

UFU raise pig sector expansion concerns with NIEA

Written by UFU Policy Officer, Dr Geoff Thompson

The UFU recently met with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to discuss pig farmers' frustrations in relation to environmental restrictions on planning proposals. Since 2006, NIEA has only permitted 14 IPPC standard pig units (more than 750 sows or 2000 finishing pigs) to be constructed within Northern Ireland. This rate of approval is significantly hampering the Agri-Food Strategy Board's Going for Growth target of a 40% increase in the national sow herd to 52,000 sows by 2020. It was envisaged that this growth would generate a 7% increase in employment within the sector and increase the industry's turnover by 48% to £360 million. However, since the release of the Agri-Food Strategy Board's report in 2013, the national sow herd has only managed a 7.4% increase, with most of this coming from a small number of large, highly productive farms that have been able to continue to expand due to production efficiencies and economies of scale despite falling farm gate returns.

In defence of their slow approval rate, NIEA stressed that there is a widespread biodiversity problem throughout Northern Ireland that has occurred as a result of nitrogen deposition from ammonia. Ammonia is the most damaging pollutant produced on livestock units and while levels have been falling elsewhere in the UK, atmospheric monitoring in NI has shown that the levels here are increasing. Under the European Habitat Directive (92/43/EEC) and Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, NIEA are required to consider the implications of any livestock proposal within 7.5 km of a European designated site or within 2 km of a priority habitat. Due to our wet climate, Northern Ireland has a high density of livestock farms and a low density of arable farms compared to the EU average. As such, a significant proportion of new planning applications in Northern Ireland fall within the radius of a designated site or priority habitat. In light of this, the current working position of NIEA is to only accept applications that produce less than 10% of the annual critical level of ammonia for any designated site that could be impacted. This includes any cumulative impacts when considered alongside other existing installations. For Areas of Special Scientific Interest, this threshold is increased to 20%, and for priority habitats the threshold increases to 50%. In light of the fact that most habitats within Northern Ireland are already at risk from high ammonia levels, the NIEA considers this to be a generous position that still enables expansion provided the farmer takes appropriate actions to mitigate against the impacts of ammonia. These options can include: fans, chimney stacks, bio-filters, air scrubbers, abatement systems, diet alterations or anaerobic digestion.

Obviously, each of these measures has an associated cost for little financial return to the farm business (e.g. an abatement system may cost in excess of £250,000), and against a backdrop of ever reducing farm margins it is unlikely that the average NI pig farmer will be able to afford such mitigation measures. Given the current local attitude towards large scale pig farms that would provide the economy of scale to allow such measures to be implemented profitably, the UFU must question the department's commitment to the Agri-Food Strategy Board's targets. If DARD and DOE are serious in their backing of the industry's target for a 40% growth whilst safeguarding the environment, then they must establish a more pragmatic approval system that considers the wider environmental impacts of these modern production facilities. They must ask themselves, "If we are to reach this increased production target in an environmentally and welfare friendly manor, which production system is more beneficial? A larger, state of the art facility, that is able to provide economy of scale, improved animal welfare and improved herd health status or to produce the

same number of pig on a larger number of older, smaller, and often run down facilities that frequently have a lower herd health status all of which reduces farm efficiencies, animal welfare, and results in a larger overall environmental impact." Additionally, local policy makers need to follow the example of other EU leading regions such as Denmark that has set aside €20 million for its Environment Technology Scheme in order to fund these expensive abatement techniques. Such an approach would ensure that pig farmers in NI can modernise their businesses and improve the local environmental situation whilst allowing farmers to continue to expand to meet the needs of the global market.