

**From the Office of the
Minister of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs**



Department of
**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

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Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Chair of the AERA Committee
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Belfast
BT4 3XX
Committee.AgriEnvRural@niassembly.gov.uk

DAERA Private Office
First Floor, Clare House
303 Airport Road West
Sydenham Intake
Belfast, BT3 9ED
Telephone: 028 9052 4140
Email: private.office@daera-ni.gov.uk

Our Ref: SUB-0231-2025
Date: 4 March 2025

Dear Robbie,

AGRICULTURE BILL - FUTURE OF THE FRUIT AND VEGETABLE AID SCHEME

During the debate on the Assembly Motion on the extension of the Agriculture Bill's Committee Stage, I asked that the Members seek to expedite their scrutiny to the fullest extent possible.

I have been following the Committee's evidence sessions closely and am aware that, despite my previous assurances, the mushroom sector remains concerned for its immediate future. I have noted the feedback from the mushroom sector that there is currently no suitable alternative support for them within the proposed horticulture schemes, nor the wider Sustainable Agriculture Programme. In recognition of that, I am very pleased to confirm to you today that **I will not be closing the FVAS at the end of 2025**. This would allow Producer Organisations with a head office in Northern Ireland to submit a new operational programme for approval in September 2025.

I have also instructed my officials to begin preparatory work on a replacement scheme to be developed in co-design with the horticultural sector, informed by the ongoing policy review of the current FVAS.

I trust that this will provide the Committee with additional assurance as to the intentions of the Bill and this will in turn aid Members in their forthcoming deliberations. Indeed, hopefully the Committee will support the Bill in its current form. If enacted, the Bill would provide the discretion to ensure that Executive earmarked funding for agriculture, agri-environment, fisheries, and rural development is used for the benefit of NI stakeholders only. In the absence of the Bill, the risk remains that DAERA would be liable to provide funding for the benefit of non-NI based growers. While this is a very complex landscape, and will depend

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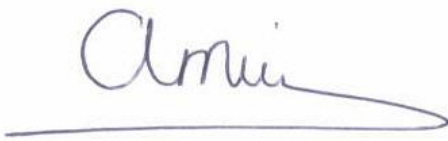
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on a number of factors, including decisions by the POs themselves, this could be more than an additional £1.5m for the 2026/27 financial year. Furthermore, the legislation would also provide me with scope to amend the current FVAS rules to better meet DAERA strategic priorities and the needs of local stakeholders.

Clearly, stakeholders will be keen to know the position as soon as possible so that they can plan ahead. I have asked my officials to liaise directly with the relevant stakeholders on foot of this letter.

I trust that the Committee will find this helpful, and that it will facilitate Members in their deliberation. It remains my hope that the Bill can complete its Assembly passage as soon as possible before Summer Recess.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'A. Muir', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

ANDREW MUIR MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs