



UFU Position on the Climate Change Committee Advice for NI in relation to the 2050 emissions reduction target

23 February 2021

UFU and climate change

1. The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) is the largest farming organisation in Northern Ireland representing over 11,500 farming families from all farming sectors across NI. Climate change policy falls under the remit of the UFU Environment Committee. The UFU Environment Committee has recently discussed and submitted a response to the DAERA Climate Change Discussion document and considered the Climate Change Committee (CCC) information during discussions on this response. The UFU Environment Committee has not had the opportunity to discuss the subsequent letter from DAERA to the AERA Committee.

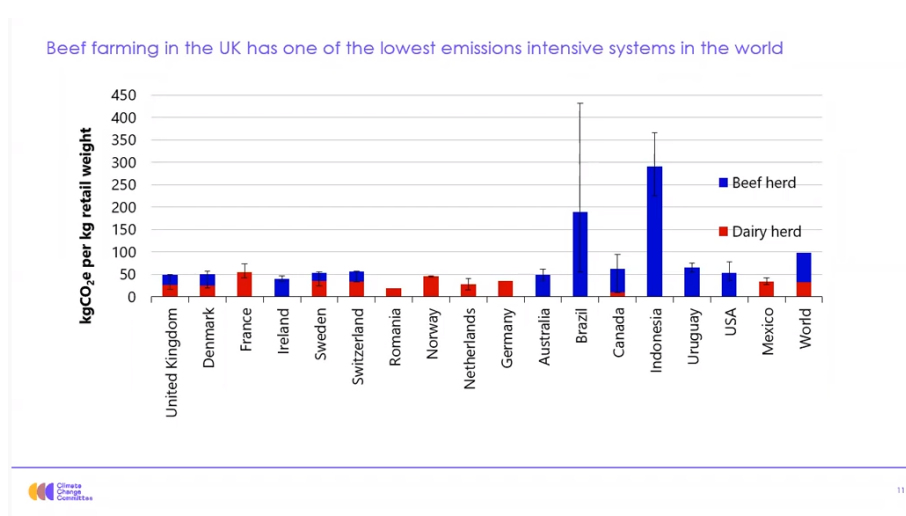
Climate Change Committee (CCC) Advice for NI

2. The CCC letter to Minister Poots re-emphasises the points made by the CCC during the launch of the Sixth Carbon Budget in December 2020. The CCC advice is clear that not all parts of the UK are required to get to net zero emissions for the UK to meet its 2050 net zero target. Advice to both Wales and NI outlines that a 96% and 82% reduction target respectively, reflects a fair contribution to the overall UK Net Zero 2050 target with neither expected to reach net zero. Scotland's earlier target of Net Zero by 2045 is again based on advice from the CCC.
3. The CCC have recognised the importance of NI as a 'significant net exporter of agri-food products' with nearly 50% of all agri-food products produced in NI being consumed in the rest of the UK. They have highlighted that for this reason, some of these emissions could be offset in sinks located elsewhere in the UK. The letter repeats, 'our analysis suggests that NI achieving Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions is not necessary for the UK to meet its climate targets' and sets out a target of 82% by 2050. The CCC clearly state that to achieve net zero in NI by 2050 would result in a substantial reduction in livestock numbers and a much greater share of greenhouse gas removal technologies being located in NI which may not be suitable.
4. In their detailed analysis the CCC have researched and analysed various reduction strategies. It should be noted that the recommended 82% reduction by 2050 will still pose a significant challenge for the agri-food sector and the scale of that challenge should not be underestimated. In order to meet the 82% target, considerable changes are required of NI farmers. For example, to meet this target, the CCC predict a 'transformation in land use'. They expect 46% of agricultural land to be freed up for forestry, agro-forestry, energy crops and restored peatland.¹
5. A 'substantial reduction in output from Northern Ireland's livestock farming sector that goes beyond even the more stretching scenarios' outlined by the CCC is not acceptable to the farming community in NI. This would have serious implications not just for farmers but for the wider rural economy and society.
6. Farming is vital for NI's economy, environment, and people. Northern Ireland farmers and growers are an essential part of rural economies and communities, providing jobs and driving

¹ NI Institute of Agricultural Science Webinar 19 February 2021 [NIIAS webinar: Northern Ireland on the road to Net Zero - YouTube](#)

growth both in food production and in diversified industries such as renewable energy and tourism. Food and Drink is a £5.2 billion industry in Northern Ireland and is the region’s largest manufacturer supporting around 70,000 local jobs (based on 49,423 total farmers and workers and 23,625 food and drink processing full time and employment agency workers). These jobs also support many more in ancillary industries e.g., transport, feed, animal health, supplies, construction etc. The NI economy relies on local food production. It is unlikely that changes to land use will result in similar employment opportunities.

7. A balance is needed to deliver sustainable local food production, which is the backbone of rural communities and the NI economy, but also for the environment. While greenhouse gas (GHGs) emissions from farms can be reduced they cannot be eliminated. Reducing GHGs will add additional costs to farm businesses and a balanced pathway with the right support is needed to ensure a sustainable future for family farms, the agri-food sector and the rural economy. It is also important that in tackling GHG emissions that it does not lead to other environmental trade-offs, exacerbating other environmental issues. Selecting an inappropriate target could result in perverse outcomes such as offshoring emissions. If red meat and dairy products are produced elsewhere to supply the UK market this results in carbon leakage. The figure below shows that ruminant farming in the UK and Ireland produces much lower emissions than other countries therefore it makes sense for NI to produce red meat and dairy from sustainable livestock farming here as the contribution to global emissions will be much lower.



8.

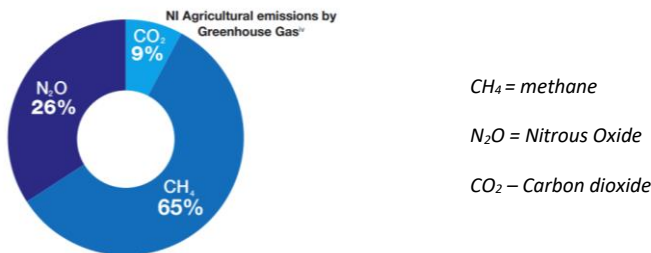
9. Source: Climate Change Committee presentation to NIAS 19 February 2021

10. In addition to carbon leakage, cutting livestock numbers and reducing agricultural production in NI would not solve the global challenge of feeding a growing population. The ability of local ruminant livestock to turn grass and other by-products into quality protein we can eat and the maintenance of some of the most iconic landscapes and habitats by grazing livestock must be recognised.

11. The CCC could not be clearer in their reports stating ‘Our current analysis does not show a credible pathway for Northern Ireland to reach Net Zero greenhouse gas emissions as part of its contribution to the UK Net Zero target. We therefore do not recommend that Northern Ireland set a Net Zero target for all greenhouse gases. Instead, Northern Ireland should aim for at least an 82% reduction in all greenhouse gases by 2050.’

12. The UFU believes that it would be totally unacceptable for the NI Assembly to accept an earlier legislative target that would result in such significant and serious consequences and would set a dangerous precedent around ignoring independent expert advice. If local politicians decide to stray away from the CCC advice they must clearly set out why they would do so, the consequences of this action, carry out a regulatory impact, rural needs and equality assessments and outline to farmers and employees in the agri-food and ancillary industries as to why their jobs and industry are to be sacrificed and off-shored.

Emissions profile in NI



NI agricultural emissions by Greenhouse Gas²

13. In Northern Ireland, the emissions profile reflects the economic importance of the agri-food sector and agriculture is the largest source sector of GHG emissions at 28%. The main Greenhouse Gases from agriculture are methane, nitrous oxide and carbon dioxide. While agriculture is the largest emitter in Northern Ireland of Greenhouse Gas emissions – these are largely natural unavoidable emissions from ruminants. Currently, it is not possible to produce high quality red meat and milk without producing methane, a greenhouse gas. Total GHG emissions in Northern Ireland account for around 5% of all UK GHG emissions.

14. For some time, agricultural organisations from across Europe, UK and New Zealand (including the UFU)³ have been calling for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to consider short lived pollutants and recognise this aspect within the international inventory. GWP100, the current metric that is used to measure emissions by the IPCC and the CCC, does not recognise the significant differences between short-lived gases, such as methane, and long-lived gases, such as carbon dioxide. GWP* or GWP-we, has been developed by climate scientists at the University of Oxford, and is much more accurate in calculating the warming impact of the different greenhouse gases in both the short and long term. Given the scale of the climate change crisis, the UFU considers it vitally important that the best scientific information and tools available are being used to inform and build trust in the decisions that global and domestic policy makers are taking. This includes emission reduction targets and there needs to be further debate on whether a separate target for methane is appropriate.

² <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/16.17.038%20Efficient%20Farming%20GHG%20Action%20Plan%202016-2020.PDF>

³ <https://www.ufuni.org/news/agricultural-organisation-unite-to-call-for-ipcc-to-consider-gwpgwp-we-for-greenhouse-gas-emissions>

15. The development of GWP* is a clear indication of how the science is continuing to develop therefore it is vital that any future Climate Change Bill includes sufficient flexibility to allow separate targets and the consideration of new emerging evidence and science on climate change. It is also important that legislative processes can respond quickly to emerging evidence.
16. The agriculture and forestry sectors are unique in their ability to remove GHG emissions from the atmosphere. The agricultural and forestry sectors are the only sectors which can do this and therefore the sectors are a vital in reaching net zero; NI will not deliver a net zero target without the agricultural and forestry sectors. Carbon sequestration must be a key element in future climate change policy and farmers must be recognised for their sequestration role. More detailed knowledge of the carbon sequestration potential is needed in Northern Ireland and an accurate baseline established.

NFU Net Zero – England

17. The National Farmers' Union in England has set an ambitious target for English agriculture to meet a net zero target by 2040. This is an aspiration, not an expectation that every farm can reach net zero. This issue has been discussed at UK Farming Union meetings and NFU England recognises that the different regions within the UK face different challenges in relation to net zero. The NFU respects the UFU position on this issue. NI has a very different farming landscape in terms of scale and land use than that in England with a much greater reliance on ruminants (NI has a greater proportion of total cattle and sheep (78%) and dairy (11%) farms compared to England (44% and 7%)). NFU has also been clear that while they make progress on reducing the impact on the climate, they should not reduce the 'capacity to feed UK consumers with high quality, affordable British food'. The NFU have clearly outlined that the UK must not achieve its climate change ambitions by exporting UK production, or our greenhouse gas emissions, to other countries.

Tackling greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture in NI

18. The UFU has been a member of the NI Agriculture and Forestry Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership (GHGIP) a voluntary local partnership between the agri-food sector, science, government and environmental organisations since its inception in 2010. The GHGIP produced an 'Efficient Farming Cuts Greenhouse Gases' plan which sets out a roadmap for the agricultural sector with support from DAERA. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/tackling-greenhouse-gas-emissions-agriculture>. This has helped to drive progress towards greater on-farm efficiency and contributed to a reduction in greenhouse gases of 11% from peak agricultural emissions in 1998. The GHGIP must be supported to continue in its work to deliver further emissions reductions from agriculture in NI in a balanced way.
19. It is essential that a programme of climate research evolves in Northern Ireland, specifically for the agricultural sector which plays such an important part in the NI economy. This must include research around mitigation, adaptation and carbon sequestration. The NI Executive must provide support for research and the development of innovative technologies as well as adopting a framework that allows this to be progressed in a timely manner to allow businesses to develop and remain competitive while delivering reductions.