

Future Agricultural Policy for Northern Ireland Environmental Assessments Paper

Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.

Executive Summary

In December 2021 the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs launched a public consultation to seek views on future agricultural policy proposals for Northern Ireland. Following consultation on the future agricultural policy proposals and the associated environmental reports, the DAERA Minister published a Decisions document, entitled “Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland”, which was adopted on 24 March 2022.

This paper and the associated Strategic Environmental Assessment Statement identifies and summarises the manner in which environmental considerations and opinions have been integrated into the future agricultural policy for Northern Ireland and the measures that are to be taken to assess and monitor the environmental effects of its implementation.

The adopted Plan for the Future Agricultural Policy for Northern Ireland, the Strategic Environmental Assessment Environmental Report, the Habitats Regulation Assessment and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Statement are available for download using the links below:

- Consultation on Future Agricultural Policy for Northern Ireland
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-future-agricultural-policy-proposals-northern-ireland>
- The Future Agricultural Policy Decisions for Northern Ireland
<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/future-agricultural-policy-decisions-northern-ireland>

Environmental Assessments

Environmental Assessments were carried out on the future agricultural policy proposals for Northern Ireland. This comprised of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) with the outcomes of the HRA being integrated into the SEA Environmental Report.

The SEA Environmental Report was prepared in accordance with the SEA Directive (2001/42/EC) and the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 (as amended). Policies and measures were assessed in the short, medium and long term for their likely potential positive and negative effects on the environment against key environmental topics, as defined in the SEA Directive and include: biodiversity, flora and fauna, population and human health, geology, soils and land use, water and air quality, climatic factors, material assets, cultural, architectural, archaeological heritage, landscape and visual amenity. The purpose of a SEA is to provide a formal and transparent assessment of the likely significant effects on the environment arising from implementation of the future agricultural policy proposals for Northern Ireland, including consideration of reasonable policy alternatives.

The HRA was prepared in accordance with the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) and the Conservation (Natural Habitats etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 (as amended). The purpose of an HRA is to determine if a proposed Plan or project has the potential to result in a likely significant effect on designated UK National and European sites, specifically Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protected Areas (SPAs).

The SEA Report recommends that all policies should be applied with due regard to the existing environmental setting and relevant legislation and guidance should be considered during the design and implementation of the policy proposals. The overarching potential for negative effects associated with implementation of the policies relates to the risk of failure to implement the proposed policies in a manner that is appropriate for realising the greatest benefits and for fully achieving the four key

desired outcomes. In order to mitigate against the potential risk of failure to fully meet the future vision for agriculture, the SEA Environmental Report states that it is imperative that during the next stages of policy development and implementation, policies and associated measures are applied in a manner that will best realise the full environmental potential of the policies.

Stakeholder views

Stakeholders expressed views on the need for continual monitoring and assessment throughout policy development and implementation and in addition; integration of the future agricultural policy with the SEA Environmental Report and HRA, which would enable policy to take account of the outcomes, mitigation and monitoring. Suggestions were made for minor text amendments, additions and updates to the SEA Environmental Report and HRA Report.

Department's analysis

DAERA received fifty two responses to the consultation question on environmental assessments. Eighteen were from organisations (of which ten were farming focused, five environment focused, and three 'other'), thirty one from individuals, two anonymous responses and one political party/representative. Consultation responses were also received from sixteen statutory consultees, including transboundary consultees.

DAERA has considered the recommendations of both the SEA Environmental Report and the HRA Report, as well as the views of the statutory consultees and other submissions received during consultation on the future agricultural policy proposals for Northern Ireland. The key recommendations identified a need for the continual integration of environmental assessments and monitoring in policy design and implementation to ensure no negative impacts on the wider environment.

DAERA response

i) Integration of environmental assessments and monitoring into future agricultural policy design and implementation.

DAERA will ensure that environmental assessments, monitoring and evaluation is integrated in future policy design and implementation in order to manage the risk of unintended consequences on the wider environment.

This will require policies and measures to be screened and assessed to determine their potential impact on the environment, including the likely requirement for a further HRA. An assessment will be made with a view to maximising the positives and eliminating or minimising the negatives. This will help to guide any specific mitigation measures, including more detailed amendments to policies during policy development. This environmental assessment screening will highlight the need for further, more detailed and specific assessment, including HRA, as required.

As policies, and their associated measures are introduced, there will be an ongoing scheme level monitoring process undertaken by each workstream.

Workstream 12, dedicated to Metrics, Monitoring and Evaluation, will measure progress of measures against the four strategic outcomes of increased productivity, environmentally sustainability, improved resilience and an effective functioning supply chain. This Workstream will monitor the management of environmental risks identified by scheme level monitoring annually, as part of the monitoring and evaluation framework. This will provide an oversight role by seeking evidence of how remaining workstreams have managed risks identified in their scheme. The monitoring and evaluation framework annual reporting procedure will enable early intervention should any unintended impacts or challenges arise.

ii) Integration of SEA Environmental Report and HRA mitigation and recommendations

As part of the SEA Environmental Report, an extensive list of mitigation measures and recommendations was proposed for incorporation into future agricultural policy for Northern Ireland. These mitigation measures were based on the findings from both the SEA and the HRA. The Agricultural Policy Programme Workstreams have considered these mitigation measures and where required will ensure that the recommendations are carried forward and mitigations proposed.

The list of mitigation measures and recommendations proposed from SEA and HRA can be found in the SEA Statement under heading:

- Section 3.2. Recommended Mitigation;
- Section 3.2.1 Integration of Environmental Assessment into Policy Development;
- Section 3.2.2 SEA Mitigation;
- Table 3-2 Proposed FAP-level SEA Mitigation;
- Table 3-3 Proposed general SEA Mitigation for schemes;
- Section 3.2.3 HRA Mitigation;
- Table 3-4 Proposed FAP-level HRA Mitigation; and
- Table 3-5 Proposed general HRA Mitigation for schemes.

Comments made and issues raised by environmental consultees regarding the environmental assessments during public consultation, and how these were considered and actioned, are detailed in Appendix B of the SEA Statement.