



AgriSearch response to the DAERA consultation on the Third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCA3)

Introduction

AgriSearch (The Northern Ireland Agricultural Research and Development Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Consultation on the Third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP3).

AgriSearch was formed in 1997 to provide a mechanism through which beef, dairy and sheep farmers could have direct involvement in agricultural focused research. Funds contributed to AgriSearch are used to commission research into the improvement and development of beef, dairy and sheep farming. Our vision is to drive excellence and innovation within the Northern Ireland ruminant livestock sector and our mission is to drive a sustainable food system that embraces all dimensions of sustainability (people, planet and profit), by acting as a trusted, valued conduit of knowledge that is based on sound science and widely applied research.

AgriSearch's response is focused on areas aligned with its charitable objectives.

We note the high volume of consultations issued by DAERA in recent weeks. For smaller organisations such as ours, this presents a significant administrative challenge, particularly during the summer months. These consultations each deal with very important issues and it is important that stakeholders have the time to respond properly to these consultations. We encourage DAERA to consider the cumulative impact of concurrent consultations on stakeholder engagement and the quality of responses.

We also observe that recent consultations on water quality, ammonia, climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation have been approached in isolation. While we recognise DAERA's statutory obligations, a more integrated approach would support coherent policy development and reduce the risk of unintended consequences across environmental and agricultural domains.

The Climate Change Adaption Challenge

Climate Adaptation is a serious issue for food production and for farmers in particular. The pressures of the ongoing changes to our weather are already apparent. This can include more extremes of weather leading to variable and unpredictable grass growth and challenges in grass utilisation. It brings up issues for future food security as many of the world's key food producing areas are facing even more radical climatic shifts than we are seeing in Northern Ireland, with increasing desertification and extreme summer temperatures.

Ironically, Northern Ireland is actually one of the very few areas of the world where climate change might actually increase our ability to grow food. Modelling undertaken by AFBI for GrassCheck's 25th Anniversary highlighted that by 2100 Northern Ireland farms are likely to grow an additional two tonnes of grass dry matter per hectare per year. This will likely be in the shoulders of the season (which will bring its own challenges in terms of grass utilisation). Grass growth in the summer months will be a lot more variable with eastern areas much more likely to see summer dry periods in line with what was experienced in 2018. Nonetheless, the potential for increased grass growth represents a real opportunity for Northern Ireland agriculture and further research is needed to assess how this potential can be fully realised within the ruminant livestock sector.

The warming climate has also seen both plant and animal health / disease challenges such as Bluetongue (BTV-3) and Schmallenberg. Crown rust is a growing issue in some of our grassland and Ash Dieback has shown how an entire plant species can be threatened. Milder winters are also complicating parasite control, exacerbated by growing anthelmintic resistance.

Extreme rainfall events also bring additional challenges with regard to nutrient run-off from agricultural fields. Something that is neither in the farmer's or society's interests.

The Third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaption Programme

Given the scale and complexity of the adaptation challenge, a coordinated and strategic approach is essential. We are concerned that the current draft of NICCAP3 lacks the coherence and ambition required to address these issues effectively. Several initiatives cited appear disconnected or insufficiently aligned with the programme's objectives.

We welcome the investment in the Co-Centres and encourage greater stakeholder involvement to ensure the programme delivers balanced and impactful outcomes.

The treatment of food security within the consultation document is particularly disappointing, given the vital importance of this topic to society as a whole. The choice of a social farms and gardens as a case study for this section demonstrates a poor understanding of the global challenge of providing the world's growing population with access to safe, affordable and nutritious food, all of the time and in ways the planet can sustain into the future. While this is a worthy initiative it does not tackle any of the real substantive climate adaption challenges.

We also note a lack of emphasis on long-term research and innovation. While the Co-Centre investment is welcome, it is time-limited. A clearer vision for sustained research at AFBI sites at Hillsborough, Loughgall and Crossnacreevy, particularly in climate-resilient grassland and livestock systems would be beneficial.

Innovation components within the Sustainable Agricultural Programme, including future Innovation Partnerships, could play a key role in engaging producers and supporting adaptation.

AgriSearch's initiatives, such as GrassCheck and ZeroNsite, are referenced in the consultation. While we appreciate this recognition, earlier engagement would have strengthened the programme's development. We would welcome further dialogue on how research and innovation can support climate resilience in Northern Ireland's ruminant livestock sector.

Conclusion

In response to the consultation's questions on food security:

- **Q12:** The current objective lacks the ambition necessary to address the scale of the adaptation challenge.
- **Q13:** The chapter provides limited detail and omits several key issues.

- **Q14:** While many listed actions are worthwhile, they appear fragmented and lack strategic coherence.

AgriSearch would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with DAERA on a more integrated, bottom-up approach to research and innovation that supports effective climate adaptation in agriculture.