



Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Regulation (EU) 2024/2516 Amending Regulation (EU)
2019/1009 as regards the Digital Labelling of EU Fertilising
Products: Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural
Affairs

10 October 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Regulation (EU) 2024/2516 Amending Regulation (EU) 2019/1009 as regards the Digital Labelling of EU Fertilising Products: Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Philip McGuigan (Chairperson)
Mr David Brooks (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Mr Jonathan Buckley
Ms Joanne Bunting
Mr Declan Kearney
Ms Kate Nicholl
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Eóin Tennyson

Witnesses:

Mr Brian Ervine
Mr Alan Lunn

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

The Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): I welcome from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Alan Lunn, who is responsible for fertiliser policy in the environmental policy branch, and Brian Ervine, who is head of environmental planning in the same branch. I invite you to present your assessment of the new regulation.

Mr Brian Ervine (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you. First, it would be helpful to the Committee for me to explain a bit of background about fertilisers, how they are labelled and what the market for them is in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has a large agriculture sector, so we rely heavily on imported fertilisers, because there are no chemical fertiliser manufacturers in Northern Ireland. Fertilisers are blended into different compounds and so on, but the vast majority of fertilisers come in as ready-made product.

Last year, 220,000 tons of fertiliser were imported into Northern Ireland. That is down on the historical trend. Four years ago, it was more than 300,000 tons. In a way, that is a good thing, because if that figure is coming down and agricultural output is maintained, it means that fertilisers are being used more efficiently. In our agriculture systems, the other part of the fertiliser inputs, as well as chemical fertilisers, is livestock manures, which are a very valuable fertiliser. From an efficiency and environmental point of view, if better use is made of livestock manures, there will be less need for chemical fertiliser. With any fertilisers, however, you want to use them as efficiently as possible. The information on the label that comes with a fertiliser is therefore very important.

Fertilisers often come in in bulk and are then packaged. Farmers will often use large quantities, so they will come in big bulk bags. Those bags will perhaps weigh 600 kg. I have some hard copies for the Committee to pass around — apologies to those who are attending online — to give members an indication of what the packaging and the labels look like. You will see that there is now a lot of information on a label. The point of having digital labelling of fertilisers is to clean up the labels to make them easier to read and for them to have the essential information on them. Furthermore, more detailed information can be made available on a digital label.

That is the concept behind the regulation. What is also driving the regulation is the fact that chemical fertilisers are usually either a straight fertiliser containing one nutrient, such as nitrogen, or a compound fertiliser containing a mixture of nutrients. That content is relatively easily specified, but, over time, we are moving to using more different types of fertilisers, such as organic fertilisers that are manufactured from, for example, manures and blended to get certain nutrient compositions. Those more complex fertilisers are coming along. The current EU regulation — the EU fertilising products regulation, to which this digital labelling is a proposed amendment — has come about to take account of newer fertilisers that are made from organics, and those get more complicated, hence the use of and need for digital labels. Without digital labels, you would end up with a very big label on a bag. That is therefore the main concept behind the regulation.

The regulation of fertilisers is partially harmonised. That means that the EU regulations apply but also that fertilisers can be marketed under UK regulations. As well as the UK regime, which is basically the retained EU regulation — the old regulation, which was regulation 2003/2003 — fertilisers can also be marketed under the Fertilisers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992. There is therefore dual regulation, and fertiliser manufacturers can choose to market under the EU regs or under the UK regime and those Northern Ireland regulations. If you go down the EU route, there is a choice of whether to use digital labels, but, equally, with marketing under that EU regulation, the use of digital labels will be entirely voluntary. It is not mandatory, so there is a lot of choice here for fertiliser suppliers and manufacturers.

In reality, many fertilisers are big, international commodities produced by large companies and traded across the EU and the rest of the world, so a lot of what will come in here will not be specific to the Northern Ireland market. Rather, it will be a bulk commodity. It is likely that, in future, the big companies will probably adopt digital labelling to some extent.

I am already aware that one of the main EU fertiliser companies, which is a main supplier in Northern Ireland, is doing a digital labelling pilot in Germany. Such labelling will be convenient for farmers, given the way in which things are going with high tech and smartphones. A large bag of fertiliser, for example, will have a chip that can be scanned to bring up information about it.

For fertilisers, yes, it is important for the basics to be in place, but having more detailed information is useful as well. On farms, and certainly on advanced farms where a lot of technology is used, nutrient management plans are getting very high tech. Fertiliser can be applied by GPS. The amount of fertiliser that is put on a field can be varied depending on what part of the field needs it. It is therefore becoming a more complex area, and the move to using digital labels fits in with that. As I said, their use is voluntary. A bag of fertiliser, even if it has a digital label, will still have to contain a label with the key information, including the nutrient content, environmental data and safety data. The move to digital labelling will not take away from the need to provide that basic information. What it will do, however, is provide more information without the need for a large, cluttered label.

That is a summary of where we are at. I will say again that the use of digital labelling is voluntary. Companies can choose to use it if they so wish, but they will not have to do it. If they do not use digital labels, all the data and other essential things will still be on the label. It is good to have something that does not appear to have any significant downsides whatsoever and that, hopefully, is not controversial.

The Chairperson (Mr McGuigan): OK. That also makes our life on the Committee easier. Brian, thank you very much for that full analysis of the legislation. No members have any questions. That was pretty straightforward, Brian. Thank you, Alan and Brian.

Mr Irvine: Thank you.