

AERA Committee Meeting Update – Thursday 4 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 are made under the negative resolution procedure and come 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 27 May, 56 late applications had been received.
- On 4 May, the deadline for the transfer of BPS entitlements expired. By that stage, 5,994 entitlements transfers had been completed, compared to 4,745 in 2019.
- 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 remains concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work could decline quickly as fear of contracting the virus remains within workforce.

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 £3.29/kg and it is expected that forthcoming statistics will show further increases as weekly quotes have been improving and are now back to 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 (19 May) for milk products showed an increase of 1.0% from the previous auction (skim milk powder up 6.7%, cheddar down 6.0%, butter down 1.9%). 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 have 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.

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 are also in regular contact with the other Devolved Administrations and have written to DEFRA seeking a commitment from UKG to provide enhanced funding to address the challenges that lie ahead.

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, will provide a much needed injection of cash to these businesses and their suppliers and will go some way towards helping the sector recoup some of its loses. DAERA Officials will continue to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on the horticulture sector over the next few weeks 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.

7. NI livestock markets took the decision to shut (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.

On the 27th April, Livestock Markets started to reopen on a gradual basis, in line with robust operational protocols, developed by the Marts in conjunction with the Health and Safety Executive NI and stakeholders. The protocols have enabled the Marts to conduct business in a manner that is safe for staff, farmers and buyers. As part of the ongoing review of these protocols, sales of breeding stock are now permitted.

Sales that would normally create large gatherings and require sellers to be in attendance, such as Pedigree Livestock sales, are still not permitted under this review of protocols. However, Livestock Markets can submit proposals to the Livestock Market Industry Stakeholder group for these sales to take place on a case by case basis.

The operational protocols agreed by the Livestock Market Industry Stakeholder Group make it clear that only Mart staff and a limited number of pre-registered buyers are allowed on Mart premises during sales.

College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)

- Education programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) are continuing with students currently in the final stages of completing their studies and online assessments / examinations to ensure the academic year is completed and students achieve their qualifications.
- The Minister will deliver an address to all CAFRE students at an online student engagement event scheduled for mid-June. 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 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

Covid 19 update

Delivery of Official Controls

- The delivery of official controls, that is, ante mortem and post mortem inspections, verification of food business operators' compliance with hygiene, animal health and welfare requirements continues in all slaughterhouses. All slaughterhouses are working normally with full throughput maintained.
- 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**
- Risk based sampling of third country imports of feed ingredients for undesirable substances has recommenced.
- In conjunction with the Food Standards Agency NI, AfIB Feed Inspectorate are developing a protocol for the remote delivery of official controls on farm primary production hygiene inspections.
- A number of remote checks to verify aspects of carcass classification in both bovine and porcine slaughtering plants are ongoing. These include the remote viewing of data and selected beef carcass images to verify accuracy of carcass classification, cold carcass weight calculation and deadweight price reporting data.
- The details of Private Storage Aid contracts for butter and cheese have been forwarded to AfIB Milk Inspectorate by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) for monitoring. Initial store approval inspections have been completed.

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 the temporary measures announced by the Minister on 30/4/20, the number of herds and animals receiving a bovine TB test is improving. As a result more bTB tests can now take place safely and the risk of increased animal and herd bTB incidence levels is reduced.

- **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 11th May 2020, TB tests were completed for 99% of herds and 113% of animals were tested when compared to the equivalent week in May 2019.
- 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 Australia, Gibraltar, United States of America and Myanmar 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**

- Further third country export health certification easements for exports to the Philippines have been implemented with effect from Friday 29th May. The agreed easements will allow the issue of an Export Health Certificate on white paper instead of crown vellum and assist in allowing more flexibility for the administrative processes, thus helping to keep trade moving.
- Negotiations in relation to further easements are ongoing with up to nine countries.

Animal Welfare

- Work is continuing to quantify the need for funding to support Northern Ireland zoo establishments and to inform considerations on the development and administration of a scheme in Northern Ireland similar to that launched recently by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
- The Minister met with Horse Sport Ireland this week to discuss the resumption of equestrian sporting activities in Northern Ireland. He also met with Jonathan Buckley MLA and Mark Durkan, MLA to discuss the resumption of pigeon racing and training following queries that had been raised with them.
- From 8th June, provided infection rates remain low, leaving home to ensure the needs of animals are met will also be expressly permitted under the Regulations. This should provide greater clarity around the operation of pet related business and travel to exercise animals.

Disposal of Animal By-Products

- VSAHG officials have recommenced inspections of the Category 1 rendering plants. These inspections will be carried out following the social distancing guidelines and in consultation with the management of the plants.

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 by the Assembly must be debated within 3 months of making the Scheme, 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 Rule, 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 has advised the Examiner that it is intending to make the minor technical amendment at the earliest opportunity and an SL1 is due to be submitted to the AERA Committee. The amendment will have 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 140 returned by 28th May. As of 28th May, the Department has made payments to 109 vessel owners totalling £1,010,000.

Aquaculture Sector

- On 26 May during a visit to Movanager 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.
- 19 potentially eligible businesses have been contacted and invited to apply to the Scheme.

Public Angling Estate

- The Public Angling Estate (PAE) opened on 18 May with anglers advised to stay local and observe social distancing measures. The car parks are also now open.
- The Department has engaged with the Executive and the DoH to request that other private angling enterprises can open as soon as possible to complement the opening of the public estate. No decision has been confirmed as yet, and the process of bringing forward relaxations is being examined.

Update on Essential Legislation: UK Fisheries Bill

- No dates have been confirmed yet for the next stage (Report) of the Bill in the House of Lords.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- Nothing new to report.

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 and littering, with particular focus on the littering of PPE more recently.
- As at 29 May, there are 57 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.

- A submission was made to the Minister to inform him of the level of engagement of the Covid-19 Waste Contingency Group Communications Action Plan and future plans. The submission provided information regarding the communications campaign as well as statistics relating to Covid-19 waste issues. A summary of the key engagement figures included:
 - (i) A flyer delivered to 830,000 households across Northern Ireland;
 - (ii) National Communications Action Plan (NI) social media campaign which reached over 1 million people;
 - (iii) National Communications Action Plan (NI) radio adverts reached 1.5 million people;
 - (iv) DAERA Press Office campaign and associated social media reached almost 200,000 people;
 - (v) MYNI mini campaigns reached around 84,000 people.
- Future planned communications will also be used to help normalise recycling behaviours throughout the year. This will help to increase environmental protection and safeguard the flow of vital materials through our recycling systems to reprocessors.

Maintaining Drinking Water Quality

- Guidance has been published on the DAERA website on maintaining drinking water quality when businesses are re-opening after lock-down.
- Following the current long spell of dry weather a number of NI Water's impounding reservoirs are now showing signs of drought. They have submitted Draft Drought Orders at three locations to NIEA seeking 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.

Bathing Water Monitoring

- On 29 May, The Minister announced the 2019 Bathing Water Quality Results, once again demonstrating that Northern Ireland continues to enjoy some of the best bathing water quality in UK and Europe. 14 out of 26 are classified as excellent, a further 9 met 'Good' status and the remainder met the 'Sufficient' standard.
- This announcement often coincides with the start of the summer bathing water season and the Minister has advised that everybody must remain focused on protecting the health and wellbeing of each other as well as protecting our health services. The Minister also advises against travelling too far and for people to avoid places which are too busy and where it will be difficult to maintain social distancing.
- The Department is responsible for monitoring water quality at the 26 beaches but this year due to COVID 19, the Department is exploring the possibility of delivering a modified bathing water programme.
- The RNLI has also announced nationally that it will not be providing 100% lifeguard cover at beaches and beach operators have advised that public facilities will remain closed.

DAERA Farm and Non- Farm Inspections

- There are a wide range of inspections undertaken by staff across DAERA covering the agricultural, business, industrial and utility service provision sectors, and for a variety of purposes. Many inspections were paused due to Covid-19.

- Since the pausing of inspections significant work has been undertaken across the Department on ways in which these inspections can be restarted as quickly as possible while taking account of social distancing requirements. This includes changes to the format for inspections as well as the use of IT and alternative technologies such as drones and geotagged imagery to avoid, or at least minimise, face to face contact with farmers, operators and the public.
- It has now been agreed by the Minister to recommence a range of farm and non- farm inspections which are considered safe to undertake. In addition, there will be a gradual run up to re-establish the monitoring and surveillance programme which is used to provide essential data and information on terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems along with water and air quality.

Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

- The Department has continued to engage with eNGOs regarding the impact of the COVID-19 and a further meeting between eNGO representatives and senior officials has been held.
- The Department 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.
- An email has been issued to all recipients of the Environment Fund inviting them to apply to make any required amendments to their projects to take account of COVID impacts.

Country Parks and Nature Reserves

- DAERA-owned forests and country parks are gradually lifting restrictions on a phased basis, starting with the re-opening of car parks on Wednesday 27 May. Other on-site DAERA facilities such as toilets, visitor centres, cafes and playparks will remain closed and their re-opening will be considered at a later stage.
- Following discussions facilitated by the Department, many other organisations including councils also began to reopen the car parks at many of their outdoor properties on 27 May. National Trust have recently announced they will begin to open their public outdoor spaces on 3 June.
- Business as usual measures are in place to address any capacity issues if they do arise in DAERA properties such as temporary closure of car parks to new entrants and local liaison with PSNI. We would require PSNI to continue to be responsible for managing any non-compliance issues that occur such as large gatherings.

Grange River Desertmartin Fishkill (Moyola)

- A major fish kill was discovered on the Grange River, Desertmartin, on 21 May. Following the report from a member of the public, NIEA and Inland Fisheries staff undertook a joint investigation following standard procedures.
- DAERA Inland Fisheries have confirmed that the number of fish mortalities occurring as a result of the incident were 2659 brown trout and 110 salmon, of all age classes. There have been significant numbers of fatalities for other fish species as well.

- The initial evidence would point to a discharge of slurry having entered the river which had a significant impact on the fishery. The criminal investigation of this incident remains ongoing, with a view to submit a file to the PPS for a decision on whether or not to initiate prosecution proceedings under the Water (NI) Order 1999. The Ulster Farmers Union are assisting the landowner, and contractors have been appointed to carry out the clean-up of the slurry that was prevented from entering the waterway. NIEA staff are monitoring this process.

Update on Essential Legislation: Environment Bill

- The Public Bill Committee scrutinising the Bill at Westminster has suspended all activity until further notice. The [UK Parliament website](#) states that: “*The Committee is now scheduled to report by 25 June 2020.*” A further delay beyond this date is now considered likely.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- Nothing new to report.

Rural Affairs, Forestry Service & Estate Transformations Group

RURAL AFFAIRS DIVISION

RURAL AFFAIRS RESPONSE TO COVID-19

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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

DAERA DIRECT OFFICES

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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)

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

These TRPSI funded initiatives continue to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers. To date, under the Coronavirus Community Fund (CFNI) 138 rural organisations have been supported in total with £364,334 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.

Rural Support

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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	53 (1 st – 22 th May)

Role of Rural Community Transport Partnership (RCTP's)

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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

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

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

Some 2,745 contacts have been made to vulnerable people and 287 of these people have received other forms of support such as food and medicines.

Farm Families Health Check Programme (FFHCP) - COVID-19 Response

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

To date 183 contacts have been made in the Northern and Western Trust areas to those 70+ with 164 of these people having received support and advice. As a result of the positive feedback and response to this pilot initiative, the service will now expand into the other Trusts area.

Rural Community Development Support Service

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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

- food parcels delivery
- PPE/hand sanitiser etc delivery to community groups
- issuing delivering wellness packs to vulnerable people who are shielded
- issuing E bulletins/flyers issued

RURAL POLICY – RECOVERY

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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

EU LEADER PROGRAMME, TOURISM AND PROJECT STRATUM

LEADER

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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.

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 which 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 particularly on the emerging issues facing the Department in relation to the rural tourism sector.

PROJECT STRATUM

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

DfE lead on Project Stratum. The bids are being technically appraised and assessed. The project is still on target to issue a contract this financial year.

PROCESSING OF GRANT AID CLAIMS

UPDATE POSITION 27/05/2020

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

Rural Development Programme

Programme	March		April		May Paid up to 27/05/2020	
	No of Payees	Amount	No of Payees	Amount	No Payees	Amount
LEADER	59	£1,934,932.61	51	£1,599,568.68	47	£1,535,293.09
Running Costs to LAGS	6	£156,981.39	11	£404,268.06	1	£26,489.12
TOURISM	2	£255,944.91	3	£525,825.49	2	£359,569.55

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		-	16/3/20 -22/5/2020	16/3/2020 - 22/5/2020			16/3/20 -22/5/2020
22/5/2020							
372			£459,336.00	118			£390,651.1

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.

Forest Service:

In line with the Executives 5 step plan to ease restrictions, DAERA reopened its carparks at forest and country parks on 27 May in cooperation with council partners and in parallel with many other recreational providers across Northern Ireland. Preparatory work on trails and signage had been put in place by DAERA staff ahead of the reopening to protect the health and safety of staff and visitors, and to meet the covid-19 guidance on social distancing. While the parks did see a significant amount of visitors, DAERA staff on site observed good implementation of social distancing measures with no major incidents or issues reported. With facilities such as toilets, visitor centres, cafes and playparks remaining closed; visitors are encouraged to take a sensible approach and consider the travel distance when planning their visit to the forests.

The extreme dry and settled weather conditions prevailing across Northern Ireland for most of April and May, coupled with the lack of fresh vegetation growth, has created a wildfire risk rated as 'severe'. Forest Service has implemented its emergency fire management procedures working closely with NI Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) in response to these conditions. Forest Service staff are monitoring the fire risk and prepared to implement a rapid response where necessary and with the support of NIFRS.

Central Services & Contingency Planning

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.
- In the first 3 days of testing AFBI has been provided with 94 samples per day for testing.
- Tests have been run and results provided in line with agreed targets.
- Testing will increase to 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.

Questions from Members to DAERA on COVID-19 Update 28 May 2020

Briefing Subject/Area	Question	Answer
Food and Farming		
Agri-food sector		
	Does the department have an update on the £25m to support Farm and Horticulture Businesses and how this will be allocated?	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 have also engaged with industry stakeholder representatives to discuss how best to allocate the funding to those impacted most by Covid 19.
	What is the reason that response time in Covid-19 testing for key workers within the meat and dairy sectors has increased and what is being done to address	Covid 19 Testing is not the responsibility of DAERA. However Meat and Dairy Industry representatives have raised this issue with Officials as part of ongoing engagement and DAERA has requested an update from the Department for Health regarding the length of time it is currently taking for Covid 19 Test results to be made available to essential workers. When we receive a

	this?	response from DoH we will provide a further update to the Committee.
Update on Essential Legislation	Can the department provide information on what the next step would be should the Agriculture Bill not pass through the House of Lords?	<p>The Bill would fall should both Houses of Parliament fail to agree on its exact wording. This would be an exceptional event, and the House of Commons could use the Parliament Acts to pass the Bill in the following session without the House of Lords' consent.</p> <p>There is no indication that the Bill would fall. The Bill's Second Reading in the House of Lords is scheduled for 10 June.</p>
	<p>What is the current status of the NI Agrifood marketing body launched by DETI in 2015?</p> <p>(Question asked following AERA Committee Meeting 23 April)</p>	<p><i>The following information about the NI Agrifood Marketing Body has been provided by DfE for sharing with the AERA Committee:</i></p> <p>In its Going for Growth report (2012), the former Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB) recommended creation of a new industry-led NIAFMB. The proposed role of the body was to co-ordinate marketing and promotion activity across NI's agri-food and drink industry. DfE led on the work to progress the Business Case (BC) for the establishment of NIAFMB, in conjunction with DAERA, INI and AFSB industry members.</p> <p>A draft BC was shared with former AFSB industry members. Following their agreement, in principle, to the BC's preferred option, it was agreed that a Summary Paper would be prepared setting out NIAFMB's activities and how it would be expected to operate. This was shared with industry representatives and discussed on 6 December 2019 in Dundonald House. The meeting was chaired by DfE, and included DAERA, INI, LMC, Dairy Council, Pork NI, NIMEA, NIFDA and UFU.</p> <p>The Paper was rejected by the meeting, with various parties highlighting that this was the first time they had had meaningful engagement around NIAFMB and that they would not be prepared to fund it. Different sectors had disparate views on NIAFMB's value, with NIMEA and Pork NI highlighting the importance of maintaining the Red Tractor brand while selling into GB.</p> <p>Industry representatives agreed to go back, discuss internally, and determine what they required in respect of marketing support. They agreed to respond to DfE by February 2020. At the meeting DfE, DAERA and INI all offered to assist with their deliberations, if needed.</p> <p>To date no response has been received and we are still awaiting proposals from the industry representatives. DfE has been in contact with DAERA officials, who have</p>

		<p>confirmed that the industry has been overtaken by the COVID19 crisis. DfE has been clear to DAERA colleagues that it is content to re-engage with industry representatives, once they reach agreement on a proposal the various bodies can coalesce around on a global industry basis.</p> <p>Clearly in a post COVID19 world we will need, with DAERA, INI and agri-food industry representatives, to revisit the value and purpose of a new marketing body and / or enhanced marketing programmes for the agri-food industry.</p>
Environment, Marine and Fisheries Group		
Environmental NGO's	<p>Given the results of the initial survey conducted with NIEL to measure the impact of Covid-19 on the eNGO sector, does the department foresee that support for the sector may be required, pending the results of the second survey?</p>	<p>The first eNGO survey and detailed engagement with the sector early on in the pandemic highlighted a number of issues. The general covid furloughing programme was being availed of by many eNGOs but the need to furlough staff due to financial constraints, reduced incomes and travel and distancing restrictions were all affecting ability to deliver outcomes including a significant number of DAERA grant-aided environmental works.</p> <p>On the basis of these initial findings the Department has moved swiftly to provide flexibilities in its existing Strategic Environment Fund programme by agreeing realistic deliverables, altering annual spend profiles, amending timelines, and providing more generous match-funding percentages for existing projects where necessary to ensure the continued delivery of key environmental outcomes.</p> <p>As well as these immediate actions, we are continuing to look closely at existing DAERA funding programmes and budgets to explore further potential to support the resilience of eNGO partners to enable the delivery of shared strategic environmental priorities.</p> <p>In advance of the results of the second survey, DAERA officials have also been proactive in engaging with other NI Departments to seek to ensure eNGOs are eligible for forthcoming charities funding.</p> <p>Additional questions have been added to the second NIEL survey and regular engagement with the sector continues so the Department can keep the situation under review.</p>
Veterinary Service and Animal		

Health Group		
Miscellaneous	<p>There is some uncertainty, especially since the re-opening of fisheries, amongst those operating equestrian facilities in rural areas as to whether they can now open. It seems some are open though others are afraid to do this in fear of contravention of regulations. Can the Department clarify?</p>	<p>Thank you for your query.</p> <p>Recent changes to the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 mean that outdoor activities are now permitted in Northern Ireland provided that they do not involve gatherings of more than six people from different households. This includes horse riding and horse riding tuition that takes place entirely outside.</p> <p>Equestrian establishments that decide to open to facilitate outside activities within the permitted numbers should, however, carry out a risk assessment and put in place measures to ensure that the Public Health Agency guidance on social distancing and hygiene is followed.</p> <p>Riding or tuition that involves indoor activity and gatherings of more than six people from different households continues to be prohibited at this time.</p> <p>Departmental officials are drafting a statement for the Departmental website which should provide the clarity for equestrian businesses.</p>