

## COVID – 19 DAERA Meeting With Industry Representatives

Done via Conference Call 25 March 2020

12:30

Chaired by Brian Doherty (DAERA)

**Industry and Associated Stakeholders:** (not exclusively) Dairy; Beef; Poultry; Fisheries; Pork; Retail; Food Standards Agency; NI Food and Drink Association; NI Grain Trade Association; NI Meat Exporters Association; Dairy UK; Manufacturing; Freight; Invest NI; NIAPA; UFU; LMC; DAERA Officials

Brian asked that those dialling in consider that just one person from each organisation dials in and then disseminates information. This avoids unnecessary pressure on the IT/Telephony system.

### Summary of actions from previous meeting:

1. DAERA to raise with DE what evidence is required by schools to prove a parent is a key worker. **Name Redacted**

**Will be escalated through DAERA Command and Control today**

2. DAERA will investigate the position around access to CMO schemes.

**DAERA Progressing**

3. DAERA will identify suitable contact in DfC in the lead on placement of workforce.

**DAERA have issued an email with contact details of David Malcolm in DfC**

4. DAERA Veterinary Service to work with Pork & Bacon forum. **NR**

**Complete**

5. DAERA to liaise with DoF on grants and rate relief for businesses **Name Redacted**

**Name Redacted**

**Will be escalated through DAERA Command and Control today and outlined actions being taken by Invest NI.**

**Name Redacted**

**Name Redacted**

### Summary Points:

1. **NIAPA:** Raised concern about falling beef prices and potential impact on cashflow. Also raised issues regarding form filling for Basic Farm Payment given restrictions at DAERA Direct Offices. DAERA advised that enhanced telephony capacity will be made available and announcements will be made in coming days. On falling beef prices, DAERA advised that options are being examined, given we are still part of EU Market Support Region.

Action: DAERA will make an announcement on enhanced telephony capacity to deal with admin of Basic Farm Payments

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2. **Poultry:** Fear factor among staff evident given situation at one of Moy Park's plant this morning. Transportation of key staff to and from work is a major concern. On social distancing, DAERA emphasised that protocols across the board need to be fit for purpose and DAERA are engaging with FSA on this. There is a need to clarify differences in social distancing between the public and key food sector workers in an environment using PPE and where HACCP measures are in place.
3. **NIMEA:** Have agreed a detailed protocol yesterday and shared with DAERA. They highlighted that for some production lines, it is neither practical nor economically viable to have staff 2m apart and industry does not want to be seen to be competing with NHS for essential PPE. Maintaining food supply and health of staff are the priorities, not profit. Feels there is a gap in guidance and uniformity is needed so as workers and unions understand processes. Meat Industry Ireland are engaging with Rol Health Service on social distancing measures.
4. **NIFDA:** Feels there is a conflict in Government telling people to stay 2m apart while expecting food supply to continue unhindered. Other European countries have adopted WHO guidelines of 1m. Strict social distancing may lead to drop of output to 50%. All non-essential production (e.g. confectionery) may have to cease. Absenteeism hasn't deteriorated from yesterday (6%). Made the point that GB would suffer because of NI food and drink production decreases, not NI but that NI would suffer reputational damage. NIFDA have a protocol developed and are meeting today to discuss options

Action: NIFDA to issue agreed (3 logo) protocol for agri-food workers so as to minimise the risk of them catching/ spreading the virus. (Ideally one protocol for entire sector)

5. **FSA:** Would like clarity from UK Government for guidance that applies across UK and preference would be for one protocol on social distancing etc. for all NI Food Manufacturers with PHA approval, given the limited number of circumstances where full social distancing could be implemented within production plants.
6. **Pork:** Social distancing measures will slow production, posts on social media are sparking fear. Industry needs clarity on issue of transportation of workers to and from work and those who live together (potential for multiple staff losses if one has symptoms etc).
7. **UFU:** Cash flow is main concern for members currently, gave an example of one animal feed supplier who is advising farmers to speak to banks if they can't pay bills as they will not extend credit. Stated many farmers are operating at below cost of production and falling beef and lamb prices are concerning – one Rol processor has lamb production 50%.

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8. **Dairy:** Raised importance once again of testing for staff and would like epidemiology updates akin to what NHS get, which would help the industry in forecasting and workforce planning. FSA will raise with DoH.

Action: FSA undertook to push with DOH that key agri-food workers should also be considered for priority testing for Covid to maintain food supplies **NR**

**NR**

FSA agreed to explore getting further information on epidemiology of Covid to assist industry with planning for staff availability.

Dairy UK referred to Europe as a 'choke point' for containers (due to lack of staff to empty them), causing a shortage for storage and movement of product, DAERA will be issuing a note this week asking people to streamline where possible to avoid storage and transport problems.

Action: DAERA to issue a note to industry asking them where possible, to streamline processes to avoid storage and transportation problems.

9. **Fish Producers:** Understand DAERA Fisheries officials are meeting Minister this afternoon. Some concern that there has been suggestions that the organisation is using social distancing measures as an excuse to prevent trawlers going to sea. Keen on robust testing for presence of antibodies and not just 'on the day' testing. Scotland have announced package of assistance for smaller vessels, keen for similar NI support. DAERA are investigating options for support for fisheries sector.

Action: DAERA to investigate options for support for fisheries sector and discuss with Minister

10. **Food NI:** Staff shortages at 10% in NI (20% in England) and anticipated to rise to 45% in next few weeks. The 2 metre social distancing does not work in production units and people are starting to call it out on social media, testing kits for workers are essential. The 80% derogation has effectively removed a pool of potential workers. Getting feedback from Peas Please initiative in England – major concerns around fruit & veg availability and are giving school children packers of veg seed with school meals. Official form needed for staff identification when travelling.

11. **Invest NI:** In response to question from NIFDA on support packages, mentioned InvestNI are investigating options and will keep industry updated, however made the point that there are gaps between Large producers and SMEs, so support may be in the form of loans from banks or short term grants from InvestNI

Action: Invest NI to continue scoping of potential support for industry and keep industry informed

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## **A.O.B**

12. On social distancing, Brian emphasised that while we acknowledge what industry are saying, it would not be in DAERA or NI Executive's gift to deviate from UK wide guidelines and a UK wide plan (2m) which are based on stringent scientific and medical advice.
13. Perpetua commented that feedback from DAERA staff at various plants would suggest variations in social distancing measures and how important it is for all plants implement measures.
14. Sharon McFlynn made everyone aware of a tweet from Deputy First Minister about essential workers.

## **ACTIONS:**

1. FSA undertook to push with DOH that key agri-food workers should also be considered for priority testing for Covid to maintain food supplies NR  
NR
2. FSA agreed to explore getting further information on epidemiology of Covid to assist industry with planning for staff availability.
3. NIFDA to issue agreed (3 logo) protocol for agri-food workers so as to minimise the risk of them catching/ spreading the virus. (Ideally one protocol for entire sector)
4. DAERA to make announcement in coming days over enhanced telephony capacity to assist with admin of Basic Farm Payments
5. DAERA to investigate options for support for fisheries sector and discuss with Minister
6. DAERA to issue a note to industry asking them where possible, to streamline processes where possible and share information with DAERA/Government
7. Invest NI to continue scoping of potential support for industry and keep industry informed

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