

DARD Strategic Plan 2012-2020

Comments by

Northern Ireland Environment Link

20 November 2012

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 57 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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Northern Ireland Environment Link thanks DARD for the opportunity to comment on this Plan. We welcome the clear statement of Vision, Goals and Actions and the Context summary.

The Context

The importance of global drivers for Northern Ireland agriculture, while clearly referred to, has not been given the emphasis which is essential if Northern Ireland is to maintain its competitive position. The importance of research and innovation in NI cannot be overstated and must be supported by local investment as well as drawdown of EU funding. There are likely to be significant challenges impacting upon NI in the period up to 2020 from a variety of economic and environmental sources and local research to address these challenges is vitally important. While commissioned research obviously needs to relate to policy objectives, the timescale of research means that a much more long-term approach must be adopted to deliver the research outcomes vital for Northern Ireland's agriculture in the coming years. There are areas where Northern Ireland leads the UK if not the world in agricultural research and investment to support this is essential if it is to continue to do so.

While the aim of 'producing more with less' is completely laudable, there is less than clear understanding of the term 'sustainable intensification' within the farming community. This largely relates to misunderstanding of the term 'sustainable' which has become linked only to short term economic impacts while it must be understood as referring to long term environmental sustainability, including operating only within the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. Truly 'sustainable intensification' must be seen as delivering multiple ecosystem services so that farmers' incomes can be maintained or increased by diversification where further intensification would lead to degradation and collapse. A thorough understanding of the true meaning (and methods of calculation) of 'sustainable intensification' must be developed and promoted by scientists to the local farming community to overcome the many existing misconceptions about what this concept actually means. How 'intensity' is measured depends on the outcomes desired, and thus research needs to be conducted and policy consultation carried out to determine what 'outputs' are needed from Northern Ireland's land (meat, milk, GHG reductions, carbon sequestration, flood prevention, water purification, recreation, etc.) and how that is to be measured (kilograms, calories, carbon). Current popular understanding of 'sustainable intensification' is very limited and there is grave danger of delivering highly unsustainable intensification leading to significant environmental problems.

DARD Policy Division has failed to support essential fundamental research on soil carbon sequestration. Northern Ireland agriculture is now behind the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland in this vital research area. Future commissioning of research may be too late to catch up. The opportunities need to be recognised and pursued for developing improved land management techniques to deliver carbon sequestration, contribute to GHG reduction targets and deliver agricultural outputs.

The emphasis on preparing for emergencies is most welcome. The need for resilience in all aspects of land management, ensuring that the environment is capable of providing necessary resilience in the face of climate change, invasive species, diseases and changing economic circumstances and global food/feed supplies is a vital area for DARD.

Vision, Aim and Role

It is important for DARD to recognise its strategic role in managing the land and landscape of Northern Ireland. It would be useful within these sections to recognise the importance of adopting an ecosystem services approach to developing an integrated delivery of multiple benefits to the farmer and public from improved land management. The key concepts of resource efficiency, resilience and ecosystem management to deliver public goods should be emphasised.

Overview of Strategy

Aim: ‘...ANTICIPATES AND responds quickly to change...’

Goals: To help the agri-food industry prepare for future market opportunities and economic AND ENVIRONMENTAL challenges.

Goal 1

The actions within this Goal do not seem to take fully into account the volatility and unpredictability of global economic, social and environmental factors as drivers for Northern Ireland’s agriculture. Changing consumer pressures (e.g. for more local food, healthier diets, improved animal welfare and environmental standards, food security issues) could have major impacts and offer Northern Ireland significant opportunities. The impact of increased fuel costs will become an ever increasing driver for changing production methods, and improved waste management options also offer many opportunities. Climate change adaptation and developing environmental resilience also offer huge opportunities to Northern Ireland agriculture. These do not seem to be adequately addressed in these ‘key actions’, although the ‘success’ points are so general as to arguably encompass them.

Goal 3

A proactive approach to keeping new diseases and invasive species out of Northern Ireland is required to protect Northern Ireland’s agriculture and environment from major costs.

Goal 4

Second line – DARD has an IMPORTANT AND DISTINCT contribution to make (rather than a ‘distinctive’ contribution).

Success measures and Key Actions seem sensible. Some mention should be made of the concepts of ecosystem services and resilience as key deliverables by DARD (so both in the Success and Actions areas). Targeting of funding by itself will not achieve the ‘best environmental outcomes’. This implies that current funding is not properly targeted. Funding must be increased substantially and targeted to prevent significant environmental degradation. DARD cannot rely solely on ‘competitive EU funds’ to deliver its responsibilities. The approach discussed above will deliver the best outcomes for Northern Ireland’s land and farmers, widening the role of DARD to include strong environmental outcomes, wider countryside management, delivery of carbon, water and soil management goals and promoting resilience in the face of climate change, invasive species/diseases and economic/social/environmental challenges at a global scale which will impact on Northern Ireland.