

**Central Service and Contingency Planning
Group**
Central Management Branch



Your reference:
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28 April 2021

Dear Stella

Please find attached briefing on Nature Friendly Farming which has been scheduled for an oral briefing at the AERA Committee on 6 May 2021.

I should be grateful if you would bring this to the attention of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee.

Yours sincerely



Michael Oliver
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer

DAERA update on Nature Friendly Farming

Written Brief for AERA Committee – 6 May 2021

Background

1. Northern Ireland now has a unique opportunity to redefine its agricultural policy for the first time in almost 50 years, with the aim of developing a framework that is better suited to local needs and one that will underpin long term sustainability within the industry.
2. Minister Poots' vision for future agriculture in Northern Ireland is defined around four outcomes:
 - a. An industry that pursues increased productivity as a means to sustained profitability;
 - b. An industry that displays improved resilience to external shocks, which are becoming ever more frequent and to which the industry has become very exposed;
 - c. An industry that is environmentally sustainable in terms of its impact on, and its guardianship of, air quality, water quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity.
 - d. An industry which operates within an efficient, sustainable, and responsive supply chain.
3. We want to help the farm sector to be the best that it can be across these four areas.
4. Nature friendly farming is central to this, and future policy must allow farmers to have the best possible tools at their disposal to deliver on environmental outcomes.
5. We see a strong central role for agri-environment measures that will deliver clear outcomes, as there are many problems to address. Air quality, water quality, biodiversity, soil health and landscape are all heavily influenced by farming. Whilst this influence has not always been positive, it can be positive going forward, but we can only address our environmental challenges if agriculture and farmers are part of the solution. We must join up our environmental ambitions with farm economic activity, where management of the environment becomes a profit centre within the farm business rather than a cost centre.

Future Support

6. Looking to the shape of a future support regime, we see a role for a simplified area based income support safety net, set at a level which doesn't blunt innovation or productivity. This could embrace some of the recommendations of the Sustainable Land Management Strategy, using soil analysis and management techniques to optimise the value of nutrients on the farm and derive maximum economic and environmental benefits.

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7. We see a role for coupled support, targeting, in particular, suckler cow and breeding ewe producers. That does not mean a return to the old coupled payments of the past. We need to explore how coupled support can be designed to drive better economic and environmental performance and not just use it as another means of allocating payments to farmers.
8. We are also keen to examine how a genetics and livestock data programme could be embedded within this to improve the economic and environmental performance of our grazing livestock.
9. Work is ongoing to develop future agri-environment policy and schemes. Schemes to facilitate ecosystem restoration, and to address biodiversity loss, and water and air quality are under consideration as part of this policy development. The potential for nature friendly farming to have a positive impact on the success of future schemes is also recognised. Officials are engaging with farmers, and farmer and environmental organisations to develop policy and schemes and to ensure that farmers and landowners are supported to deliver environmental outcomes that will make a significant contribution to restoring nature.
10. We need to expand investment and knowledge tools to support better nutrient management and reductions in carbon, ammonia and nitrates emissions. We need to explore the possibilities of encouraging the farming of carbon through a range of measures, including land management techniques and increased woodland planting.
11. There is also a need for continuing professional development - something that is absolutely vital within farming as we move forward.
12. It is also important to say that we see a role for better succession planning. We have an opportunity to develop an approach to succession which respects the farmer who is stepping back and assists the younger farmer who is moving forward.
13. Business as usual for many farms will not be an option; the future is about doing more with less, in a sustainable and innovative way. Nature friendly farming is central to this. We look forward to engaging with you on the Department's proposals over the coming months.