

Farmers For Action

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Nature Friendly Farming Stakeholder Submission

Requested by Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on 3rd March 2021

Farmers For Action's Steering Committee having met some of those already involved in the push for Nature Friendly Farming in Northern Ireland and have the utmost respect for their views and aims, however, people across the world have to be fed at least 3 to 4 times in every 24 hours every day of the year, COVID-19 or not, climate change or not, Brexit or not, poor farm gate prices or not and so the list goes on - nevertheless the people still have to be fed!

At this point our Steering Committee refer to a statement by an expert gentleman in England recently who said that the last 100 years were about the increased use of chemicals in agriculture – the next 100 will be all about how to decrease their use! FFA's Steering Committee go further on two counts and say 1) that the last 100 years were about a complete swap from horse power to fossil fuelled tractor power, the next 100 years must be a complete swap from fossil fuelled tractors to electric or other green tractors and 2) the last 100 years have driven family farmers to intensively specialise their farms in one sector, whereas the next 100 years must be about lessening intensive sectors and a return to crop rotation and therefore nature friendly farming whilst still being able to feed the people.

In addition, they point to all the exaggerated and unfair blame farmers seem to be receiving about natural methane emissions, on top of this the increasing difficulties trying to farm with changing weather patterns, poor farm gate prices and not to mention the cost of the changes that will be needed to mitigate the use of fossil fuels in agriculture alongside farmers doing their best to improve emissions.

The question is how do we solve all of this and become increasingly nature friendly – FFA's Steering Committee would first of all point to the Northern Ireland Farm Welfare Bill already with this Committee. Farmers For Action fully supports the NI Farm Welfare Bill along with all the other organisations in NI Farm Groups supporting it. This Bill if enacted

would return family farmers across Northern Ireland a minimum of the cost of production inflation linked plus a margin for their produce – this would see a rise in farm incomes of some 60% on average to a sustainable minimum level– this would automatically mean that farming in Northern Ireland would be viable, therefore, many of the 57 - 60% part-time farmers across Northern Ireland would return to the land full time, leaving jobs in their wake for others to take. Most importantly with these farmers returning to farm there would be less con-acre available, therefore, larger farms depending on con-acre would be happy about losing con-acre because they would have increased returns via less production which would in turn go towards more nature friendly farming on a big scale fairly quickly. In addition, with virtually all sectors being viable there would be a big move by many farmers back to rotational cropping which would also increase CO₂ absorption, note - Northern Ireland's cropping area has massively reduced since the 70's particularly in cereals and other crops, where nature used to thrive with crop diversity. Very importantly, young farmers would decide to remain on the family farm automatically due to profitability and therefore no need for almost forced succession planning currently being touted.

FFA's Steering Committee always supported the NI Farm Welfare Bill going forward because farmers across Northern Ireland and across these islands and indeed around the world must have the funds to carry out the following sustainability changes the world now requires for man to live, those are; swap chemicals for mechanical weeding and crop control by electric tractors / robots where possible, in addition they must have the funds to make the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy equipment, with further funds needed to return to rotational cropping and production. We must keep and maintain our family farm structure because it is best placed to deliver harmony within the Environment for nature friendly farming and indeed tourism.

Above all if the NI Farm Welfare Bill was enacted it provides an excellent automatic opportunity to allow an enhanced Nature Friendly Farming system to grow and flourish in Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely

William Taylor
FFA NI co-ordinator