

## Introduction

1 What is your name?

Name:

[REDACTED]

2 What is your email address?

Email:

[REDACTED]

3 If you are providing a submission on behalf of an organisation or business please state its name

Name of organisation or business :

Mushroom Producer Organisation

4 The Committee for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs would like your permission to publish your response as part of the survey results. Please indicate your preference.

Publish response

## Agriculture Bill

### Clause 1– Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector (FVAS): amendment of CMO Regulation

5 Do you agree with the power's provided in this clause to allow the Department to continue with the FVAS on a discretionary basis only and to remove the current requirement for all eligible claims to be funded?

No

If no, please explain:

Mushroom Producer Organisation fully objects with Clause 1; to remove any requirement for all eligible claims to be funded and enable the Department to continue the FVAS on a discretionary basis. The removal of the requirement for all eligible claims to be funded leaves growers no future security in this industry. The term discretionary gives no confidence to the industry, it does not encourage growth, does not allow future planning and leaves Northern Ireland at a significant disadvantage in comparison to our competitors, in Europe, Ireland and Scotland who all have advantage of a long term, structured guaranteed F&VAS scheme that encourages growth. If this funding is not guaranteed and ringfenced at the same level as EU, Ireland and indeed Scotland, the mushroom sector in Northern Ireland, and in reality, the whole of the horticulture sector will become uncompetitive and therefore will struggle to exist. With the EU having a 7 year revamped F&VAS and Scotland recently announcing the continuation of the F&VAS, accompanied with the fact that DAERA are still waiting on DEFRA to make a decision on the F&VAS. We ask that DAERA prioritise working with DEFRA to continue the F&VAS. The programmes currently are closing in December 2025 . It is simply too late now to design a suitable alternative grant program for the industry by 1st January 2025. It is also worth noting that Ireland have had recent workshops to promote the F&VAS. The F&VAS is exactly what DAERA are looking for, a collaborative approach to increase growth in the sector and improve synergies. It would be in Northern Ireland's best interest to continue the scheme and promote it to other sectors of horticulture, otherwise Northern Ireland will become uncompetitive, and the horticulture sector will diminish.

### Clause 2 – Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: power to modify

6 Do you agree with the power being conferred on the Department by Clause 2 to make regulations as described above?

No

If no, please explain further:

The intention over the previous 5 years for the government was to double horticulture in Northern Ireland. Is it still an objective of DAERA to continue to develop the horticulture sector of Northern Ireland? Currently there is no other grant funding options available to the industry, without this grant funding many more producers would have stopped producing years ago, therefore, we do not agree with allowing the F&VAS to be modified as we believe this could reduce the level of funding causing more uncertainty to this sector. To be able to compete against ROI and now even within GB itself, Northern Ireland growers need a guarantee that this current level of funding will be ring-fenced. The farming industry's confidence is at an all-time low, further uncertainty will cause a ripple effect across the whole supply chain. The Mushroom Producer Organisation would like to ask for more information on how this would benefit the long-term strategy for food security.

### Clause 3 – Information provision and promotion measures: power to modify

7 Do you agree with the power being conferred on the Department by Clause 3?

No

If no, please explain further:

Mushroom Producer Organisation would like to request more information on this as modifying this scheme could potentially reduce current levels of funding for information and promotion of healthy food within Northern Ireland. We would also like to seek more clarification if a full risk assessment has been undertaken to ensure that this does not reduce Northern Ireland's Food producers' ability to remain competitive against ROI etc. It would also be of our opinion that if this is to be modified it would have to be at the advantage of the industry to improve competitiveness against ROI etc.

## Clause 4 – Regulations

8 Do you agree that the regulations made under this Bill may contain the above wide-range of provision's?

No

If no, please explain further:

As an industry we do not have enough information to be able to evaluate the impact this would have on our sector at this time and therefore would not be able to comment until this information would be made available for assessment. No information has currently been given on a suitable, competitive replacement scheme that suits the industries needs. It is of our option that a horticultural committee should be implemented with key representatives from each sector to assist in the design of any suitable replacement scheme and the scheme evaluated appropriately to ensure that it meets the industry's needs and promotes growth within the sector. Without such evaluation and collaboration there is a significant risk of horticultural decline within Northern Ireland. It is also worth noting that the F&VAS is a fantastic scheme and that competitive grant funding does not work for our industry.

9 This clause also provides that regulations under the Bill can only be made following approval by the Assembly. Do you agree that the regulations in this Bill can only be made following approval by the Assembly?

Yes

If no, please explain further:

## Clause 5 – Interpretation

10 This clause provides interpretation of terms used in the Bill, including that “modify” includes amend, repeal or revoke. Do you agree with the term ‘modify’ as interpreted in the Bill?

No

If no, please explain further:

As it currently stands, we do not agree with the bill. We believe in the F&VAS and are actively promoting it as it aligns with Northern Ireland's food strategy. The F&VAS is being promoted in other countries and is a key driver in increasing productivity, quality and environmental actions. With the increasing developments in AI, automation and robotics, which other EU countries are funding within the F&VAS and other horticulture grant funds. It is crucial that DAERA make the right choices for the industry and do not leave our growers in an uncompetitive footing. The F&VAS is a value for money scheme and if Northern Ireland do not act fast to promote, encourage and continue with the F&VAS, or fund an appropriate replacement scheme Northern Ireland Horticulture will not remain competitive. Northern Ireland growers will not have the financial resources to fund these new technological advances on their own and over the next decade the industry will sharply decline and industry knowledge of this sector and scheme will be lost as key officials seek alternative industries.

## General

11 Do you feel that the Bill if enacted will have any direct costs to you or your organisation?

Yes

If yes, please explain further:

If this bill is enacted and my Northern Ireland growers are not allowed to stay in our English registered Producer Organisation, this bill will have a direct cost impact to my growers in the short and the long term. There is absolutely no clarification on if our Northern Ireland growers will be funded under an England Scheme, or a Northern Ireland Scheme in the future. Therefore, we would seek that the department postpone this bill until this issue has been addressed and full clarity is given to the industry. Without this funding being ringfenced and at the same level as EU, Ireland and indeed Scotland, the mushroom sector, and indeed the whole of the horticulture sector in Northern Ireland will become uncompetitive and therefore will struggle to exist, growers in the short term will fund investments 100% themselves, but will be competing against ROI and EU growers who have access to 50%+ grant funding for production, quality etc. actions and 80% for environmental actions. ROI is actively promoting the F&VAS to all horticulture sectors, and it is the ethos that if you are not in a Producer Organisation, you will be left behind. Therefore, it would be within reason to say that without any appropriate, alternative grant funding Northern Ireland growers will be also left behind. Scotland have seen value in the F&VAS and have committed to extending the scheme. Without the same level of funding as Ireland, Europe and Scotland the direct impact will be a reduction in the horticulture sector in Northern Ireland and issues with food security as climate issues continue to cause supply chain issues globally. It is also worth noting that another direct impact is the Farm to Fork Carbon Footprint. If the Northern Ireland Horticultural sector does not have competitive grant funding then overtime the carbon footprint of our food will increase. This will therefore have a direct cost on our consumers who will have to pay more due to additional transportational costs for their food.

## Producer Organisations (PO)

12 Are you or your organisation currently a member of a Producer Organisation (PO)?

Yes

13 If no, have you ever been a member?

Not Answered

If yes, please explain why you or your organisation left the PO :

14 If no, would you ever consider becoming a member of a PO?

Not Answered

If no, please explain your reasons :