



HORTICULTURE FORUM FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Dear Minister O'Neill

Land availability for vegetable and potato production in 2015

As chair of the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland I wish to express my very grave concerns about the availability of sufficient suitable land for the production of local vegetables and potatoes in 2015 if the current DARD proposals on the establishment of entitlements proceed as planned. The DARD proposals threaten to devastate both the vegetable and potato industries locally. Locally the seed and ware potato industry is worth in the region of £25m and the vegetable sector approximately £16m generating considerable income and employment for the horticulture sector.

We in the Horticulture Forum recognise the complexities in the delivery of the CAP reform proposals, however we urge you to give this issue urgent consideration. Some 1,400ha of vegetables and around 4,300ha of potatoes are grown locally. Of this a very high percentage is grown on conacre land. This is a necessary management requirement for vegetable and potato growers to allow the proper rotation of land and to ensure crops are grown on 'clean' land with a minimum burden of disease and pests. Land is taken in conacre from 'active' farmers who let fields to vegetable and potato growers as part of their normal rotation and from 'inactive' landowners who routinely let all of their land.

This dependence on conacre land will pose very significant difficulties for vegetable and potato growers in 2015. Discussions with landowners show that many will withdraw their land from the conacre market in 2015 in order to establish their own entitlements on their land. This decision by landowners has not been made lightly. Many of them have long standing agreements with vegetable and potato growers. A lack of clarity from DARD and a failure to recognise the implications for the vegetable and potato sectors has forced landowners to make this decision. The requirement to implement 'greening' for larger landowners, is also acting as a disincentive to rent out land for vegetable production.

If measures are not put in place to address this issue there will be a very significant reduction in the area of vegetables and potatoes grown locally, jeopardising many local businesses. There will be a significant shortage of local produce for the consumer and also local packers and processors will be forced to buy in vegetables and potatoes from outside Northern Ireland. Many key market outlets for local produce will be lost.

You recently stated that you would take on board all views relating to CAP before arriving at a final decision. In light of this I ask you to ensure your department puts in place formal exemptions or legal rental arrangements for vegetable and potato production in 2015 as a matter of urgency. The alternative will be the loss of both the vegetable and potato industries.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Shaw
Chair of the Horticulture Forum for Northern Ireland
Tel: 07799 711555
Email: elaineshaw@northwaymushrooms.co.uk