

FROM: Irrelevant & Sensitive
BRANCH: VETERINARY PUBLIC HEALTH
CONTACT: Irrelevant & Sensitive

DATE: 12 NOVEMBER 2020

TO: EDWIN POOTS MLA
MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL
AFFAIRS

**SUB/1945/2020 – TEMPORARY CESSATION OF ACTIVITIES AT WD MEATS,
COLERAINE**

SUMMARY

Issue: Temporary cessation of operations at WD Meats, Coleraine in response to increasing incidence of COVID-19 amongst the workforce.

Timing: DESK IMMEDIATE.

SpAd Comments:

Financial Implications:* N/A.

Employment of External Consultants Implications N/A.

Legislation Implications:* N/A.

Equality Implications: There are no equality implications arising from this submission.

FOI Implications: In the event of a request for disclosure of information contained in this submission under the FOI Act, the request would be considered in the context of the relevant provisions of the legislation, including any relevant exemptions that may be applicable.

Rural Needs Implications: N/A.

Executive Referral: N/A.

Presentational Issues: This issue has the potential to generate significant media attention.

**Submission Cleared by Press Office -
12/11/20.**

Date Draft Press Release: N/A.

Recommendation: That you note the contents of this submission.

Current Situation

1. WD Meats is a large beef slaughter, deboning and processing plant based in Coleraine. With a 470 strong workforce and a weekly processing throughput of approximately 1400 cattle, WD Meats has a strong local, national and international presence and demand for its produce.
2. In response to growing concerns around the increasing incidence (cumulative incidence - 47 positive cases on 9 Nov) of COVID-19 within the workforce, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) engaged with WD management, facilitated by VSAHG management to initiate mass testing of the remaining workforce.
3. A further 88 positive cases were identified following mass testing on 10 November. In response, and to break the chain of transmission, PHA made the recommendation that all existing 'non-positive' staff should be considered as 'close contacts' and undertake self-isolation for 14 days.
4. Effectively this recommendation has resulted in the cessation of activities at WD Meats with effect from close of business on 11 November.
5. On Wednesday 4 November, HSENI inspectorate, in response to the elevating COVID-19 levels, carried out an unannounced site visit at WD Meats to assess and review existing COVID-19 controls. With the exception of a few minor recommendations, HSENI are content with existing controls in place.
6. WD Meats are currently engaged with PHA, HSENI & VSHAG officials to formulate a plan to resume activities at the earliest opportunity within a safe environment and after staff have completed their mandatory periods of self-isolation.

Impact of cessation in operations

Beef Supply Chain

7. There is currently sufficient additional processing capacity across the NI processing sector to mitigate against the potential development of any on-farm backlogs of slaughter-ready cattle. Therefore, no animal welfare & welfare nor food supply issues are anticipated.

China market access

8. WD Meats is currently listed to export beef to China, however, as the export health certificate is not yet agreed, exports have not as yet commenced. In response to the high number of positive cases, likely media interest associated with the PHA investigation and China's position in relation to the presence of COVID-19 within

exporting establishments, WD meats voluntarily agreed to be removed from the list of establishments eligible to export to China. VSAHG officials will commence the relisting process upon satisfactory resolution of this incident.

TB Reactor Contract

9. WD Meats are the current supplier of the DAERA contract for the Haulage and Slaughter of Tuberculosis (and Brucellosis) reactor cattle. Included within the contract is the requirement to move reactor animals from farm to slaughter within a specified time-frame in addition to having a well-developed and robust business continuity and contingency plan.
10. WD Meats continuity plans in the event of the temporary closure of the processing establishment revolves around two options:
 - Use of an alternative processing site under company ownership within the Ballymena area.
 - Divert reactor animals to another slaughterhouse in NI.
11. Given the nature of COVID-19 and the necessity for all staff to self-isolate it is not possible to use the alternative processing site. Preliminary feedback from the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) has indicated that, neither the appetite, nor the capability exists to take on the short term slaughter of reactor cattle across the remaining beef processing establishments.
12. To address any emergency welfare issues, WD Meats management have indicated that they would be willing, subject to PHA approval, to consider setting up a direct cull & disposal operation on-site to facilitate the slaughter of such reactors. In addition, on resumption of activities, WD Meats management have committed to increasing reactor throughput to ensure the prompt resolution of the backlog.

TB Control and Eradication

13. Although not ideal, provided reactor animals are isolated as required, with appropriate cleaning and disinfection post removal, risk of further TB transmission should be minimal. It should also be noted that herd-keepers do have the option of slaughtering TB reactors at their own commercial risk and under DAERA licence in any NI slaughterhouse.

RECOMMENDATION

14. That you note the contents of this submission.

Personal Data

Name Redacted

Veterinary Public Health Programme

CC List

Dr Denis McMahon
Robert Huey
David Small
Fiona McCandless
Norman Fulton
Brian Doherty
Tracey Teague
Dr Perpetua McNamee
Brian Dooher
Neal Gartland
Michael Hatch
David Torrens

Names Redacted

DAERA Press Office
VS Coordination