

# Written Ministerial Statement

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

*Published at 12pm on Wednesday 29 January 2025*

This statement sets out my communication plans for my Department's new programme of farm support. I am issuing an associated press release later today.

### **Background**

I previously provided an Oral Statement on my Department's new programme of farm support on 14 May 2024 and further to this issued a Written Statement on my interim communication plans for this programme on 3 December 2024 to provide as much clarity and stability for farm businesses as possible, within the confines of the overall budget position, as we approached the end of the year.

In many ways farming is enduring the biggest impact from the multiple climate, biodiversity and ecological crises, but has the most to gain from the interventions needed to give a strong and sustainable future. We cannot ignore what we see in front of us with the severe weather patterns experienced this year alone - some of our towns, villages, communities, businesses severely impacted. We must act now.

The impact of climate change is particularly acute for agriculture. Climate Change modelling projects a greater chance of hotter, drier summers and warmer, wetter, winters with more extreme weather and rising sea levels. This will mean changes to how and what we farm in the future, we may be growing different crops and managing livestock differently to ensure our food security. Building long term resilience, adaptation and achieving a genuinely just transition is key.

Achieving improved environmental sustainability is also critical. None of us wants the situation on Lough Neagh to continue. We all know we need to do things differently going forward. I strongly believe that we can do this in a way that safeguards food security and delivers high standards of disease control, public and animal health. Recognising that the health of our people is closely connected to the health of animals and of our environment, I want to see all our policies underpinned by the One Health approach.

Our young people have a key role to play. We must encourage the younger generation to get involved and support new talent.

I acknowledge that the road ahead is not easy, especially after recent announcements on inheritance tax, which will have a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland if implemented.

However, I am pleased that further to my discussions with the Finance Minister in November, the Executive formally agreed to treat the Resource DEL that has been baselined in the NI block grant as 'Executive Earmarked' for 2025-26 and future years as part of its Draft Budget for 2025-26 announced on 19 December. This is a major win for the local farming community and underscores the critical importance of agriculture to Northern Ireland. While the draft budget does not take into account inflation, having a proposal to earmark the agricultural support budget in the next and future financial years is a significant and positive step forward. Northern Ireland is the only devolved region in the UK so far, to have secured a proposal from its local Executive to earmark the agricultural support budget, highlighting the unique importance of farming to the region's economy, environment and food security. It also reflects the value that local government places on agriculture. This will provide assurance to our farm businesses in the coming years that their counterparts in Scotland and Wales currently do not have and maintains the competitive trading position of the industry.

I am also pleased that the Executive agreed to set aside dedicated funds for a Just Transition Fund for Agriculture in the draft budget. This is to be welcomed and will be aided by the work I am taking forward to establish a Just Transition Commission later this year.

While I appreciate that the Draft Budget is undergoing consultation, the positive announcement on 19 December provides the basis for me to move forward with my plans for the roll out of the new programme of farm support.

We should not underestimate that the significant and onerous resource and work required to develop and implement new schemes to replace previous common agricultural policies from the EU. However, despite these challenges, we are getting on with the work to implement new farm support schemes, in the context of the positive advantages of dual market access for agri-food in Northern Ireland and in the knowledge that a comprehensive SPS Veterinary Agreement is hopefully on the horizon.

I have consistently set out a vision for the future of farming in Northern Ireland where financial and environmental sustainability goes hand in hand.

My Department's new programme of farm support is targeted to meet the bespoke needs of Northern Ireland and seeks to implement policies and strategies that benefit the environment and support our economically significant agri-food sector. The Programme has been developed through extensive co-design with a range of agriculture and environmental stakeholders which I believe has brought robustness and buy-in to the development process. I want to thank those stakeholders for their participation, leadership and commitment to the process.

The overall objective is to transition to a more sustainable farming sector by seeking to implement policies and strategies that benefit our climate and environment, while, very importantly, supporting our economically and socially significant agri-food sector.

Importantly the policy development being undertaken is evidence led with a firm focus on data to help with decision making. Science and innovation are key drivers with skills and smarter ways of working critical to success realising the benefits of science and technology and enabling better succession planning.

We took the first step on the Programme's journey of change in 2024 through the introduction of the new Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme and it is important that we continue at pace with the implementation of new Schemes in the coming months and years. I am pleased that many of the schemes being introduced are already seen as innovative exemplars across the UK and Ireland.

## **Sustainable Agriculture Programme**

I acknowledge that the proposed Executive Earmarking of the allocation for Agriculture, Agri-environment, Fisheries and Rural Development will bring with it a high level of scrutiny on deliverable outcomes and demonstration of value for money and delivery of public good. Therefore, effective delivery of this programme will have a critical role in justifying future funding to transition to more sustainable farming, working in co-design with industry. Programme communications will also need to include a wider public narrative to withstand anticipated increased independent analysis and scrutiny.

Taking this into account I have therefore decided to refer to the new programme of farm support as the 'Sustainable Agriculture Programme' (SAP) to achieve a simple, easy to understand name for the new support arrangements which replace Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) when we were part of the European Union and to relay clearly its importance in supporting change for a sustainable future.

## **Role of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme in delivery of Ministerial priorities**

The Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP) will have a key role in the delivery of a number of the draft Programme for Government priorities together with my key priorities through striving to achieve its four outcomes of improved environmental sustainability, enhanced productivity, stronger resilience and an effective functioning supply chain.

Tackling climate change is a key priority and critically important for the agriculture sector which is both most affected by the consequences of extreme weather events, whilst also having a positive and constructive role to play in reducing our greenhouse gas emissions.

The Schemes being introduced as part of the SAP will be essential levers in contributing to Northern Ireland's statutory obligations under the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022 and achieving a genuinely Just Transition. Their implementation and delivery will be vital to meeting the targets set out in the forthcoming Climate Action Plan for the NI Agriculture Sector.

Protecting and restoring our natural environment is another key priority. Delivery of the SAP will be essential in addressing phosphorus and ammonia related issues. This is needed not just as a requirement from Northern Ireland's Environmental Improvement Plan but due to the scenes witnessed in two consecutive years in Lough Neagh. Implementing the Environmental Improvement Plan is fundamental to achieving improved environmental sustainability in Northern Ireland and securing the recovery of Lough Neagh and other waterways. These issues of improving water quality are challenging, I do not shy away from them because we owe it both to communities around Lough Neagh and farmers of tomorrow to take the actions today to give a strong and sustainable future upon which success can be assured. The same is true of ammonia, another difficult issue in Northern Ireland where emission levels are going the wrong way but where I have grasped the nettle and personally convened Ministerial roundtable meetings to find a way forward that drives down emissions and deals with the practical problems like replacement farm buildings.

The SAP will also deliver on securing sustainable productivity within Northern Ireland agriculture and assisting the development of effective functioning supply chains ensuring food security and high standards of disease control, public and animal health.

### **Co-design and engagement**

The challenges are no doubt great but the prize to be gained from navigating these challenges together is significant. It is my firm belief that Northern Ireland can become an exemplar in achieving a thriving, sustainable and resilient agri-food sector with a healthy, nature rich environment leading on climate change but this requires both positive leadership and taking tough decisions.

I will continue my relentless efforts to work in collaboration with the agricultural industry so that we grasp the changes, challenges and opportunities together and create a sustainable sector for future generations. The important role of the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group in the continued co-design of the SAP will be essential as we move forward and I would again like to thank all the stakeholders for their constructive engagement in the co-design process to get us to this point.

I acknowledge that the communications in relation to the Programme to date have been far from ideal due to the negative impact of the lack of future budget. I am pleased however, that today signals the commencement of a full supporting programme of communications to ensure farm businesses, and those who provide support and services to farm businesses, are fully informed of the timelines around the schemes coming on stream and the necessary management steps they need to take to prepare.

### **Sustainable Agriculture Programme - Communication Plan**

The SAP will provide options for all farm businesses in Northern Ireland to secure and improve their viability and environmental sustainability and it is important that we engage with them to maximise uptake.

The SAP encompasses a wide range of schemes, some of which will provide support and assistance to farm businesses e.g. Knowledge and Innovation Schemes and the Livestock Dietary Emissions Challenge Fund.

Others will serve as data platforms to provide important information to help farm businesses e.g. Soil Nutrient Health Scheme, Ruminant Genetics Programme and the Carbon Footprinting Project.

In addition, others will provide payments through schemes for: Farm Sustainability Payment, Protein Crops Scheme, Beef Sustainability Package, Farming with Nature Package, Capital Investment Scheme, Farming for the Generations Programme, Horticulture Schemes and Supply Chain Scheme.

I have now agreed the timeline for the roll out of the schemes of the SAP over the next two years. This can be viewed on the Department's website.

The Farming with Nature Package is one of my top priorities. It is my ambition to scale up nature friendly farming with all farmers being rewarded for delivering environmental public goods, alongside food production and that Farming with Nature will become an important enterprise on farms. This Package will be introduced in a phased approach with the aim of increasing the extent, quality, and connectivity of habitats in the farmed landscape within and outside of designated sites and priority habitat areas. I plan to say more about this Package at Balmoral Show together with opening dates subject to business cases and legislation being in place.

Further information on all of the schemes is now available on the website and I would encourage all farm businesses to avail of this information resource. This will be updated on a regular basis.

Having taken onboard feedback from stakeholders and to ensure that communications extend to the entirety of our target audience, I have also agreed that the first edition of a 'SAP Newsletter' will issue in hard copy to farm businesses in Northern Ireland. This will serve as a helpful information reference resource for the Programme and will be issued in the coming months.

I am also pleased to announce that a series of Awareness Events will take place at a range of venues across Northern Ireland in February and March. These events will raise awareness of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme and its benefits to farm businesses and encourage farmers/growers to take actions linked to the schemes of the Programme that have already launched or are scheduled to commence. The format will include an overview presentation of the SAP and provide expert advice and signposting for attendees on additional information to help them prepare. I would encourage all farm businesses to attend. Further details are available on Sustainable Agriculture Programme pages of the DAERA website.

## **Closing**

The Sustainable Agriculture Programme is fundamental to helping DAERA support our farm businesses and enables us to collectively achieve our environmental and climate change goals, providing the right support and policies to help us move forward on a journey of change ensuring both economic and environmental sustainability.

My officials will continue to develop the Programme's communication plan over the coming months to ensure that communications are relayed in a consistent and coherent manner utilising the most appropriate communication channels to engage appropriately with stakeholders.

Participation in the Programme is essential to ensure we deliver on key priorities and address common challenges and I would seek your support in encouraging farm businesses to engage with the planned programme of communications and avail of the information provided.