



Nature Friendly Farming

Evidence to the AERA Committee

April 2021

Ulster Farmers' Union

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.

Introduction

2. The UFU believes that farmers across NI are currently nature friendly.
3. Farming has shaped our landscape in Northern Ireland creating different environments which support our economy, rural communities, tourism and recreation. Local farmers manage approximately 78% of the total NI land area and not only help to manage the environment but produce high quality safe and affordable food and provide employment. Farmers in Northern Ireland have an inherent interest in maintaining their land in good condition and protecting the environment to assure long term productivity on their farm and to enable them to pass on their natural assets to the next generation in a better condition.
4. 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 growth both in food production and in diversified industries such as renewable energy and tourism. Farmers were recognized as 'key workers' during the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of secure local food production was consistently noted.
5. 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 and local farmers.
6. A balance is needed to deliver sustainable local food production, which is the backbone of rural communities the NI economy, the environment and nature.

Sustainable farming and food production

7. The UFU believe that the focus should be on sustainable farms, that is farms that are environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. Focusing on one of the sustainability pillars without considering the others will result in imbalance.
8. The global demand for food is increasing and, according to UN forecasts, the number of mouths to feed will rise to nearly 10 billion by 2050. For some, the answer is to reduce production to mitigate the impact of agriculture on the environment, but that would not solve the global challenge of feeding the growing population of the world. The question is how trade-offs between climate, biodiversity, food production, and rural development should be managed. Reducing agricultural production would only move production to countries where food production has a higher environmental impact. It is recognised that NI farmers are some

of the most sustainable in the world and therefore it is better to support high quality local produce from local farmers than import from elsewhere. For example, Beef production in Western Europe is currently 2.5 times more efficient in managing carbon emissions than the global average. It is important that fair prices are paid for high quality food to ensure farms are economically sustainable.

Environmental Challenges

9. There are environmental challenges across NI that farmers will need to address, these challenges are not unique to NI and are replicated through the world. Support for research, knowledge transfer and new technologies will be vital as NI continues to embrace these challenges and deliver further environmental improvements at the same time as supplying high quality sustainable local food and supporting the economy.

Agri-Environment Schemes

10. Farmers in Northern Ireland have embraced agri-environment schemes over the years. Between 2007-2013 the Agri-environment Programme supported on average 11,699 farm holdings and 433,263 hectares (around 43% of agricultural land in Northern Ireland) with the aim of enhancing biodiversity, improving water quality, enhancing the landscape and mitigating climate change. Since the programme began in 2007, £187million has been provided to farmers in these schemes, with a peak in participation at the end of 2009, with 12,600 participants and 468,000 hectares of agricultural land under agreement.¹
11. From 2014, the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) was developed. Delays to launching the EFS resulted in many farmers who had previously been involved in the agri-environment programme dropping out of an official agri-environmental contract. There have been considerable issues with EFS; farmers have been restricted in the amount of environmental works they can do in the wider scheme due to the cap imposed by DAERA. The removal of the 'Watercourse Stabilisation and Fencing' measure also coincided with a significant drop in farmers' interest to the scheme and the impractical prescriptions imposed in some of the EFS Higher measures also resulted in lower uptake on some farms. EFS Higher was repeatedly over-subscribed however DAERA did not have the resources to facilitate applications again resulting in lower uptake.
12. The UFU have been drafting proposals for a future agri-environment scheme that will deliver more for both farmers and the environment.

Conacre

13. It is also important to recognise that approximately a third of land in NI is let out in conacre, a system of letting agricultural land that is unique to Ireland offering short term leases to tenant farmers. This system presents its own challenges often hampering long term planning,

¹ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/17.18.192%20Ex%20Post%20Evaluation%20of%202007-13%20RDP%20Programme%20Final.PDF>

preventing investment in the land and excluding the land from agri-environment schemes which require security of tenure usually over several years. The conacre system needs to be addressed to help the long-term sustainability of farms in NI.

Future Support

14. The UFU's major objective from any future agricultural policy framework is to deliver sustainable food production. An integral element of this is to encourage environmentally sustainable farming practices. The UFU has submitted [initial views](#) on future support to DAERA in a previous stakeholder engagement exercise in October 2018 and the Union is currently working on a range of reports to help inform our decisions on the best mechanism to support farmers going forward. As outlined above, UFU have been drafting proposals for a future agri-environment scheme that will deliver more for both farmers and the environment.