

AERA Committee Meeting Update - Wednesday 8 April 2020

DAERA response to THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (NORTHERN IRELAND) REGULATIONS 2020

Members agreed to forward the regulations to DAERA asking for a written brief in relation to those aspects and consequences of the regulations as they relate to DAERA.

The following are overarching Department wide responses to the Regulations. More detail is provided in the update provided by each Departmental Group.

- We have closed the majority of our buildings and facilities to the public for safety reasons.
- Most staff across DAERA are now working from home. Staff are only accessing our premises where necessary.
- When not working from home, staff are practicing social distancing.
- We have improved our IT capacity to work remotely.
- We have temporarily stopped most inspections to reduce the risk to staff, the farming community, and others.
- We are working closely with a range of industries (food processors, waste and fisheries) as they seek to operate within the climate created by these new Regulations.
- We have worked to identify designated key workers needing to travel for work and are providing them with documentation to facilitate their movement.

AERA Committee Meeting Update - Wednesday 8 April 2020

Veterinary Service & Animal Health Group

Covid 19 update

- **Bovine TB Testing:** The Minister has moved to update (30/03/20) our approach to bovine TB (bTB) testing - the default position is that TB testing visits should no longer be carried out. Under exceptional circumstances, visits to carry out bTB tests may continue if they can be done safely in accordance with the public health guidance
- **Council Animal Welfare Service:** Due to resource and health and safety issues associated with the pandemic, local councils have reduced the level of the enforcement service they provide in respect of companion animals. This may have potential ramifications for companion animal welfare in Northern Ireland and the Department is keeping the matter under close review. It is anticipated that council staff normally assigned to animal welfare duties may need to be reassigned to essential council business. If this transpires, the Minister has agreed that, given the exceptional circumstances, the Department should not withdraw its funding for these staff (the Department fully funds the delivery of the Council service).
- **Animal Welfare Charities Funding:** The Department has received some requests from animal welfare charities for funding to feed and care for their animals and/or to provide pet food to those owners that cannot leave home or afford to feed their animals. The Department has signposted these charities to the Department of Communities, existing guidance and funding available to the voluntary sector. The same approach is being taken to similar requests to Defra and other Devolved Administrations. The Department will, however, continue to monitoring this situation closely with a view to engaging further with the Department for Communities on the matter.

Animal By-Product Disposal and Utilisation: VSAHG have developed a contingency plan for the disposal and utilisation of Animal By-Products during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan will focus primarily on the alternative disposal options available in the event of disruption to the NI rendering sector.

- **Pausing of routine farm and non-farm inspections:** VSAHG have agreed to pause all routine farm and non-farm inspections until 30 April except those which are essential for public health, animal health & welfare, plant health or environmental protection.

Update on Essential Legislation

- At this juncture, there has been no significant impact on planned VSAHG legislation. This may, however, be subject to change and will be dependent on the longevity of the pandemic and impact on staffing levels.

Questions from the Assembly Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, which require responses below. (If the updates above have answered these questions already, please indicate that below.)

Bovine TB - has DAERA considered a cessation of badger culling as has been enacted in GB?

There is no badger cull currently in Northern Ireland.

Avian Flu – can we be given some further information on assistance for farmers affected and supported/prevention measures for neighbouring farms?

Officials have been working closely with industry representatives in respect of the recent non-notifiable avian influenza cases to determine the potential sources of disease introduction and methods of spread. This information has enabled officials to provide further advice and recommendations to industry on risk pathways, and assist with voluntary depopulation and other biosecurity measures to minimise the risk of spread to other premises.

The Department continues to communicate messages which encourage vigilance, early reporting of suspect cases and the importance of maintaining excellent levels of biosecurity. Flock keepers are also encouraged to subscribe to a bird text alert service and reminded of the need to register their flocks with the Department.

These steps will help keep farmers informed of the current disease risk in Northern Ireland and of the practical steps that can be taken to mitigate that risk.

Testing and Inspections: given the serious concern about infection spread and the need for control, has DAERA considered temporarily suspending TB testing?

See above

AERA Committee Meeting Update - Wednesday 8 April 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. 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.
- By 1 April, over 5,000 farm business had submitted their SAF, an increase of 67% from the same period last year.
- Orchard House has closed and 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 derogation has been put in place 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.

Statutory Instrument (SI) to temporarily relax competition law

- On 27 March, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) made a Statutory Instrument (SI) [The Competition Act 1998 \(Groceries\) \(Coronavirus\)\(Public Policy Exclusion\) Order 2020](#) to temporarily relax competition law with respect to retail supermarkets and logistics services providers (e.g. haulage companies). This SI allows groceries suppliers (direct and indirect) to enter into agreements to coordinate quantities and ranges of essential products, deployment of staff, supply to certain groups of people, and to share information about stock and logistic services providers. The SI also permits logistic services providers to coordinate staff deployment and share information about storage capacity and vehicles. The [Explanatory Memorandum](#) provides further information, including definitions.
- The SI was made by negative procedure, came into operation on 28 March 2020 and it applies retrospectively to agreements entered into from 1 March 2020. Competition law is a reserved matter under Schedule 3 paragraph 26 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Key NI stakeholders have been informed of the changes.

Current key issues arising from DAERA engagement with agri-food industry stakeholders

1. While supply chains are still working effectively there are significant concerns across all stakeholders that staff availability for work will decline quickly as fear of contracting the virus grows among workforce. Calls were made to have some level of quick testing for staff

following self-isolation before returning to work and to have specific advice on how best to check/screen staff entering the workplace.

Position – DAERA raised this through the C3 structures and FSA also raised this directly with DoH.

2. In addition there is 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. It was recommended that sectors produce their own protocols initially using the most up to date government guidance. Ideally a single protocol for the agri-food industry should be agreed. NIFDA plan to issue such a document.

Position – NIFDA and NIMEA have developed protocols with input from FSA, DAERA and other agencies. Businesses are each putting their own measures in place to protect and reassure staff in line with guidance on the GOV.UK website of 25/03.

3. 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.

4. Financial pressures are increasing rapidly as markets adapt to the changes, 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 including grants, rates relief, loans and EU (CMO) schemes. Such support would involve government, lending institutions and a good deal of forbearance by creditors.

Position – DAERA are working closely with industry 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. NI livestock markets have taken the decision to shut for 2 weeks in an attempt to shock farmers and raise the importance of social distancing. This follows continued high numbers of farmers attending markets despite warnings and pleas from farming unions. Other means of sale will be explored including virtual sales, buyer only markets and specialist sales.

Position - DAERA are working with the markets to ensure livestock movements can be facilitated by a combination of Aphis on-line and telephony services.

6. Concern growing about 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 is being put back on farms to hold stock and/ or dump product (milk a real concern – reports today of milk not being collected on 30 farms in Wales over the weekend).

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 explore options.

CAFRE

- Education programmes at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) are continuing with remote delivery of learning materials and assessments being progressed until the end of the academic year.
- CAFRE Knowledge Advisory Service Advisers and Technologists are available for reactive technical support to the Northern Ireland Agri-Food industry, affected by the COVID-19 crisis.
- Arrangements are being progressed to facilitate the potential use of CAFRE's facilities by the Department of Health as part of their contingency planning with a number of health workers already using Enniskillen campus 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.

Questions from the Assembly Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, which require responses below. (If the updates above have answered these questions already, please indicate that below.)

DAERA Direct Offices: have staff been given the option to work from home where possible, bearing in mind that the closure of the livestock marts will substantially reduce the need for DAERA Direct face-to-face services?

CAFRE Students: has consideration been given to recruiting on a voluntary basis, students who form part of a civil contingency to carry out farm work in situations when farmers are unwell due to COVID-19?

- At present, although face-to-face delivery of all programmes at College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) has ceased, education courses continue to be delivered remotely where students are continuing to complete and submit assignments and other coursework towards their qualifications. This will continue up to the end of the academic year in May 2020.
- Many of CAFRE students are from family farms and therefore will be the first port of call if other family members become ill or are self-isolating due to COVID-19.
- CAFRE senior officials have been in discussion with representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and Farm Relief Services in relation to those students who may be available to help on other farms. They have agreed with the UFU to signpost students to farm relief recruitment agencies.
- Information on how to register with farm relief recruitment agencies has been circulated to students via CAFRE's virtual learning environment and students can now submit an expression of interest to Farm Relief Services. They will then be contacted by the recruitment agencies should their help be required.
- Working through a recruitment agency ensures that any students who put themselves forward to help at this time will be entitled to the same terms and conditions as other farm workers.

- In addition, all CAFRE education courses contain an element of work placement and CAFRE currently has over 200 students and apprentices working on farms on placement in Northern Ireland and further afield. Given the essential nature of farm work, these placements are continuing at this time unless the student or the work placement provider is impacted by COVID-19.

Area Based Schemes: given the pressure and bureaucracy in meeting the annual 15th May deadline for SAF returns, and the fact that we are in the midst of a COVID pandemic where social distancing is our most potent defence, will DAERA relax this deadline given that this a Force Majeure situation?

- Answer provided in update.

Can farm businesses apply for self-employed support schemes and the other COVID-19 related schemes announced by the Economy and Finance Ministers?

- Eligibility for these schemes is a matter for the relevant Departments.
- There is nothing to exclude farm businesses where they meet the eligibility requirements.

Why are inspections for EFS and other schemes still continuing in light of the PHA advice on social distancing and the need to take all steps to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 virus?

- A small number of EFS inspections are being completed this week on less than 10 farms to allow payments to be made. Public Health Agency guidance is being strictly adhered to and social distancing measures are implemented. No face-to-face contact with the farmer is required. Businesses are contacted in advance to ensure all these measures are followed and if the business refuses the inspection, payment will be held until the inspection is completed later in the year after restrictions are eased.

Are farmers eligible for the self-employed support scheme, the employee retention scheme, the £10K small business scheme and the other measures recently announced by the Economy and Finance Minister in response to the COVID crisis?

- As above, Eligibility for these schemes is a matter for the relevant Departments.
- There is nothing to exclude farm businesses where they meet the eligibility requirements.

Area-based Schemes Division - Impact of Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) Regulations

The aspects and consequences of the regulations as they relate to ASD are as follows:

- The majority on on-farm checks have ceased until at least 1 May. A small number of inspections (10) continue, to allow us to process payments to customers. These are being carried out with no face-to-face contact with the applicant and should be complete by w/c 6 April.
- We no longer provide face-to-face advice to customers on the DAERA Direct offices, as the offices are closed to customers. Advice is however, available via a telephone and online service. Farmers can also request a change to the maps, as normal, via our online service.

- Our contractor continues to carry out checks, as normal, on claims for the Basic Payment Scheme on our behalf, using Control by Remote Sensing (checking satellite images).
- Our mapping system, continues to be updated, as normal, on our behalf by Land and Property Services.
- All staff are working from home where we have been able to provide the necessary IT. IT is being secured for the remaining staff. Small numbers of staff go into an office on occasion to complete specific key tasks. With the exception of Ballykelly House, all offices remain open to staff.

NIEA & EMFG – ENVIRONMENT ISSUES

Covid 19 Update

– **Waste management collection, storage and processing**

DAERA's priority is to maintain the fullest range of council waste services possible including recycling which supplies the waste industry and contributes to packaging. Recycled material from much of the commercial sector is no longer available. At present all 11 Councils are maintaining kerbside collections with Belfast City Council resuming full service from 1 April following a short disruption to waste collection services. The majority of Council's Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) are closed.

The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) is providing a "Matchmaking Service" between councils and the private sector to link up capacity and resources pressures. Groups have been set up to ensure regular contacts between councils, DAERA and the waste industry.

Waste workers including those involved in transport, treatment, recycling and disposal are classified as Essential Workers.

A DAERA / NIEA COVID-19 Waste Management Contingency Group has been established to coordinate and maintain the fullest range of waste management services possible. Weekly meetings have been established with councils (Government Waste Working Group & the Strategic Waste Partnership Group) and the waste industry.

Key public health messages¹ have been disseminated in conjunction with the waste sector; a number of channels are being used to reinforce this (Ministerial tweets, a "bin hygiene" page on NI Direct, #thankyouthursday, for example). The Waste Industry Safety & Health Group has issued guidance.

A range of COVID-19 Regulatory Position Statements have been prepared by NIEA to ensure pragmatism and flexibility in the waste sector (eg. Authorised Waste Facilities – Temporary variation of licence/permit conditions).

With the reduction in legitimate waste services and increased arisings, there is an increased risk of illegal dumping/fly-tipping. The Department is working closely with local councils on this matter. The NI Direct fly-tipping page has been updated regarding reporting of wasted crime.

– **Provision of Drinking Water**

The Drinking Water Inspectorate within NIEA is working closely with NI Water (NIW) to ensure continued supply of wholesome drinking water. NIEA Water Management Unit is focussing on inspections of catchments used by NIW to abstract raw water supplies.

– **Routine Inspections**

DAERA has paused all routine inspections until 30 April 2020, except those which are essential for public health, animal welfare, plant health or environmental protection and those related to our

¹ Clean your hands and disinfect your bin handles/lids,

Do not put contaminated waste into your recycling, protect your waste workers,

Double bag and set aside for 72 hours before placing in your general waste (black) bin.

Please keep recycling, the materials you put in your recycling are vital resources in packaging production.

regulatory response to pollution and other serious incidents. This will provide a consistent but appropriate approach to inspections in the short term, in order to protect the health of staff and those who they would come into contact with. It will also allow time for consideration and development of alternative approaches.

However where it has been reported or suspected that there has been or there is likely to be potential for a significant impact on public health, animal welfare or pollution / damage to the environment, the pausing of inspections will not apply and staff will investigate these reports (site visits need to comply with Government advice on social distancing and with the provision of suitable PPE appropriate to the nature of the site visit) and enforce legislation.

– Future Viability of Environmental NGOs

A UK wide survey of the eNGO sector has indicated that many are at moderate to high financial risk as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Many eNGOs will be putting a proportion of their staff on furlough. In Northern Ireland, DAERA has been in discussion with the sector to identify key environmental and organisational challenges and where central government may be able to help in the delivery of solutions.

A survey of eNGOs will be undertaken by Northern Ireland Environment Link and NIEA and EMFG senior management is meeting with representatives of the sector later this week. It is important that the eNGO sector remains resilient, retaining capacity and expertise, to continue to deliver key environmental outcomes. DAERA will be considering the needs, sources of funding available and whether further action is required.

– Country Parks and Nature Reserves

NIEA visitor centres, cafes, mobile concessions and public toilet facilities are all closed. Where possible vehicle access to sites has also been closed, however pedestrian access remains; accordingly essential health and safety work within sites is being maintained as far as possible. Numbers visiting Country Parks have seen a significant decline over the past week.

Traffic issues caused by vehicles parking on roads and verges outside sites has been reported at a number of locations, this is a PSNI issue as is engagement with the public on social distancing guidance. Staff have been in communication with the PSNI where necessary.

– Guidance on Controlled Burns

Guidance has been issued advising land owners and land managers to refrain from prescribed burning of heather and other vegetation in order to reduce the risk of accidental wildfires. This will reduce the need for NIFRS to deploy their resources, and potentially environmental, health and other services, to deal with wildfires when all services need to focus as far as possible on Covid related emergencies.

– Burials

A COVID-19 Regulatory Position Statements has been prepared for the expansion of existing graveyards and burial of fallen animals on farms.

– Disposal of Animal By Products (ABP)

There are concerns that the rendering sector may be impacted by COVID-19 leading to possible plant closures which impacts on the capacity for disposal of ABP's within NI. NIEA in conjunction with Veterinary Service and Animal Health Group has agreed a disposal contingency plan should intervention be required.

- Storage of Tallow

Tallow is a by-product of the rendering industry. The normal outlet is to the biodiesel market. There is currently a downturn in the biodiesel market being seen. The market demand for tallow has reduced, therefore, difficulties arise in finding other market outlets. NIEA is working closely with the rendering industry to identify a suitable storage facility for tallow as the rendering companies have limited on site storage.

- Air Quality

DAERA officials have been liaising with District Councils across NI to ensure that air quality monitoring can continue as far as reasonably practicable.

A Departmental Direction to the Chief Inspector NIEA has received Ministerial approval and been issued to NIEA. This document directs the Chief inspector to, if necessary, waive enforcement action against the three electricity generators, in respect of a breach of a permit condition, for reasons which are outside of their control during the COVID-19 pandemic period due to an overriding need to maintain energy supplies in Northern Ireland. This direction applies to the three power stations in Northern Ireland.

- Regulatory Position Statements

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) regulates a number of key industries - including waste management, drinking water, waste water and industrial sites. NIEA also provides expert scientific advice in relation to potential impacts to the environment - such as extending cemeteries in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, and anticipated increase capacity needs in the short term.

The COVID-19 Regulatory Position Statements only applies 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. NIEA will adopt such regulatory positions only if, and when, they are required. They are designed to ensure continued protection of human health and the environment as far as possible, whilst also assisting key industries, such as the waste industry, to keep operating under these extreme COVID-19 conditions.

- Carrier Bag Levy

Issues:

Devolved administrations (including DAERA) received queries from the retail sector in respect of the possibility of being allowed to provide bags free of charge for home deliveries in light of COVID-19. The use of carrier bags for home deliveries will reduce the need for drivers to enter houses and come into contact with the occupants thus reducing the risk of passing on the virus and with the possibility of an increase in staff absences within the retail sector. The use of carrier bags will speed up home deliveries, the number of which have increased significantly.

What we have done:

DAERA made The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Coronavirus Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 under powers conferred on it by sections 77(2), 90(2)(b) and 90(3)(a) of, and paragraphs 1 and 2(b) of Schedule 6 to, the Climate Change Act 2008. For a period of six months due to COVID-19, the requirement to charge for a carrier bag does not apply to bags used for home delivery as part of a grocery delivery service. They came into operation on 1 April 2020.

Update on Essential Legislation

– Environment Bill

- Parliamentary scrutiny of the Environment Bill has been suspended until at least 28 April. It is not yet clear if it will be possible to reconvene the Bill Committee by that date.
- This suspension will afford the Committee some additional flexibility regarding the publication of its report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- A bid has been made for Covid-19 funding to support local councils and waste sector. The funding bid also covers additional communications.

AERA Committee Update - Wednesday 8 April 2020

EMFG – FISHERIES ISSUES

Covid 19 Update

Fisheries - Sea Fishing Sector

- On 3 April 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. An SL1 for the Committee's consideration will be submitted week beginning 5th April.
- The scheme requires approval of DoF and confirmatory resolution in the Assembly.
- The Department's aim is to be in a position to start paying grants by early May and work is already in hand to draft the scheme legislation and devise an application process.

Aquaculture Sector

- There has also been a severe drop in sales of aquaculture products as a result of COVID-19. The predominant European market for shellfish has all but shut down and domestic restaurant trade stopped. As products are sold fresh, there is no option of freezing/storage until the market reopens. The finfish aquaculture sector has suffered similarly, and retail trade has significantly reduced due to the closure of wet fish counters. As a result, increased stocking densities may increase welfare and disease issues. A separate scheme is currently being investigated to support this sector.

Inland Fisheries

- Lough Neagh Fishing Co-operative Society has now suspended its fishing operations due to the markets closing down and also in response to concerns over the health and welfare of staff. Eel processors in Holland have remained closed due to the poor demand and therefore the eel season, due to start on the 1st of May will likely be deferred until later. Boats that had been fishing on the lough have now been tied up with little or no fishing activity taking place.
- The Department is currently considering what additional measures to support the Lough Neagh fishermen can be put in place at this time, other than those already outlined by the Government.
- Angling at the public angling estate waters has now been closed and fishermen have been advised to stay at home at this time and not to go fishing.

Actions and Engagement

- DAERA officials have been actively engaging with all the fisheries sector and a number of meetings have been held with representative groups. The Department is urgently gathering economic evidence from all sectors to underpin any support that will be offered.

Update on Essential Legislation

- The current status of the UK Fisheries Bill is summarised in the table below.

Stage	Westminster	Stage	NI Assembly
1. Introduced (House of Lords)	29 January 2020		
2. Second Reading	11 February 2020		
3. Committee Stage	2 -11 March 2020		
		1. Committee Evidence Session	5 March 2020
		2. Legislative Consent Memorandum laid	23 March 2020
4. Report Stage	Date to be confirmed		
		3. DAERA Committee Report published	Date to be confirmed
		4. Legislative Consent Motion	Date to be confirmed
5. Final Reading	Date to be Confirmed		

Next Steps

- DEFRA expects the Devolved Administrations to have had the Legislative Consent Motions debated in their respective assemblies before the Third Reading of the Bill in the first House at Westminster.
- The dates for the Report Stage and Final Reading for the Fisheries Bill at Westminster have not yet been scheduled.
- The Minister laid the Legislative Consent Memorandum for the Fisheries Bill in the Business Office on Friday 13 March 2020. No date has been scheduled for its Legislative Consent Motion in the Assembly.
- Notwithstanding COVID-19 developments, the House of Lords is due back from its Easter recess on 21 April 2020. DEFRA had indicated previously that Report Stage would occur as soon as possible after the Easter recess.
- 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.

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- Fishing support bid already covered in above briefing. The Department has placed a bid of £1.5m to DoF to support the fisheries sector during COVID 19 crisis.

Questions from the Assembly Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, which require responses below (If the updates above have answered these questions already, please indicate that below.)

How does this crisis impact on the local fishing industry?

- The fishing sector in Northern Ireland has been badly hit by the impact of COVID-19 and the Department has received many appeals from the industry and their public representatives to provide some support to assist the industry to cope with a collapse in the markets for seafood.
- The Department has been meeting regularly with representatives from the sea fish catching, processing, aquaculture and inland fishery sectors to assess the situation and identify potential support measures.
- The primary issues are market collapse for seafood and freshwater fish products at this time, and the impact of social distancing which is difficult to observe on fishing vessels. This is resulting in fishers having to cut fishing effort substantially and perhaps tie-up their vessels for days at a time, reducing income. The social distancing is also causing issues in fish processing plants.

AERA Committee Meeting Update – Wednesday 8 April 2020

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 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.

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.

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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

EU LEADER PROGRAMME, TOURISM AND PROJECT STRATUM

LEADER

- DAERA has provided advice to all Councils responsible for administering 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.

- 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.

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.

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.

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 ON ESSENTIAL LEGISLATION

- No Essential Legislation

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.

Questions from the Assembly Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, which require responses below. (If the updates above have answered these questions already, please indicate that below.)

DAERA Direct Offices: have staff been given the option to work from home where possible, bearing in mind that the closure of the livestock marts will substantially reduce the need for DAERA Direct face-to-face services?

Answer to this question is contained above.

Farm Family Health Checks Programme: is consideration being given to utilising this programme especially the mobile van for COVID-19 testing in isolated rural areas?

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) lead on the delivery of the Farm Families Health Checks service across Northern Ireland and following consultation with DAERA and the Public Health Agency took the decision to suspend the service on the basis that the nursing resource could be best utilised elsewhere in the response to Covid 19. The vehicle layout also makes social distancing difficult. NHSCT are aware of the capacity issues with the FFHC vehicle and will keep its potential functionality under review as the Covid 19 situation continues to develop.

COVID-19 update Estate Transformation Division

In response to COVID-19 the Department has temporarily closed its Headquarters buildings at Ballykelly House, Ballykelly and the Klondyke Building in Belfast city centre. Dundonald House remains open as a Headquarters location in order that essential Department staff can work from it if required.

As stated above all DAERA Direct Offices remain open to staff. This is in order to support the food supply essential functions of trade certification, identification, registration and movement of animals and Tuberculosis testing.

Where staff remain working within DAERA Direct Offices and other DAERA buildings social distancing has been put in place within the local offices. Furthermore where required, staff rotas have been introduced to reduce the number of staff in offices and to facilitate social distancing. Additional laptops are also being sought so that more staff can work from home.

Public access to the Department's forests and country parks has been restricted as far as possible with car parks closed to all vehicles, playparks and on-site toilet facilities closed along with camping amenities, museums, mobile concessions and visitor centres.

Throughout this period the Department has sought to follow guidance provided by the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the NI Civil Service on measures to take to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Original action taken across the DAERA estate by premises teams included ensuring that PHA COVID 19 posters were prominently displayed; adequate supplies of soap and towels were available for staff to carry out good hand hygiene practices; and that cleaning was focussed on the high traffic communal areas.

The Department is also currently working with DOF in order to ensure that essential maintenance works etc. can be carried out during this period on key DAERA buildings including those which may be of use in responding to COVID-19.

Covid-19 Update Forest Service

With the backdrop of the Covid-19 outbreak, Forest Service has been managing operations consistent with its business continuity planning and is continuing to focus on its role in delivering essential business in the context of societal needs and in accordance with the UK government and Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance.

Related announcements made to date include a statement on 24 March by the Minister to close car parks and public access facilities to DAERA-owned forests. The decision was taken following a significant increase in footfall from people wishing to exercise in open spaces.

On 28 March the NI Executive introduced *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020*, which further restricted movements without reasonable excuse. Forest Service is now working in collaboration with PSNI as required to minimise risks associated with large gatherings in contravention of social distancing guidance.

Forest Service essential services focus on:

Safety of staff, contractor and the public in forests

To minimise the number of individuals in forests and as a result the likelihood of social interaction, Forest Service has closed all camping and caravanning facilities as well as visitor centres, mobile concessions and cafes, playpark facilities and public toilets. Forest Service has also closed vehicular access to forests and suspended any events up to the end of May at which point the position will be reviewed.

For staff safety, Forest Service are complying with the latest guidance from the PHA in implementing measures to safeguard staff. The position regarding workforce placement as at 2 April is that approximately 95% of the workforce are working away from an office environment, either at home using IT or working remotely between home and direct worksites including remote forests.

Minimisation of effects on the economy & provision of essential services

To prevent wildfire spread, damage to the environment and Forest Service assets valued at approximately £340M; FS staff, operational processes and emergency fire plan procedures are required to be in place and maintained so as to scan for, and where necessary control, emerging forest fires. As we enter Spring/Summer DAERA forests can become increasingly susceptible to fires both occurring naturally and from risks associated with prescribed burning which is used to improve game habitat and the quality of upland grazing areas that can be otherwise dominated by heather. With emergency services already stretched to combat the Covid-19 outbreak, the Minister urged farmers on 2 March to refrain from carrying out prescribed burning from mid-March to mid-April. This is to prevent the risk of prescribed burning growing out of control and resulting in wildfires which require NI Fire and Rescue Service and PSNI involvement as well as that from the NI Environment Agency and Forest Service.

Forest Service is continuing to support customers and suppliers by ensuring financial transactions continue without undue delay so as to help maintain industry and support those businesses which may be considered 'at risk'. This is particularly important when considering those businesses which contribute to the food chain such sawmills who produce pallet wood from Forest Service trees. This pallet wood is in turn used for packaging material that enables goods transportation. Focus on other food chain related activities includes the maintaining and continuation of field based sampling,

inspections and issuing of phytosanitary certificates which are necessary to safeguard seed potato crops and the supporting of trade.

AERA Committee Meeting Update – Wednesday 8 April 2020

Central Services & Contingency Planning

Covid 19 update

Update on Essential Finance or Budget information

- The Department submitted bids to DoF for COVID-19 Funding on 1 April 2020 as set out in Table 1 below with the projected profile over the first quarter and beyond separately identified.

Table 1: DAERA Funding for COVID-19 – Resource Profile			
Sector	2020-21 Total £m	2020-21 First Quarter Requirement £m	2020-21 After First Quarter Requirement £m
Farming/Animal Welfare	105.0	52.5	52.5
Rural Affairs	1.0	0.3	0.7
Fisheries	1.5	1.5	-
Environment – Waste	16.7	1.0	15.7
Total	124.2	55.3	68.9

- DAERA will keep these profiles under review as the position evolves over the coming weeks and months and further details are set out below.

Farming / Animal Welfare

- The most impacted sectors are projected to be Dairy, Poultry, Pigs, Beef, Sheep, Horticulture and Eggs and it is assumed that around 20% of product will not be moving off farms from around three months from April because of restrictions in processing chains. This is estimated to cost around £105m Resource DEL and would cover the cost of lost product and disposing of the product. In addition, if there are any general market disturbances, DAERA would be looking for both National and EU funding.

Rural Affairs

- On the Rural Affairs side a further £1m would:
 - continue and enhance the Assisted Rural Travel Scheme to support isolated rural dwellers access assistance and essential services;
 - assist the work of Rural Support in providing helpline and follow-up support services for rural dwellers and farmers during and after the COVID-19 outbreak; and
 - provide community grants to organisations assisting the over 50s and those in rural areas in need of assistance in dealing with the impacts of COVID-19.

Fisheries

- A number of potential support packages for the provision of short-term, financial assistance to the Northern Ireland Fishing Industry have been considered. This is as a result of the impact on markets and operational factors (crew health and crew availability) associated exclusively with the current COVID-19 situation. The Department has considered the other financial

assistance schemes that are available to UK businesses, employees and the self-employed and which appear open to fishermen and vessel owners. The proposed assistance to Northern Ireland fishing vessels is tailored towards addressing a gap in the existing support. This relates to assistance with the fixed costs incurred by a vessel when it is unable to go to sea.

- This package, coupled to other support mechanisms available, would help the fish catching sector keep their workers and put them in a position to respond immediately and effectively when markets for fish recover and safe working practices are introduced. Most workers on sea fishing boats are classified as either contracted staff or self-employed and the measures introduced should be available to vessel owners and their crews in respect of loss of earnings.

Environment - Waste

- A COVID-19 Waste Management Contingency Group has been established to provide a DAERA aligned policy and regulatory response to the current COVID-19 crisis for the waste sector in Northern Ireland. It has the following key objectives:
 - To provide support to local councils to prevent public health issues arising from waste;
 - To provide timely and responsive regulatory direction to local councils and the waste sector to safeguard human health and protect the environment;
 - To provide guidance and information to the waste sector to assist with maintaining a post-crisis viable sector; and
 - To contribute to, and provide support to local councils, for the communicating of clear and consistent information to the public on dealing with household waste.
- This bid covers costs including communications, dealing with fly-tipping and waste storage. However, the largest element relates to landfill costs. In the event that Councils are unable to maintain uncontaminated waste streams, Councils would be forced to direct increased levels or, in a worst case scenario, all waste to landfill. The bid represents the cost of 12 weeks recycling diverted to landfill at £120 per tonne. This would be a substantial burden on Councils for which they are not resourced. In addition, remedial work would need to be carried out on existing landfill sites to facilitate increased usage and those sites that have been mothballed would need work carried out on them to bring them back into use.

Covid 19 update

- The ferry network from NI to GB is the main, if not really the only effective means of moving vast quantities of food to our homes via a range of retailers and suppliers. There are approximately 200 lorries of foodstuffs moving to Northern Ireland daily, across all ferry sailings. The timings of some of the ferry crossings could be critical to some retail and manufacturing businesses in meeting just in time supply models. Many businesses do not have adequate storage space, so just in time deliveries are key to successful food chain security.
- Additionally, there are regular shipments of minerals and vitamins for complete feed for pig and poultry and to cut this off would put further strain on the food supply chain with all the potential consequences that could bring.

- P&O had advised on Thursday 2nd April that changes to their sailing schedule would be effective from today (Monday 6th April) which has resulted in an approximately 50% reduction in sailings.
- Stena have since also indicated a reduction in their sailings. This will have an immediate on operations of grocers across NI. 70% of the value of goods that comes in GB-NI is based on retail.