

Agri-Food Strategy Board

Call for Evidence

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

13 September 2012

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 62 Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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The consultation document states that the Board intends to identify short, medium and long term targets and actions. However, the restricted nature of the questions and sub-sectoral format indicates that there has been limited recognition of the need to think in a more integrated and longer term manner. There are major issues facing the food sector in Northern Ireland in relation to global, EU and UK policy and issues which must be addressed and these are not considered well within such a focussed and limited approach. There are many opportunities for the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland, and many of these can be developed on a purely sub-sectoral basis with advice from those active in those sectors. However, many other opportunities and threats will not be identified by such a narrow focus.

Over the past few years UK policy has rightly shifted to set local food production and consumption in a more global context. Markets are global, but so are other drivers and policies, and merely looking at the issues facing Northern Ireland's agri-food sector from a sub-sectoral perspective will not address these issues. Factors relating to land use, impacts of climate change (both adaptation and mitigation), changing consumer preferences, need for a more healthy diets, changing demands for food at a global scale, animal welfare issues, increasing costs of fuel and fertilisers, an increasing emphasis on food security and increased drive for local products all need to be considered within this strategy. This requires a much broader and more integrated approach than that which is being adopted here.

Agriculture accounts for around 80% of Northern Ireland's land. There are many goods and services which this land can provide for the public benefit. Termed ecosystem services, green infrastructure or natural capital, the increasing emphasis within UK and international policy on maximising the overall public benefits provided by the environment, including that under agriculture, requires a much more integrated approach. The changes being contemplated under CAP reform will almost certainly bring major changes to agriculture in Northern Ireland, changes which the Agri-Food Strategy Board should be considering and contributing to. These changes go far beyond the types of questions raised in this consultation paper tied to sub-sectors – they require an integrated approach across all of the sub-sectors as well as a strategic approach going beyond those individual aspects. Other aspects of EU policy and fiscal measures will also have major impacts on Northern Ireland's agriculture and food systems and 'future proofing' NI policy against possible changes at EU and global levels is required.

It is apparent from the questions in this call for evidence that the approach adopted by the Board is 'more of the same'. While there are indeed opportunities which can be developed through this approach, there are many more opportunities which could be gained for Northern Ireland's agriculture and food sectors if a broader and more integrated approach were adopted, using the approaches which have been put forward in the UK and elsewhere, looking at global food issues (including the challenges of feeding nine billion people in the near future and the changes in diets that will require), resource and energy constraints, and minimisation of food wastage at all stages in production. The lack of this approach in this consultation is most disappointing.

Soil quality, climate and biodiversity are all fundamental to our ability to produce food and other products from Northern Ireland's land. Soil quality is in general good, but it is under threat from a number of factors and protection of the soil must be a significant consideration within this

Strategy. Poor soil is not capable of producing food in quantity, and avoiding degradation of soil quality has to be high on the aims of any food strategy for Northern Ireland. The climate is already changing, and this will determine what crops can be grown and any modifications in farming techniques (e.g. need for irrigation, dealing with flooding, waterlogged soils) which will arise from these conditions. Pollination is critical to a number of crops already grown and may be critical for other crops which might be introduced, so it is essential that biodiversity is maintained to provide this and other critical services to food crops.

Questions which need to be addressed in this strategy include:

- What can Northern Ireland's land be used to provide, given physical, weather and global market conditions? A land use strategy is required to ensure that all of the public goods are provided as well as traditional outputs. The limitations of current policy approaches which can seem minor but could lead to major shifts in land use (e.g. subsidies for anaerobic digestion possibly leading to major shifts away from livestock production) must be recognised and a more strategic approach to our land and its many outputs adopted.
- What new opportunities are there for using Northern Ireland's land in ways other than to produce food (e.g. energy crops, harvesting of renewable energy (e.g. wind, anaerobic digestion), tourism, carbon sequestration) and what balance needs to be struck amongst these competing demands on a limited land area? What land is most suitable for which outputs (e.g. peatland has huge carbon storage, water purification, biodiversity and cultural benefits, has major potential to produce wind energy, and is of low value for crop production)? How do we balance the various outputs from different areas to ensure that as a whole all of Northern Ireland's needs are being addressed effectively and efficiently? Delivery of multiple outputs is often achievable, but it requires a land management strategy which takes into account all that an area can deliver and work to maximise that. This is fundamentally different to current techniques which leave decisions to individual land managers within very broad fiscal drivers.
- How can we ensure that land management will continue to protect soil quality and will improve water quality? Greater awareness around and legislation to protect both soil and water quality are fundamental drivers for protection of these resources in the longer term. If these assets are degraded the negative impacts could be immense, yet to date effective action has been minimal and even awareness of the importance of soil quality is limited.
- How will climate change and government legislation around carbon management impact on farming – what we grow and how we grow it? Both aspects will become increasingly important drivers, and when coupled with the increasing cost of energy and especially of fossil fuels (and the products derived from them) will have a major impact on farming practice and outputs. Lack of inclusion of these factors limits the relevance of any Food Strategy to a very short lifespan.
- What consumer preferences are relevant and where will they drive NI farming? There is likely to be an increasing demand for local produce, and with suitable techniques this can be accommodated. The ability of Northern Ireland to produce high quality, low input or

organic meat and dairy products should be recognised and this market should be developed further both at home and further afield.

- How do we manage wastes? EU legislation is driving efficient energy, nutrient and materials usage and coupled with increasing costs, efficient use will be a major consideration in how food is produced.
- How is Northern Ireland preparing for future economic, environmental and social impacts on global food production? How can we address increased needs for local food security? A report by the Environmental Audit Committee published on May 13th 2012, Sustainable Food, stated that the UK does not have the science base to develop more sustainable food production. In response to this the Technology Strategy Board will provide £75 million investment over the next five years to boost technological developments to enhance food security.
- Does this group have a role in addressing Northern Ireland's diets, and the role of local production in improving peoples' diets from both health and sustainability aspects? If so, the membership of the group needs to be wider to incorporate experts in these areas, not just production; if not it must be made clear that this 'agri-food strategy' is very restricted in its role.