

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

£1.7M FURTHER COVID-19 SUPPORT FOR THE SEA FISH CATCHING SECTOR

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Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):

- 1 I wish to make a written statement to the Assembly to advise Members of my decision to provide a further £1.7m COVID-19 financial support to the sea fish catching sector, which continues to feel the impact of lost markets and lower prices as a result of COVID 19.
- 2 In April, I allocated £1.5 million emergency support to Northern Ireland's fleet to enable them to deal with the immediate impacts of the pandemic. The fleet continues to feel the adverse impacts of the pandemic with significantly reduced markets that are predicted to remain depressed for the remainder of this year.
- 3 I have therefore allocated a further £1.7 million for our full-time fishing fleet, bringing the total amount of support over this year to £3.2 million. This is the most far-reaching support package anywhere in the UK and I am proud to support our local fishing industry.
- 4 This latest support has been developed in discussions between industry representatives and my officials and helps to address the ongoing issues of over-supply and low prices whilst still allowing the fleet to respond to market demands as export markets and the hospitality sector continue to recover.
- 5 The assistance will be provided in two parts to, the trawling and dredging sector, and the potting sector respectively.

Trawl and dredge sector (£1.3m)

- 6 Over the next week, all owners of NI registered trawlers and dredgers, will be contacted by the Department and invited to apply for assistance. The mobile gear scheme is being funded through the Temporary Cessation Measure of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.
- 7 Since the announcement of the earlier sea fishing support scheme in April the European Union amended Article 33 of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund to allow it to be used for COVID 19 support. The governance arrangements for this element of the funding will be those that apply to the delivery of the EMFF.

Potting sector (£0.4m)

- 8 Due the seasonal nature of potting for shellfish the EMFF Temporary Cessation Measure is not deemed appropriate and the Static Gear Scheme will be supported through national resources. Owners of vessels that exclusively use static gear will be contacted towards the end of this month.

- 9 This scheme is smaller in value (less than £400k) and will be based on fixed costs. It will operate in a similar way to the scheme provided to the fishing sector earlier this year. However this time costs will be based on actual fixed costs rather than banding based on average fixed costs. There is still some work to do on this element of the scheme including seeking Department of Finance approval. I believe that given the relatively low cost of the fixed cost scheme and the availability of funding, this should be a relatively straightforward process. This element will also require a legislative scheme that must be made jointly with DoF.
- 10 Similar governance arrangements will be put in place for the fixed cost element as were introduced for the previous fixed cost support.
- 11 In the coming weeks I intend to bring forward legislation to the Assembly to enable the delivery of the potting sector scheme.

Eligibility

- 12 For both elements of the funding support, eligibility criteria will apply in order to ensure the benefits provided accrue to the Northern Ireland commercial fishing fleet, address identified need, and provide value for money. These are:
 - a vessel must be NI registered and have a home port within Northern Ireland
 - the vessel for which financial assistance is being sought must have fished for at least 120 days in the preceding 24 months.
 - a vessel must have generated sales of at least £10k during 2019.
 - a vessel must have a track record of fishing in the period for which of support is being sought during 2019, and.
 - a vessel must provide its most recent three years financial accounts as part of the application process in order to calculate the appropriate level of financial assistance.

Conclusion

- 13 This remains a challenging time for our fishing fleet due to COVID-19 and I hope that the proposed support will demonstrate my Department's commitment to, and confidence in, the long-term future of the local industry and help position it to grasp the opportunities that will come during 2021.
- 14 I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my Executive colleagues for their continued support in my efforts to support the fishing industry and coastal communities at this difficult time.