

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

ACTIONS TAKEN BY DAERA IN COMPLYING WITH AN ANIMAL DEPRIVATION ORDER ISSUED BY THE COURT

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Mr Muir (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The purpose of this statement is to provide information to the Assembly on the actions taken by my department following a court order requiring the department to deprive an individual of animals that remained in his possession. The individual had been disqualified for life by the court from keeping, owning or participating in the keeping of animals.

I am providing this statement to ensure that Members are updated on the particulars of this situation so that any public commentary is grounded in accurate information.

In setting out the facts of the case, I have sought to balance the need for transparency with the department's responsibility to avoid unnecessary detail about the circumstances of an individual herd owner.

Acting on Court Deprivation Orders

Under the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 2011, if a person is convicted of certain offences, including causing unnecessary suffering to animals, a court may make an order depriving them of ownership of the animal and for its disposal, including by destruction. The department must comply with such orders.

Specifics of the response in the Fivemiletown area

It is a matter of public record that, on 08 June 2026, the individual was convicted on the following charges:

- Thirteen charges of failure to dispose of an animal carcase.
- One charge of failure to comply with an Animal By-Products notice.
- Six charges of causing unnecessary suffering to an animal.
- One charge of failure to produce medicine records.

The individual was also disqualified for life from keeping, owning or participating in the keeping of animals, being party to an arrangement under which animals are kept, and from transporting or arranging the transport of all animals. A deprivation order was issued by the court and action was therefore required.

Although the court order had immediate effect, my officials will generally try to work with the individual herd owner. In this case, and recognising the particular circumstances that applied, they gave the individual an extended period of 3 weeks to sell or dispose of the animals.

Throughout this 3-week period, the department advised the herd keeper on the specific requirements needed to enable him to divest himself of all animals registered in his herd. Unfortunately, the keeper only divested himself of a small number of animals. The department is therefore obliged to comply with the Deprivation Order in relation to any remaining stock in the keeper's possession.

In such situations, officials need to consider the best way forward, taking account of factors including animal welfare, animal health, disease control, traceability and integrity of the food chain and public health. The options will by their nature vary according to the particular circumstances that apply and decision-making must balance all of the factors referenced above as well as costs to the public purse.

In this particular case, 51 animals remained on the farm in question and in the possession of the herd owner and, in compliance with the court order, it was necessary for these animals to be removed from the disqualified keeper. I am advised that after careful consideration of all available options, the department was unfortunately left with no reasonable alternative to comply with the court order, other than to euthanise the animals.

While it is generally preferable for the animals to be removed from the premises and euthanised remotely, in certain circumstances, such as this case, it was the assessment of professional veterinary staff that this option was simply not possible.

In this case, they concluded that euthanising the animals remotely was not possible due to the lack of suitable, safe facilities on farm to gather up and contain animals to protect both the animals and staff; the temperament of the animals; the additional stress of handling and suitability of the animals for transport e.g. some of the cattle were horned; and the reality that it was simply not possible to transport all of the animals away from the location.

In carrying out such court orders, my veterinary officials will always prioritise welfare of the animals involved, alongside health and safety implications of the operation.

I can advise Members that 50 of the cattle were euthanised by the DAERA Humane Slaughter Team on 29 June 2026 with one animal euthanised by the team on the morning of 30 June.

The staff in this team are highly trained, in line with best practice and legislative requirements, and highly respected across these islands for their expertise following procedures that provide for a humane death. In fact, they are often called upon to support colleagues in other jurisdictions.

While not called upon frequently, sadly their skills are needed from time to time, not only to ensure compliance with a court order but also when required in disease outbreaks.

I have been alarmed by some of the highly inaccurate and irresponsible commentary surrounding the team's actions.

Officials have outlined that no animal was chased around fields by DAERA staff, no animal was shot multiple times, nor were there sounds of loud gunfire. It is standard practice that silencers are used, an important detail both from an animal welfare and from a public concern perspective.

In such cases where a Deprivation Order is granted it is the legal responsibility of the disqualified keeper to dispose of any animals euthanised. In this case, and as the keeper also had convictions for failure to dispose of Animal Byproducts (which was in relation to diseased animals), the department made the decision to arrange collection and disposal of the animals at the department's expense.

Current procedures require that such collections do not take place until operations are finished for health and safety reasons, so the animals were collected and disposed of the next morning (30 June).

The conduct of the operation was dynamically assessed by the team on site, including consideration of public visibility. Operations were conducted in the most suitable areas available within the fields to minimise exposure to public view and to maximise operational safety. Although complete screening from all possible vantage points could not be guaranteed, efforts were made to keep the operation out of public view.

Two of the sites were very remote with limited public access and the cattle were euthanised on these sites by approximately 1.30pm on 29 June with no issues arising.

On the third site, I understand that issues did arise when a local farmer approached staff at the scene to indicate a potential interest in purchasing some of the animals. Operations were halted immediately

to provide space for any transaction to take place. The local farmer seeking to purchase some of the animals, another individual and the herd keeper were facilitated to remove the animals from a field into a lorry. They chased the animals for a significant period of time and released them on to a public road which created further health and safety risks.

While those actions delayed the completion of operations, ultimately, DAERA staff had to intervene as the individuals were unable to detain the animals which by that stage were stressed.

At this time there was a small number of protestors at the site, but operations did not recommence until they had left the scene.

With the assistance of some neighbouring farmers, staff were able to move the remaining cattle from the road and they were subsequently euthanised.

I know that Members have also asked about the role of the PSNI. I can confirm that my officials enjoy positive and constructive relationships with their PSNI counterparts and that the PSNI was advised on Friday 26 June of the date planned for the operation. Officers attended the location on the morning of 29 June and had no concerns in relation to the operation and offered advice on how to contact them in the event that any concerns emerged.

When the issues I have outlined above occurred at the third site, there were however difficulties in establishing contact with the PSNI via the means provided. These circumstances will be discussed further in the days ahead with PSNI colleagues.

External review

My veterinary staff are highly professional. They take animal welfare extremely seriously. They are experienced in their jobs. They are also people we all rely on when it comes to disease control and food safety.

This was, however, a particularly complex and distressing case and given the challenges experienced during the operation, my Chief Veterinary Officer had already identified the value of carrying out a lessons learned exercise to determine any learning for the future.

Acknowledging the concerns expressed, the complexities of this case and on-going commitment to openness and transparency, I have since decided that such an exercise should be carried out by someone external to the department and the arrangements for conducting it are being finalised.

My department will shortly publish the terms of reference for the review and I will also place a copy in the Assembly Library. I also commit to publishing the findings and recommendations from the review once it has been concluded.

I am determined that the review will be thorough but not prolonged. I want to see it completed promptly by early autumn so that any learning can be identified and implemented quickly.

Impact of inaccurate public commentary on civil servants

Finally, I want to address some of the political and public commentary that has followed the euthanising of these animals.

Some of it has been highly irresponsible and very misleading. Other commentary, particularly on social media, has had the effect of encouraging and provoking quite disgraceful and unacceptable reactions, including some that are abusive and clearly misogynistic.

That commentary has led to threats being made against some DAERA staff and multiple other staff being subjected to significant abuse online, in person and through written correspondence. That is not acceptable in any scenario, and certainly not when it comes to our civil and public servants carrying out their lawful duties.

My senior officials now have to review risk assessments; reassure staff as to the value and importance of their work; and assess what specific security, policing or legal responses are required in the case of some comments. That should not be necessary but sadly it is.

I am therefore asking all Members to unite in condemning the threats and abuse directed at DAERA staff.

As public representatives, we all have a duty to ensure that our own public commentary is accurate and measured.

We also carry responsibility for ensuring that our comments are not couched in a manner that encourages or legitimises abuse or threats against public servants. That is a responsibility that I call on all political representatives to discharge appropriately.