster have not yet been scheduled.
- Should Report Stage be delayed due to COVID-19/longer recess period (note: this has not been confirmed), this could impact on the timing of the Legislative Consent Motion in the Assembly.

Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformations Group

Covid 19 update Rural Affairs Division

Following the meeting of the AERA Committee meeting on 19th March the Committee asked for further briefing on the Rural Affairs remit. The information below sets out activity across Rural Affairs to ensure safety of staff, continuity of activity across existing Rural Development Programmes; refocusing of rural community supported activity towards Covid response; and, actions to protect customers and staff across the DAERA Direct network of 12 Offices.

RURAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

- Officials continue to monitor the COVID-19 Crisis situation closely. This is a very fluid situation and responses set out below are subject to change at short notice depending on the latest guidance from Government.
- Rural Affairs Division continues to work with a range of statutory and community and voluntary sector partners to provide support to rural communities and rural businesses. This support is primarily channelled through the EU 'LEADER' and Tourism programmes and the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme.
- Rural Affairs have taken the following general actions to respond to the impact of Covid 19 over the last 3 weeks:
 - a. Engaged with project partners to identify solutions to project delivery challenges and provide flexibility and guidance around operating rules where possible to maintain and sustain investment;
 - b. Redirected resources to project payments across EU LEADER, TOURISM and TRPSI schemes to ensure payment of funds to private businesses and community and voluntary sector projects and organisations;
 - c. Worked with Central and Local Government, statutory organisations and community and voluntary partners to identify issues, share information, and offer support; and,
 - d. Continued to prepare the draft Rural Policy Framework and consider emerging actions that could be brought forward as pilot projects in the Autumn that would assist rural businesses and communities recover.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

Rural Affairs continues to focus on payments processing and supporting partners. Work continues on the draft Rural Policy Framework.

DAERA DIRECT OFFICES

- On 26 March 2020, the Minister increased the measures in place to protect citizens and staff by ceasing all public facing direct services offered by DAERA Direct Offices.
- All customers must now conduct their business through DAERA Online services or, if appropriate, via the Cattle Registration Telephony line (0300 200 7855).
- Documents can still be delivered to a DAERA Direct office and left in a designated post box at the entrance to the building. To ensure protection of the food supply chain, current certification arrangements will continue to apply until further notice.

- Digital Assistance with applications to the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) can be accessed through the SAF Advisory Service on 0300 200 7848.
- General queries can be raised directly with the local DAERA Direct office on 0300 200 7840.
- DAERA Direct offices continue to be manned by the minimal number of staff, social distancing is being enforced, and appropriate safety measures are in place to carry out high priority work in relation to maintaining the NI food chain.
- Arrangements are being made to allow some staff to carry out their duties at home, where possible and a number of laptops have been secured to facilitate this.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

Staff continue to work in the DAERA Direct offices on essential services whilst maintaining social distancing. Arrangements to allow more personnel to work from home with laptops and other mobile devices are progressing well.

TACKLING RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION (TRPSI)

- Through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme, DAERA are working in partnership to deliver a range of initiatives that can help to tackle rural poverty and social isolation. Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus the emphasis for a number of these initiatives has changed to ensure best practices are implemented to ensure vulnerable rural people can be assisted in this time of need.
- The TRPSI funded initiatives detailed below have over the past few days refocused their attention to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers in the following ways:

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

These TRPSI funded initiatives continue to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers. The DAERA Minister has agreed to contribute £200k of funding to the CFNI Coronavirus Community Fund with provision also made to fund those applications that are deemed ineligible by CFNI on the basis that the applicant organisation have the advancement of religion noted in their constitution.

Rural Support

- Rural Support staff are continuing to deal with calls to their helpline, which have steadily increased over the period of the Coronavirus. Rural Support sent text messages out to all 9,000 Ulster Farmers Union members last week advising of their services and this has resulted in an influx of calls. The majority of the calls are from people who have concerns regarding the following issues:-
 - Worried about benefits
 - Concerned about their mental health
 - Farming related matters – possible slowdown in the supply chain, the movement of stock and the discontinuation of TB testing
 - Older children moving back home - increase in daily running costs - food electric etc
 - Fearful of the Coronavirus and the impact that their death may have on the farm

- Rural Support mentors continue their role in providing support to clients via phone and on-line and using a comprehensive Coronavirus fact sheet for their team which can be utilized when providing advice to clients.
- Rural Support have also developed an 'Across the Hedgerow' initiative with the Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster. This initiative sees the YFC members making daily / weekly linkages with the farming community and in particular the most isolated.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

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

Current callers are 60% male and 40% female, mainly in the 35 – 55 year old bracket with some coming in from the 70+ relating to CoVid19 rather than direct farm related issues. A comparison of number of people calling the Rural Support Helpline in early 2019 and 2020 is provided below. Rural Support are currently adequately resourced to deal with this increase and DAERA officials continue to liaise with them on a very regular basis.

	2019	2020
Jan	39	68
Feb	31	34
March	33	85
April	34	84 (up to 16th)

Role of Rural Community Transport Partnership (RCTP's)

- Through the TRPSI Programme, DAERA officials have been working in conjunction with DfI and the RCTP's to develop a comprehensive list of the activities that RCTP's will now undertake in their local areas. Establishing maximum effectiveness for the resource available to the RCTP's (100 vehicles) has been concluded. A comprehensive overview of what services the RCTP's can now provide has been collated and shared with the recently established Council / Trust Emergency Hubs. The RCTP's staff have also commenced calling their 5,000 membership (mainly elderly and disabled isolated rural dwellers) on a regular basis.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

The DAERA and DfI Ministers, in a joint Press Release confirmed their Departments partnership arrangements to agree for the RCTP's to play a key role, working in tandem with local Councils and Health Trusts, in delivering services to rural dwellers. This work has now commenced and is proving to be a very effective partnership approach to delivering food, medicine and other services to vulnerable rural dwellers.

SPRING Social Prescribing Project

- Following government guidance, advising social distancing and isolation, all Social Prescribers have suspended client visits. SPRING staff have developed a new delivery model called the "Connect Well Service" to ensure all clients, previously referred, continue to feel connected and supported at this time. The project has therefore moved to a service where Social Prescribers will contact all clients remotely, by telephone, text, social media platforms or through video link. This will benefit 530 vulnerable rural dwellers and 1,800 clients in total.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

No change.

Rural Community Development Support Service

- Rural Community Development Support Service Programme (RCDSSP) funded by DAERA works across the 10 'rural' District Council areas in Northern Ireland rural areas so that it can help rural communities identify and address their social and economic needs.
- With access to 1,500 member groups, the 6 Rural Support Networks (RSNs) delivering the service is playing a pivotal role in assisting Councils and Trusts with the task of identifying those vulnerable rural residents who will be in need of assistance and co-ordinating the community response to ensure that it is delivered in a structured way. RSN's have provided detailed lists of the many Community Response organisations across NI to the Councils / Trusts Emergency Hubs. They are also available to assist other Departments and agencies with the important task of circulation of advice and guidance to voluntary sector groups as required.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

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

Rural Community Network (RCN) and NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN)

- Both RCN and NIRWN are currently supported under the joint DfC/DAERA Regional Infrastructure Support Programme (RISP). Officials have worked closely with DfC to ensure that programme flexibilities have been implemented and funding continues to be provided to both organisations to ensure they have the capacity to support rural communities at this time.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

No change

EU LEADER PROGRAMME, TOURISM AND PROJECT STRATUM

LEADER

- DAERA has provided advice to all Councils responsible for administrating the delivery on the EU 'LEADER' Programme 2014-2020 to protect and support Council staff and LAG Board members whilst continuing to provide a service to the public. Easements in procedures and processes from application to Letter of Offer and in claim processing continue to be applied so that project promoters can continue to be reimbursed in a timely manner.
- In line with the requirements of the Public Health Protection (Coronavirus, Protection) Regs (NI) 2020 all council staff involved in the administration of LEADER are working remotely (at home) and site visits to projects by Council staff and DAERA staff have been suspended until further notice. LAG Assessment Panels and LAG Board meetings have been suspended but may be conducted via on line social media platforms, video conferencing or by written procedure.

Updated on 01/05/2020 11:52

- Councils advise that there will be delays in delivery for the Rural Business Scheme, Basic Services Scheme, Village Renewal Scheme and Co-Operation Scheme where contractors have suspended work due to the current situation.
- DAERA continues to work closely with LAGs and Councils to maintain a flexible approach which will facilitate the utilisation of all budget allocations before the programme end.
- DAERA regularly liaises with Councils involved in the Rural Development Programme 2014-20 Rural Tourism Scheme. As work has been suspended on construction sites there will be delays in progressing tourism projects. DAERA is working with Councils to provide advice and guidance at this time. £164k has been processed for payment in the last two weeks, with a further £497k pending.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

RAD continue to monitor progress on the LEADER and Tourism measures. Issues on access for projects remain as previously advised.

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

The deadline for commitments (ie Letters of Offer) was the 31 December 2020. The Commission has now confirmed that commitments can be made under the 2014-2020 NI RDP until 2023 and will be eligible for payment up until the end of 2023 or until the EU allocation is used up (whichever is earlier). The Department will use this change from the Commission to ensure maximum benefit to rural communities.

PROJECT STRATUM

- Indications are that the bidders are continuing to prepare their responses to the Invitation to tender and Project Stratum/access to broadband continues to be viewed as a priority by DfE.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

Work by bidders to the tender continues with a closing date of 5 May 2020, after which the bids will be technically appraised and assessed. The project is still on target to issue a contract this financial year.

PROCESSING OF GRANT AID CLAIMS

- In line with UK Government and Assembly messaging, staff have designated the payment of claims to project promoters as essential business and have worked tirelessly over the past 3 weeks to put in place new systems to service customers and to process payments. This has resulted in circa £1.7m of payments to LEADER businesses, community organisations and councils being authorised as well as almost £500k to Tourism projects in the last 2 weeks. In the same time period 46 small rural businesses received payment totalling over £150k while 90 applicants to the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme received payments totalling £112k from the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

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

RURAL POLICY – RECOVERY

- Officials have been working on a draft Rural Policy Framework and continue to do so. Although the public consultation will be delayed until the Autumn due to Covid 19, officials are considering the evidence and need identified by stakeholders to date with a view to bringing forward pilot actions in the Autumn that would address that need and could contribute to the Covid recovery.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

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

UPDATE ON ESSENTIAL FINANCE OR BUDGET INFORMATION

- Rural Affairs continue to manage its current budget but expects there to be delays in project completion, due to the Covid 19 restrictions and impact. A large accrual will be brought forward from the 2019/2020 year. Payments to promoters and groups continue where possible subject to the easements given to delivery agents.

UPDATE POSITION 24/04/2020

The impact on the Budget continues to be monitored.

Forest Service – Covid-19 Update

- Forest Parks

This week the Minister affirmed that Forest and Country Parks were open for pedestrian access to provide people with a spacious environment to exercise in a matter consistent with public health advice on social distancing. This is in compliance with NI regulations, including where there is 'reasonable excuse' to travel for exercise. Car parks as well as caravan and camping and associated facilities remain closed.

Forest Service represent DAERA in relation to its Forest and Country Parks on a PSNI led Situational Awareness Group to monitor and address compliance issues regarding social distancing and the NI regulations. The group includes representatives from Fire and Rescue Service, Ambulance Service, Belfast Harbour Police, Coastguard and Local Government as well as the PSNI and Forest Service.

In assisting the work of the group, Forest Service deploys forest ranger patrols to monitor the forest areas across NI more likely to experience crowds gathering. Since 10 April 2020 and particularly over Easter and subsequent weekends, no major issues have had to be addressed, however the close liaison with PSNI assisted in a few minor situations being identified managed before they could develop into a more serious incident. To date a high level of adherence to guidance has generally been observed and recognised by the group.

- Food Distribution – DAERA Assistance to Councils

DAERA/Forest Service meet by teleconference daily with Councils and DfC Food Distribution project managers. The food package service has been in operation since 7 April and was set up to help those most at risk of food insecurity due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes those who are shielding having been contacted by their GPs, as well as people who are financially vulnerable or who may be experiencing difficulties physically accessing food. Forest Service are assisting Councils individually on their preferred operating model that best suits the scale and volunteering distribution issues within each council area. Forest Service are coordinating the wider DAERA resource to assist in distribution of food parcels to vulnerable people and are engaging in front line delivery services as required by councils.

- Forest Fire Update

The extreme dry and settled weather conditions prevailing across Northern Ireland for some weeks now, coupled with the lack of fresh vegetation growth, has created a wildfire risk rated currently as 'severe'. Forest Service is implementing its emergency fire management procedures and is continuing to work closely with NI Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) in response to these conditions. Forest Service staff are actively deployed in monitoring the higher risk sites across NI and implementing its rapid response directly and with the support of NIFRS where early incidents of wildfire occur before these escalate to major incidents. Staff and machinery with purpose built all-terrain machinery have transported fire-fighters and fire-fighting equipment to remote and difficult access locations reducing the potential damage to the natural environment on both DAERA and privately-forest owned land. Over the recent week a significant fire occurred in Armagh which required resources over a period of days and during the last weekend a number of smaller incidents in the west were extinguished.

Central Services & Contingency Planning Group

Update on IT

- The Department has been working hard since 16 March 2020 to put in place the architecture, hardware, tools and support to enable large numbers of staff to work effectively from home to deliver essential DAERA services. 95% of identified priority workers were able to work remotely by 13 April 2020. There are currently approximately 2,000 staff able to work from home with a target for 2,300 staff capable of working remotely by 30 April 2020. By mid-May 2020 DAERA aims to have 2,500 staff equipped to provide services using secure remote technology;
- To achieve these targets DAERA has quickly mobilised a team to secure, configure, schedule and distribute devices and accessories to staff across the country. 5 distribution hubs have been set up and contactless distribution processes have been put in place to allow laptops to be issued safely and securely;
- There remain risks to the supply of devices into the NICS as normal hardware distribution schedules and supply lines continue to be affected by the global pandemic;
- DAERA continues to provide a range of essential online services to customers and citizens. For example, the online Single Application Form (SAF) is currently live and farm businesses are submitting their applications. It is critical that these systems continue to be supported and maintained. Work is ongoing to ensure that there is service continuity in the event that key IT resources are unavailable to work due to illness;
- DAERA is leading on work to maximise the use of video conferencing, audio conferencing and other collaboration tools to allow effective distributed working and maintain a high level of productivity across the Department. Updated guidance on home working has been developed and issued and new collaboration tools have been tested and are being rolled out. For example, an online web conference was successfully piloted on 15 April 2020 involving DAERA's Senior Management Team and 573 online attendees. Early feedback from the event has been positive and it is hoped that this technology and format can be adopted more widely across the Department; and
- Finally, DAERA has developed an online application to log the status of staff, their availability to work and any instances of unavailability due to COVID 19. This tool and associated information dashboards will help keep managers informed and their staff supported.

Update on Communications/Engagement/Staff Well Being

- DAERA continues to use a range of media and events to inform and engage with stakeholders. In addition to press releases and social media, DAERA is also maximising the use of the IT architecture and hardware it has put in place to reach out to stakeholders. Over the past number of weeks, at the request of industry partners, the three times weekly dial in meeting of stakeholders was reduced to twice per week and as of w/c 27 April will be held weekly. The dedicated mailbox for Covid-19 queries remains open and stakeholders are encouraged to use it to raise any queries that arise between meetings. Issues raised and resolved in this way are added to the repository of information for stakeholders on the Covid-19 pages of the DAERA website. These pages contain Questions and Answers and Key Information for stakeholders and are gateway to information and advice on a range of wider supports provided by Government. They are updated on an ongoing basis.

- In addition to the meetings with the overarching stakeholder grouping, Groups throughout the Department continue to engage with their sectoral stakeholders through video conferencing and tele conferencing. Many of the meetings take place on a weekly basis or more frequently depending on the urgency of any issues arising.
- Internal communications and staff engagement continues to intensify. In addition to Business As Usual staff and team communications and engagement channels, the Department has:
 - (i) Created dedicated intranet pages with information, advice and practical tips to help staff through this period of change;
 - (ii) Introduced fortnightly briefings by Senior Management to staff within their Groups; and
 - (iii) Delivered webinars through which staff can engage directly with Permanent Secretary and the Gold Command team.

The first webinar was held on the 15 April 2020. The purpose of the event was to reach out to DAERA staff, to thank them for all the work they are doing to keep the Department functioning, to update them about what is happening across DAERA and to provide them the opportunity to ask questions directly to Gold Command. A total of 573 members of participated in the event and feedback gained through a follow up survey is very positive. The Minister may also participate in next one of these events which is scheduled for Wednesday 29th April.

AFBI Covid-19 update

- AFBI in collaboration with Queens University Belfast and Ulster University are supporting the Department of Health's efforts in respect of Covid-19 testing
- Preparations are now being finalised including: software updates to the Regional Virus Laboratory's (RVL) Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) in order to import AFBI results; and the employment of a further robotic system within VSD to ensure an end to end robotic process, as required by RVL
- An SLA with the Belfast Trust is also due for agreement later this week and following final sign-off by the Belfast Trust Quality Assurance Panel a date for the commencement of testing can be agreed.
- AFBI hope to achieve 1000 tests per day when fully operational.
- Testing has been scheduled for an initial period of 12 weeks.
- 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.

Questions from Members to DAERA on Covid-19 update 23 April 2020

Briefing Subject/Area	Question	Answer
Food and Farming	Please provide further information on the financial support package being sought for farmers who are facing difficulty.	There are significant problems building for the farming sector, as well as problems already being experienced by the ornamental horticulture sector due to the impact of COVID-19. In the worst case scenario, it is possible that falls in agricultural prices affecting farm incomes could last to the end of 2020, and it is anticipated that dairy and cattle & sheep farms could be particularly severely affected. State Aid rules apply when Government decides to intervene in the market. The UK operates under EU State Aid rules during the transition period up to end of 2020, so potential support measures must be designed and operate within that framework. It is estimated that, in the worst case scenario, targeted sectoral interventions to mitigate the income effects calculated could cost approximately £100+ million. Work continues with the support of industry to develop the evidence base necessary to secure funding and to consider the practicalities of delivery.
Agri-food sector	<p>In relation to BEIS relaxing of UK Competition Law to allow farmers to work together and identify where there is hidden capacity in the supply chain for processing milk into longer life dairy products, how much hidden capacity in the supply chain is there?</p> <p>If the main issue DAERA foresees is production lines having to close due to absenteeism, will increasing production of long-life products be possible in practice?</p>	<p>The Department does not have specific data on commercially sensitive aspects of the supply chain here. However, at present there are no reports of milk failing to be collected from farms in Northern Ireland and local industry has indicated that there is currently sufficient storage for products. It should be noted that the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) decision to relax UK competition law was largely prompted by the circumstances in GB and the fact that a small number of milk purchasers were particularly exposed to the food service sector (and, therefore, lost a significant proportion of their market outlet for short shelf life produce). The relaxation in competition law will allow raw milk to be diverted in a more orderly way to alternative outlets. In Northern Ireland, the local dairy processing sector has not been affected in this way.</p> <p>As noted above, the very specific problem that the relaxation in competition law was designed to address has not emerged in Northern Ireland. The Department is monitoring absenteeism rates, with the processing sector now reporting, on average, absentee rates of under 10%. Currently, this has not impeded processing capacity. The majority of NI output is currently longer life products, such as cheese, butter and skim milk powder, and those production lines could be impacted by absenteeism, though that the risk this seems to be at a lower level now than feared a few weeks ago. The amendments to UK competition law provides producers, processors and logistics providers with the ability to co-ordinate the sharing of labour and</p>

		<p>facilities, which would undoubtedly help if that risk were to materialise.</p>
	<p>1. Can the Minister provide an update on the £105m bid for an agrifood support package? How was the sectoral division (dairy £40m; poultry £15m; Pigs £10m; Beef £22m; Sheep £4m; Welfare/Horticulture/Eggs £14m) decided? What is the anticipated input from the EU?</p> <p>2. Does the dept. accept that the Self Employed Income Support Scheme is welcome but will have little impact on the farmers in ANC areas who make little or no annual trading profits; has DAERA requested that the Dept for the Economy extends the</p>	<p>The initial bid from DAERA was very much focused on the threat that absenteeism in downstream transport and processing sectors might disrupt the movement of inputs and outputs to and from farms. These concerns have not materialised beyond problems that are being experienced by the non-edible horticulture sector (where the closure of Garden Centres has disrupted the route to market and this is something DAERA is considering). The risk of produce not moving off farm in the rest of the sectors appears to have reduced – particularly as we now seem to have reached the peak in terms of C19 infections - however we continue to monitor the situation closely. While these earlier risks are subsiding, other risks are now escalating due to downstream market disruptions feeding back up the supply chain to primary producers through price movements. Consequently, we are reassessing what response might be needed if the measures announced by UKG such as Self-Employed Scheme and the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme prove to be insufficient to address this particular problem. This work is ongoing.</p> <p>The sectoral division in the original bid reflected an assessment of the potential cost of compensating and disposing / culling of product / animals if 20% absenteeism meant 20% of farm output had no outlet for a sustained period of 2-3 months.</p> <p>The funding for the response being considered initially and more recently would be sought from National monies. EU funds such as that for the Basic Payment are already committed. The scope to reshape spending of EU monies under the NIRDP is being considered but this is relevant to medium term rather than immediate responses given the way the NIRDP is structured. The EU has also just announced a Private Storage Aid scheme of the dairy, beef and sheep sectors which will provide some assistance through market support.</p> <p>DAERA welcomes the fact that farmers and growers who are self-employed or a member of a partnership and who have been affected financially by Covid-19 can avail of the Self Employed Support Scheme subject to eligibility criteria.</p> <p>However, as this scheme is based on average trading profits over the last three years levels of uptake and benefit realisation for the agriculture industry may be limited as farm profits have been in decline in recent</p>

	<p>£10k small business scheme to include small farm businesses?</p> <p>3. In light of the COVID crisis and the pressure this is placing on farmers and farm agents, will the department consider extending the 4th May SFP entitlement?</p> <p>4. Has any progress been made on the quick testing of staff and key workers in the food supply chain following self-isolation?</p> <p>5. What steps are the department taking to assist farmers with the plummet in beef process and the excess of steak and higher end cuts? Has the dept. made representation to the EU or Westminster for storage aid support?</p>	<p>years. Latest figures show that the 'Total Income from Farming' (TIFF) in Northern Ireland fell by 25% (26% in real terms) from £386 million in 2018 to £290 million in 2019. This follows a reduction of similar magnitude in 2018. Farm level estimates showed that almost all farm types have suffered, with the situation for cattle and sheep farmers being particularly challenging.</p> <p>Farm businesses are not eligible for the 'Small Business Support Grant' as claimants must be in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief or benefit from Industrial Derating. Farm businesses do not come under these categories as agricultural land and buildings are exempt from business rates.</p> <p>The statutory deadline for submitting applications to transfer Basic Payment Scheme entitlements will remain 4 May 2020. A range of support is available to assist farmers and agents making transfer applications. The deadline is being maintained to ensure clarity and stability during the claim period and to underpin October payments. A significant volume of trades have already been completed successfully on line and there are no direct reports of difficulties from farmers, agents or auctioneers.</p> <p>The Public Health Agency (PHA) issued further guidance on 22 April 2020 in relation to the Coronavirus National Testing Programme for frontline workers who are having to self-isolate due to having coronavirus-like symptoms or because a member of their household has symptoms. This information included who is eligible for testing and how they should go about arranging it, which DAERA officials have shared with Agri-Food stakeholders.</p> <p>There are problems building for the beef sector due to the loss of markets in the food service sector and resulting carcass balance issue. These high value parts of the carcass are likely to go into storage or be sold as lower value, subsequently devaluing the carcass and impacting on farm gate prices. There is ongoing engagement with the beef sector to monitor market impacts, develop the evidence base to secure funding and to consider the practicalities of delivering a support scheme. The EU has also just announced a Private Storage Aid scheme for the beef and sheep sectors which will provide some assistance through market support.</p>
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	<p>6. What is the current status of the NI Agrifood marketing body launched by DETI in 2015? What steps has the LMC taken in partnership with local retailers and organizations such as FoodNI and the agrifood marketing body to help address the carcass imbalance and build up of steaks and higher end cuts? (I note from cttee correspondence that M&S has been promoting steak nights and dine-in promotions and in doing so has seen their cattle demand increase by 5% since the lockdown came into force.)</p>	<p>Consideration of an NI agri-food marketing body is being led by the Department for the Economy: further detail is being sought from them and a response will be provided next week.</p> <p>LMC has advised that it has been working very closely with key stakeholders in the beef and sheep farming and processing sectors to assess and quantify the impact of the severe market distortions which have resulted from the Covid-19 Pandemic and the closure of food service and catering sectors. In normal times, on average 35% of sales from the Northern Ireland beef and sheep processing sector are into the food service / catering sectors in the UK and export markets with 65% of sales to retail customers. Retail promotion of higher value cuts may provide some relief to the loss of food service / catering markets for higher value cuts, but there are obvious limitations as to what can be achieved in such an uncertain and recessionary market place. LMC has an important role to play in the promotion of the beef and lamb industry in Northern Ireland and its high quality products. LMC completed a burst of beef and lamb advertising on 31st March 2020. This campaign featured on TV, radio and online and has been running since September 2019. Since the middle of March 2020, when the widespread lockdown of society came into effect across Northern Ireland, LMC has been significantly energising and increasing the reach of its online presence particularly on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Youtube. As people are spending much more time at home and preparing many more meals at home LMC has been showcasing to consumers a wide range of quick and easy to prepare nutritious and versatile beef and lamb recipes that can be enjoyed at home. LMC is currently working with its advertising agency and key industry partners to repurpose and bring forward some of its planned advertising activity to promote beef consumption at home for example during beef week (23rd to 30th April 2020) and LMC is launching an online advertising campaign next week to encourage consumers to replace the dining out nights at the restaurant with special nights at home.</p>
	<p>7. What is the feedback from online marts? Is there an update on the ongoing engagement between the dept., NILAA and the HSE about re-opening the marts in a socially safe way?</p>	<p>DAERA has maintained regular contact with the Northern Ireland Livestock Auctioneers Association and other Mart operators over recent weeks and welcomes the decision to recommence sales of primestock, cull animals and store stock on a gradual basis from week commencing 27th April. These sales play a crucial role in food supply and resilience. Robust operational protocols, developed by the marts in conjunction with the Health and Safety Executive NI and stakeholders, will enable them to conduct business in a manner that is safe for staff, farmers and</p>

		buyers. Video sales have continued at a number of mart venues this past week. Industry feedback on the use of this technology has been very positive.
Environment, Marine and Fisheries Group		
	<p>Can DAERA explain further what the “sustainable green recovery” envisaged looks like?</p> <p>What planning is underway to use the opportunities presented by the current crisis to help to deliver a sustainable green recovery?</p> <p>Can DAERA provide more detail on the work that is currently being done to deliver this recovery?</p>	<p>In recovering from Covid 19 DAERA aims to ensure that tackling ongoing environmental challenges are prioritised alongside new ones for the economy and wider society. As we seek to rebuild our economy we want to capitalise on the attitudinal and behavioural changes in society to maximise environmental gains made. This needs to be adopted into how we live and work going forward.</p> <p>Plans are at an early stage, but a number of task and finish groups are being established to scope how a green recovery and renewal can be realised. This will involve cross-Departmental working and stakeholder engagement with a view to developing a strategy for green growth.</p>
	<p>There is a clear disconnect between what the law states on gorse burning and what is happening on the ground. Wildfires over the last few days and weeks have caused damage to wildlife and biodiversity and diverted emergency services away from dealing with Covid-19. What is being done to prevent illegal burning of gorse from taking place and to enforce current legislation?</p>	<p>If wildfire incidents occur in the countryside a number of organisations, such as DAERA, PSNI and NIFRS can be involved in investigations into the extent of damage and the possible causes and origin of the fire. Although the law is a deterrent such investigations are very difficult.</p> <p>DAERA have therefore, in partnership with other stakeholders such as NIFRS, Mourne Heritage Trust, Belfast Hills Partnership and UFU, focused a lot of attention towards the progression of a wide range of preventative and awareness initiatives to attempt to reduce the number of gorse fires and to limit their impact when they do occur.</p> <p>This includes: provision of good practice demonstrations to landowners and farmers regarding the danger of wildfires and how to carry out burning operations safely; supporting tailored wildfire messaging e.g. to school children in urban / rural interfaces in Belfast and Ring of Gullion; support and development of fire response plans and fire risk reduction plans for sites such as Natura 2000 sites; implementation of wildfire risk reduction measures in the Mourne Mountains; up-to-date provision of wildfire</p>

		<p>risk warnings to wildfire stakeholders to aid vigilance; joint wildfire response; and sharing of knowledge and resource.</p> <p>During wildfire risk conditions the Minister/DAERA and NIFRS issue joint media messages on the subject – a number of these have issued over recent weeks.</p>
	<p>Given that air pollution is linked to increased risk of Covid-19 related deaths, has the Minister considered issuing updated warnings related to this? NO2 pollution breaches legal limits at 30 sites across Belfast and North Down with working class communities are particularly affected.</p>	<p>DAERA officials review air quality data for a number of pollutants on a daily basis. This is particularly important in a pandemic where the disease in question affects the respiratory system and officials are now checking throughout the day.</p> <p>Levels of particulate matter (PM) in Northern Ireland have been increasing since the start of the year and this trend of increasing PM has continued following lockdown. As a result, it was necessary for DAERA to issue an air pollution alert on 9 April 2020, in respect of forecast widespread moderate air pollution (particulate matter) for 10 April 2020. This was issued on Thursday 9 April in advance of the air pollution episode and the Minister and Committee were informed.</p> <p>Levels of NO₂ have been declining since January 2020 and largely follow the average annual trends experienced in NI in the last five years.</p> <p>Officials continue to monitor data daily and will issue further alerts as required.</p>
<p>Inland Fisheries pages 7&8</p>	<p>The paper tells us that DAERA Public Angling Estate (PAE) waters are closed due to Covid-19 then explains, that in the course of Easter weekend, Fisheries Inspectors visited 160 sites and refers to social distancing monitoring. Can we enquire as to the nature and sites of these visits, whether PAE or not and what powers, if any, the Inspectors have in relation to social distancing, especially at non PAE sites?</p> <p>I am assuming that significant overtime costs were incurred.</p>	<p>DAERA Fisheries officers have no powers to enforce the current measures for Covid 19, only the PSNI have the necessary powers. The vast majority of anglers stopped fishing when requested to.</p> <p>The visits were to assess public compliance with the closure of the Public Angling Estate for angling and no vehicular access. It was also to assess any other possible issues such as if people were observing social distancing, if there was increased parking on the other roads nearby. Officers would also have ensured no illegal fishing activity was taking place at these sites as well.</p> <p>Overtime was kept to a minimum with some officers taking Time off in Lieu instead of payment.</p>
<p>Fisheries</p>	<p>8. Can the dept. provide an update on any plans for</p>	<p>In line with the scheme already approved for Sea Fisheries, the Department has engaged directly with</p>

	<p>support measures for the Lough Neagh fishing industry following the collapse in eel sales and suspension of the Lough Neagh Co-Operative Society?</p>	<p>the Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-operative Society (LNFCS) to consider what support might be appropriate to assist with fixed costs while boats are not operating. The Department has now assessed this information and considers that the Lough Neagh Fishermen do not have the same fixed costs as the sea fishing fleet and therefore no assistance of that type can be provided at the moment.</p> <p>A response that the Department has already been able to make, is to increase the European Maritime Fisheries Funding (EMFF) grant for glass eel stocking into Lough Neagh, from 50% to 60%, reducing the costs to the Lough Neagh Fishermen’s Co-operative.</p> <p>The Department has now also reviewed the EMFF to consider if funding would be available to help with existing storage costs, but unfortunately this is not possible under the current criteria that apply to the scheme. The only assistance possible under EMFF maybe to extend storage facilities at fish processing premises, which is unlikely to be an attractive option.</p>
<p>Environment</p>	<p>9. Flytipping remains a very serious challenge. Can the department outline what steps it is taking in partnership with Councils to stamp this out?</p>	<p>The Department is working closely with all local councils in monitoring and assessing fly-tipping during the current Covid-19 Period. At present all councils are reporting daily to the NIEA on a range of waste management issues including fly-tipping. There are two components to that fly-tipping reporting (i) the number of recorded incidents during the Covid-19 period in comparison to the same period in 2019 and (ii) a red, amber, green (RAG) status based on the councils assessment of incident numbers and their ability to manage the issue. As of the 24th April 2020, 4 councils are reporting a ‘green’ RAG status (no increase/low increase and no immediate risk) and 7 councils are reporting an ‘amber’ status (some/increasing incidents but situation is manageable).</p> <p>The Department meets weekly with all 11 councils through a Local and Central Waste Working Group and fly-tipping remains a core agenda item. At present the consensus across councils is that although most have seen an increase in fly-tipping (to varying degrees) the situation is currently manageable.</p> <p>Should there be occasion when the situation is not manageable the Department will, where appropriate, consider use of its own waste contractor to assist with clean-up of fly-tipped wastes on behalf of a local council.</p> <p>The Department and councils each have their own enforcement capability but will, where appropriate,</p>

		work collaboratively to ensure those responsible for this activity face the strongest possible deterrent.
Miscellaneous		
Covid 19 measures	<p>How long does the Minister foresee this legislation being in place?</p> <p>As COVID-19 restrictions lift, who will be removing this legislation?</p>	<p>This Order (THE COMPETITION ACT 1998 (GROCERIES) (CORONAVIRUS) (PUBLIC POLICY EXCLUSION) ORDER 2020 No. 369) is intended to disapply competition law only in respect of agreements needed as a result of coronavirus. When the Secretary of State believes that there is no longer a significant disruption or a threat of significant disruption to the supply of groceries to consumers in the United Kingdom the Secretary of State must publish a notice stating this. The period under which agreements are considered excluded from competition law provisions (the 'groceries supply disruption period') will end on a date specified by the Secretary of State in the notice, which must be a minimum of 28 days after the date the notice is published. The period between the notice being published and the end of the disruption period is intended only to enable the orderly winding down of arrangements.</p>