

**Strategic Planning and Corporate Services  
Group**  
Strategic Support Directorate



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

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil  
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'

**Fairmin, Environment  
an' Kintra Matthers**

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

Minister's Office  
Clare House  
303 Airport Road West  
Sydenham Intake  
Belfast BT3 9ED  
Telephone: 028 774 45117  
Email: [paul.mcgranaghan@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:paul.mcgranaghan@daera-ni.gov.uk)

**FROM: PAUL MCGRANAGHAN  
DAERA DALO**

**DATE: 31 MARCH 2026**

**TO: DR. JANICE THOMPSON  
AERA COMMITTEE CLERK**

### **The Cattle Identification (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

**Summary:** The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs intends to make a Statutory Rule (SR), '*The Cattle Identification (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026*'. This SR introduces minor technical amendments to existing domestic cattle identification legislation, to enable the voluntary implementation of Electronic Identification (EID) of cattle in Northern Ireland (NI)

**Business Area:** Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division

**Issue:** To advise the AERA Committee of the Department's intention to make Regulations facilitating the introduction of voluntary EID in NI.

**Restrictions:** None.

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**Action Required:** To note and consider the contents of this SL1, the attached draft Statutory Rule and the associated Explanatory Memorandum.

**Officials Attending:** Neal Gartland, Director of Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division  
Christopher Andrews, Deputy Director of Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division  
Niall McAuley, Divisional Veterinary Officer, Identification, Registration & Movement  
Darrin Fullerton, Livestock Identification and Germinal Products Policy

## Background

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (“DAERA”) proposes to make the above named Statutory Rule under powers conferred on it by sections 11 and 22 and paragraph 11M(1), (3) and (8) of Schedule 2 and paragraph 21(b) of Schedule 7 to, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

The Rule will be laid before the Assembly under the negative procedure and it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 1 July 2026. A copy of the Statutory Rule is attached at **Annex A** and the associated Explanatory Memorandum is attached at **Annex B**.

## Purpose of legislation/policy background

Cattle in NI are currently identified using visual ear tags embossed with the animal’s unique identification number. This system underpins the NI traceability regime, covering births, deaths, movements and disease-related recording requirements.

Electronic Identification (EID) can streamline the recording of all animal events for farmers, markets, abattoirs and the Department. It also reduces errors arising from misreading visual tags, which can result in inaccurate information being entered into the Northern Ireland Farm Animal Information System (NIFAIS).

EID ear tags contain a microchip encoded with an animal’s unique identification number and can be read automatically using an electronic reader. EID tags are available in low frequency (LF), high frequency (HF) and ultra-high frequency (UHF) options. There are benefits and limitations to all tag types, however, the main difference is the speed and range from which tags can be read. Under EU Animal Health Law (AHL), which NI must continue to follow, EID for bovines is optional, but if adopted, LF tags must be used. LF is also being progressed in England and Wales and is already in use in the Republic of Ireland (ROI).

The Committee previously received a written briefing on the benefits of EID and on proposals to introduce voluntary EID from July 2026 (**ACP/25/273**). The Department also advised that mandatory EID is proposed for 2027, subject to the outcome of a public consultation, which closed 23 February 2026. Analysis of those responses is underway and the Committee will be updated in due course once that assessment is complete and a Ministerial decision is made on the matter. This draft SR provides only for voluntary EID. Any move to mandatory EID will require further legislation.

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## Proposed Statutory Rule

AHL rules are supported domestically by several Regulations, including the Cattle Identification (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 1998 (“the 1998 Regulations”), which set out identification requirements, offences and penalties.

As EID is optional under AHL, there is no mandatory requirement for NI to introduce it. However, AHL prescribes technical specifications that must be followed where EID is used. The SR therefore introduces minor technical amendments to the 1998 Regulations to reference the relevant AHL provisions. This will allow herd keepers to choose to use one electronic ear tag in place of a conventional tag, without imposing any obligation to do so.

The introduction of voluntary bovine EID does not pre-empt any future decision on mandatory EID. Rather, it provides herd keepers with greater choice in how they identify their cattle and is being progressed now in response to industry requests. Allowing voluntary EID at this stage will enable larger businesses who already use EID management tags, to adopt the technology sooner. It will also give industry more time to transition to EID tags and to invest in any necessary hardware and software should mandatory EID be introduced at a later date. This phased approach will allow other farms to observe the benefits of EID from early adopters, while continuing to use existing non-EID tags for longer, and will help facilitate the use of existing stocks of non-EID tags.

Making EID tags available from July 2026 on a voluntary basis will also mean that when the Bovine Genetics Project (BGP) commences, with the application of tissue sampling tags for DNA testing of existing breeding animals (expected from September 2026), and for DNA testing of newborn animals (expected from January 2027), these tissue sampling tags could also include EID technology. However, it is important to note that the application of an additional tissue sampling EID tag to existing breeding stock will only be possible if they are already tagged with ‘XI’ prefixed tags. Should they be tagged with ‘UK’ prefixed tags, these are not suitable for EID, as the 12-digit number which starts with a ‘9’ on UK tags cannot be programmed on LF EID tags. Therefore, such tissue tags being added to animals under the BGP would be non-EID tags.

## Consultation

As voluntary EID does not impose new obligations on herd keepers or industry, no public consultation is required. A separate public consultation on mandatory EID closed on 23 February and is currently being analysed. The Committee will be informed of the outcome of that consultation in due course.

## Position in GB/ROI

### *Great Britain*

The Welsh Government consulted in June 2025 on introducing LF EID, with mandatory implementation for newborn calves proposed for 2027 at the earliest. Likewise in England, Defra announced on 2 June 2025, that LF EID will be made mandatory for newborn calves from January 2027. The Scottish Government consulted on the introduction of bovine EID in April 2024 and confirmed in February 2025 that it will introduce mandatory UHF EID from 2027, beginning with newborn calves. There are no plans to introduce bovine EID on a voluntary basis in GB.

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## ***Republic of Ireland (ROI)***

In the ROI bovine EID is now well embedded using LF technology and has been a mandatory requirement for newborn cattle since July 2022.

## **Equality Impact**

The Department is required under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to screen the proposed changes to ascertain if an Equality Impact Assessment is required. A screening exercise was, therefore, carried out on the SR and no equality issues were identified.

## **Regulatory Impact / Better Regulation**

A Regulatory Impact Assessment has not been prepared for the proposed SR as it doesn't place any significant mandatory impact in terms of costs on business, charities, social economy enterprises or voluntary bodies.

## **Financial Implications**

EID tags are likely to be £1.50 to £2 more expensive to purchase than the traditional non-EID tags. Furthermore, to operate EID effectively and fully utilise the benefits the system offers, keepers may wish to invest in the optional hardware and software to support EID, such as tag readers and herd management software. However, the draft SR does not require keepers to use EID tags. Those who wish to benefit from the technology will therefore need to meet any associated additional costs. As a result, EID tags are likely to be adopted initially by those herd keepers who already use EID technology in herd management systems.

Operators, such as markets and abattoirs, may wish to upgrade their IT systems and associated equipment, however, this is voluntary and most are expected to already possess and use this technology for sheep EID. For the Department, an upgrade to the NIFAIS database to incorporate and support bovine EID is required. Such an upgrade necessitates capital expenditure, which are expected to be less than £10,000.

## **EU Implications**

The SR supports voluntary implementation of some of the IRM elements of the EU AHL, and in particular the technical specifications for electronic cattle tags, which must be followed if EID is adopted. These automatically apply to NI because it is listed in Annex 2 to the Windsor Framework.

## **Compliance with Section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998**

The SR does not have any human rights implications and is not incompatible with EU law. The SR was screened for impact on human rights and is deemed to comply with the requirements of section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

When the SR, together with the Explanatory Memorandum has been laid at the Assembly Business Office, the Business Office will submit copies to the Committee.

This SL1 is being copied to the Human Rights Commission and Legislative Programme Secretariat.

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## **Rural Needs Impact**

A Rural Needs Impact Assessment was undertaken and no specific impacts on the needs of people in rural areas have been identified in relation to the SR.

## **Proposed timing of consideration of the SL1**

The SL1 is being submitted to Committee in accordance with the minimum four-week timeframe. The Department seeks the Committee's consideration prior to its Oral Presentation on 14 May 2026.

Yours sincerely,



**Paul McGranaghan**  
**Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer**

**Enc.**

- Annex A: The Cattle Identification (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**
- Annex B: Explanatory Memorandum**

**cc: Human Rights Commission**  
**Legislative Programme Secretariat**  
**Equality Commission**

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