



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture and Rural  
Development

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Better Regulation:  
Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association

20 October 2015

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr William Irwin (Chairperson)  
Mr Sydney Anderson  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr Declan McAleer  
Mr Kieran McCarthy  
Mr Oliver McMullan  
Mr Ian Milne

**Witnesses:**

Mr Conall Donnelly	Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association
Mr Campbell Tweedie	Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** I welcome Campbell Tweedie, president of the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA), and Conall Donnelly, executive director of the association. Please take up to 10 minutes to give your presentation. After that, we will ask some questions. We apologise for your long wait. It was beyond our control.

**Mr Campbell Tweedie (Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association):** Thank you. It is good to be here today. I will give just a brief lead-in. NIMEA represents eight red meat processing businesses in Northern Ireland, comprising a combination of 11 abattoirs and cutting plants. NIMEA represents members with beef and lamb interests, although several members also operate in other meat areas.

We will look at three areas today, and Conall will brief you on them. Those areas are better regulation of Northern Ireland farms; market access development; and industry support outside the United Kingdom. I will hand over to Conall to give the presentation, and then we are open to whatever questions you want to ask.

**Mr Conall Donnelly (Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association):** To reiterate what Campbell said, we welcome the Committee's initiative to investigate opportunities to reduce the burden of regulation on Northern Ireland farmers. We believe that onerous implementation of regulation at farm level has implications for the entire industry. Pre-slaughter veterinary inspections — ante-mortem inspections — for animal welfare is a subject worth examining. We are committed to high standards of animal welfare in our businesses, and so are our members. However, we also recognise that inconsistent and burdensome interpretation of the legislation is a concern for our members and their suppliers alike.

When a producer presents cattle for slaughter, a DARD vet will perform an ante-mortem inspection in the lairage. At that point, they assess the animal for any injuries that may have rendered it unfit for

transport. If such a case is identified, it will be referred to the DARD investigation unit, which will investigate, and that will involve interviewing under caution the producer or haulier. If the investigation unit deems it necessary, it will prepare a file and pass it to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) for prosecution. The DPP may then make a recommendation to prosecute, at which point it will come before the courts.

A number of cases have been referred for prosecution that DARD has lost in the courts. In some of these borderline cases, there has been what we would see as a burdensome interpretation of the regulations. If a common-sense approach had been used, the case probably would not have been referred for investigation by the official veterinarian (OV). The issue is that we believe that some OVs refer more cases for investigation than others. Aside from the obvious waste of time created by such cases, we are concerned about the impact on the farmer. On a personal level, there is stress for the suppliers, given that they are interviewed under caution and potentially dragged through the court. That is a concern for the industry. The lack of consistency may also prompt producers to avoid certain plants, depending on the OV who is on duty. That is unfair to the plants involved. If such a scenario exists, it might even be counterproductive to animal welfare if producers are encouraged to take animals, in borderline cases, on a longer journey to avoid a particular vet. Furthermore, DARD vets have no permanent presence in marts, so it is hard to see how they can provide a consistent approach in that regard.

I want to finish on this point by explaining that our members are absolutely committed to animal welfare. We do not want our farmers transporting cattle that are injured or in pain, and we expect suppliers and hauliers to comply with legislation. However, we also need a common-sense and consistent approach, and the industry would welcome your support on this issue.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** Thank you very much for your presentation.

**Mr Donnelly:** There are two more points that I would like to raise, Chair. The industry is wholly dependent on government support for market access. Members acknowledge the ongoing work and progress made in the key markets and the important contribution of DARD and DEFRA. However, market access must be properly resourced at a UK level, and we are concerned that DEFRA's trade budget must be protected going forward.

The world's largest beef importers, roughly in order of importance, are China, the USA, Russia, Japan, South Korea, the EU, Canada, Mexico and Chile. Of all those markets, we really only have access to the EU and part of China, which is Hong Kong. Since 2013, the EU market has not been performing well; we see this if we examine the league table of EU cattle prices. Great Britain and Northern Ireland have been consistently ahead of prices in the remainder of the EU, and the differences have been substantial. The Northern Ireland price has been up to 50 cents a kilo ahead of prices in France and Italy, and German prices are currently 70 cents a kilo behind ours.

Third-country markets are offering much better prices. At the moment, boneless flank in the UK market is returning £1.40 a kilo, while in the Chinese market, bone-in flank is returning up to £2.40 and £2.50. That is just an illustrative point that explains our industry's desire for market access to places such as China and the USA. The USA, for example, is offering significantly better returns for beef mince, or grinding beef, as they call it. Both countries are paying higher prices, and they take serious volumes from the international market. Without access to those key markets, we are seriously disadvantaged. In Australia, for example, the industry there has access to China, the USA and the EU and very high prices are available for Australian beef in China and the USA. Australian exporters are able to accept lower prices for high-value steak meat in the UK market. To some extent this year, this has undermined our market. Without access to China and the USA, not only are we restricted in our marketing options but we find it harder to compete with the Australians in the EU.

You can see why market access is so important to the sector. We must give credit to DARD and the Minister for the work that they have done and also to DETI and Invest NI for promoting exports through Anuga and other such initiatives. We need to see a good level of political and technical engagement maintained with those key markets. We appreciate that the speed of progress is somewhat determined by foreign governments and their wish to provide access. However, DEFRA takes the lead on these issues, and we understand that the DEFRA trade section has come in for cutbacks in recent years. We would be concerned that its trade budget be protected. Any help that you can provide on that front would be gratefully received.

The final issue that I want to raise is industry support measures outside the UK. We have had the second-highest beef prices in Europe generally in recent times, behind Great Britain, so the UK is well

ahead of the rest of the EU in terms of prices. Northern Ireland farmers have continued to struggle with profitability. Meanwhile prices in mainland Europe have been so much lower over the past two or three years. It is only recently that we have seen major protests at a European level. We have long suspected that additional direct and indirect subsidies are available in other member states. We would welcome a thorough examination and evaluation of all the support measures across the EU.

A few weeks ago, the 'Irish Farmers Journal' provided a useful summary of the support levels per hectare across the EU, and it showed the variances in support for agriculture in terms of pillar 1 and pillar 2 funding. The UK has the third-lowest level of CAP funding on a per hectare basis, and the Netherlands has the highest, which is substantially higher than in the UK. It is interesting, but it would be particularly useful to have a comprehensive analysis across the EU of national support measures, tax breaks and coupled support. If this type of analysis is not already available, and we do not believe that it is, it should be undertaken to ensure that we have a better understanding of how our industry has been supported relative to farmers elsewhere in Europe. It would go a long distance towards helping to inform future CAP discussions.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** OK. Thank you very much for your presentation. Two of the issues that we are interested in exploring in our inquiry into better regulation are the recording of the colour of an animal as a data requirement and the potential for the use of cattle electronic ID (EID). One of the issues identified in the 'Northern Ireland Agri-Food Better Regulation and Simplification Review' of 2009 was a reduction in the amount of information needed for the registration of animals. The less data, the simpler the process. We note that providing a description of the colour of the animal is not a requirement under EU legislation. We also note that the colour of the animal is not required in the Republic of Ireland.

One of the reasons why I am asking about that is that I know of one farmer who was fined from his single farm payment for recording dun animals. Believe it or not, dun animals can cover quite a range of colours from white Charolais to roan or red. Some of those issues can be a problem. What is your view on the colour?

**Mr Donnelly:** I appreciate the concern, and it is certainly something that we have heard before. Colour is a very small part of traceability, and, if there is an issue with colour, we would expect it to be investigated and resolved quickly by looking at the other components that make up the traceability of the animal. I take your point that, for example, dun covers a very wide range of colours, as you said, from white to almost dark brown or black. They can change shade at certain times of the year as well.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** There is no doubt about that.

**Mr Donnelly:** I certainly agree that it is something worth investigating further.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** I know of one farmer who had DNA tests carried out on three of his animals, which proved that he was right. The Department said that the colour was not right, so that is interesting.

**Mr Donnelly:** It is good that that technology is there now —

**Mr Tweedie:** And is there in a big way.

**Mr Donnelly:** — to support producers.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** Yes. What is your view on electronic ID?

**Mr Donnelly:** If you go back a number of years, you might be aware that NIMEA supported a move towards bovine EID. Our position in the industry and in NIMEA, from the point of view of efficiency and process efficiency, is that we would not want to have a twin-track system if bovine EID were to come in, with tags maintained at the same time as bovine EID. So, we would welcome bovine EID. It would be useful, would potentially cut down on paperwork and would be a speedier processing solution in plants.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** I would have thought that quite a bit of work would be involved in making it work. Would it not?

**Mr Donnelly:** It probably would, but there is a very strong business case for it. There is also a very strong case for DARD to support it.

**Mr Tweedie:** About three or four years ago, DARD was almost on the verge of launching it. A lot of money was lifted for it, but it just went flat on its face.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** Are you aware of whether any other region of the EU has electronic ID?

**Mr Donnelly:** No. That is not to say that there is not. I am sure that there is.

**Mrs Dobson:** Thank you for your briefing. I suppose that I had better declare an interest as my husband is a beef farmer.

I have said it before in the Committee that it really sticks in my throat to see cheap £5 meat packs for sale, which often do not have a country of origin label. That undermines our farmers. That meat has been imported from countries that have nowhere near the level of onerous regulations that our farmers face every day. Does it frustrate you that, while our farmers provide meat to world-beating standards, people are engaged in importing a substandard product into the country?

**Mr Tweedie:** I would say that it does annoy us. The unfortunate thing for us is that, because of the way that the currency has worked, an awful lot of meat is being imported from solid countries like the ROI. I would say that 50% of our butchers in Northern Ireland are buying Irish beef, because it costs about £150 a beast less. The unfortunate thing is that we are the second-largest in the European league, yet our farmers and processors are not earning money. That can be checked out. If anyone looks at the company accounts of meat plants over the past couple of years, they will see that it has been a very unprofitable business. That has been because we have the situation where a lot of cheap imports are coming into the country. We do not welcome it.

With the recent weakness of the euro, we have two situations. First, we have an amount of Irish beef hitting our Northern Ireland shops. Unfortunately, it is good-quality beef — we cannot run it down; it is good-quality beef — but it is so much cheaper that, if one shop uses it, the other has to use it to compete. It has become a problem for processors who are trying to sell our beef at a higher level. Secondly, over the past two years, the price of cattle in Northern Ireland has been about £150 a head more than that in the South of Ireland. A 7.5% difference in the euro makes the beef coming into us cheaper and also means that beef going to England is cheaper than ours. So we are facing a competition whereby we are part of one island and we have more expensive beef being shipped into the same market as our counterparts in the South, who have much cheaper beef and a more favourable exchange. That is a big problem that we have at the moment.

As for bringing beef in from other outside countries, we believe that none of our members are involved in that whatsoever.

**Mrs Dobson:** You are confident that none of your members are involved.

**Mr Tweedie:** I am confident. If there were, it would be far better if we were asked to look at that member. If a statement is made that it is coming into Northern Ireland, all our members are blackened by that statement. We would prefer to be contacted and the company mentioned, so we could come back and give answers. We would welcome that, because, as far as we are aware, which is all that we can say, that is not happening. If anyone had information that it was happening, it would be better if we were told to look into it, rather than blanketing our whole industry with that.

**Mrs Dobson:** So would you thoroughly investigate it if you were told?

**Mr Tweedie:** It is not really for us to investigate it, but we would enquire about it.

**Mrs Dobson:** But you would be concerned if one of your members —

**Mr Tweedie:** We would be concerned, but I am sure that the proper regulatory authority would investigate it. Although, we must point out that it is not illegal to bring in such meat. It comes from a European country, and it is a European market. If the meat is cheaper and the quality is good, nothing illegal is being done. Hundreds of our people drive across the border to buy diesel in the South of

Ireland. There is nothing illegal about that, because they are going to the cheapest market. So, although we would not promote it, there is nothing illegal about someone doing it.

**Mrs Dobson:** But you are representing Northern Ireland for its world-class meat.

**Mr Tweedie:** We are. All I am saying is that, while we would not promote it and do our best to stop it, the situation is legal. People, although not so much in our industry, are doing food services. An awful lot of imported meat is coming into Britain. You will see from the figures that the imports to Britain have gone up. If they are servicing a contract in Britain, and that contract is being serviced by someone in the UK who is bringing in imported beef, the only way that they can compete against it is by doing the same. We are not condoning it and would prefer not to have it, but the practice is not illegal.

**Mrs Dobson:** But our Northern Ireland farmers look to you, as the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association, to support them and their world-class meat.

**Mr Tweedie:** And we are doing that 100%, yes.

**Mrs Dobson:** In your briefing, you state that progress is being made in key markets, with important contributions from DARD and DEFRA, as Conall outlined. Have you lobbied DEFRA directly? I understand that the DEFRA Committee is looking into the impact on farm-gate prices. So, have you lobbied it?

**Mr Donnelly:** Not on that specific inquiry into farm-gate prices, no. We have certainly spoken to Northern Ireland members of the EFRA Committee about the importance of market access and its export development work. Achieving improved market access would be the single biggest thing in improving the lot for Northern Ireland producers. The strongest markets at the moment are outside the EU, and that is the only market that we have large-volume access to.

China and the USA are two of the strongest performing markets in the world at present. They are taking strong volumes at higher prices. We are enormously committed to getting into those markets, and we appreciate the work that is being done on it by government. We are concerned about the fact that that work requires ongoing and strong resourcing to ensure that the relationships that are built up to eventually deliver on access are maintained and fostered. That requires resource. We are conscious that that resource is likely to come under pressure because of the coming cutbacks. For the work that we do directly, we are engaged with the UK Export Certification Partnership (UKECP), which is an industry/government body that comprises people from DEFRA, the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the processing sector and levy bodies. That uses industry funding to support government activity. Only government, however, can really deliver market access. We are very much dependent on government to deliver on that. That work requires strong political, diplomatic and tactical engagement. There are therefore three facets. Ongoing communication is required. We appreciate the work that has been done so far, but, as I say, we are some way off access to China.

**Mrs Dobson:** Given the fact that you are presenting to us here, I would have thought that the next step would be DEFRA, which is currently looking at the impact on farmgate prices. We know that, here in Northern Ireland, we are fighting for survival with the low farmgate prices. I would encourage NIMEA, as the representative of meat exporters, to send its views to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee at Westminster. Do you plan to do that in order to make your views known?

**Mr Donnelly:** Certainly. I understand that this Committee will make a contribution to DEFRA.

**Mrs Dobson:** Yes, we certainly will make our views known.

**Mr Donnelly:** We very much appreciate that. We have already made our views known to DEFRA on this particular issue, but, in the context of farmgate prices, I take that point.

**Mr Tweedie:** Conall, you have met the two members, Margaret Ritchie and David Simpson.

**Mr Donnelly:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mrs Dobson:** When I asked you at the start, I thought that you had said that you had not engaged directly with DEFRA. You said that you had met members.

**Mr Donnelly:** Not on that particular inquiry.

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you plan to?

**Mr Donnelly:** We are engaging with DEFRA constantly on UK —

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you plan to engage on farmgate prices?

**Mr Donnelly:** I take your point.

**Mrs Dobson:** So, you will.

**Mr Donnelly:** We will, yes.

**Mr McMullan:** Thank you for your presentation. You have been doing very good work. I am just reading your report. On the Going for Growth figures, and so on, what more can we do to expand our export business for the betterment of the industry, given what is happening in Russia and elsewhere?

**Mr Donnelly:** Again, it comes back to access. At the minute, as an industry, we are probably operating with one hand tied behind our back. Look at the kind of access that the likes of Australia and Brazil have. Obviously, they are much larger beef-producing regions of the world. When it comes to major markets, we have access only to the EU. If we had access to the likes of China and the USA, that would give us an enormous opportunity to attract better prices for manufacturing and getting ground beef into the like of America and offal — the fifth quarter — into China. China is a very attractive market, not just for offal products but for primals — and getting into its market would help us compete and become more competitive, even in the EU market. One of our problems is competing with the like of Australia, which has access to China and the USA. It is then able to come into the EU market and effectively offload some product at prices that we cannot really compete with but that we have to compete with. Regarding competitiveness, market access would go a seriously long way to helping address that. Competitiveness does not just start with the market. We have to look at competitiveness at farm level. Work also has to be done there, and I know that that work is ongoing, genetically. We are committed to that type of work, too.

**Mr McMullan:** You say that you have one hand tied behind your back. What is the problem there? Who is responsible for that?

**Mr Donnelly:** It is not a case of who but of what. Prior to the mid-90s, the industry would have had access to a lot of those markets. In the BSE era, market access was withdrawn, and we were dependent on the UK market initially. Eventually the EU market opened up, and that brought with it stronger trade, particularly post 2009.

You then move further ahead, into today's world. Back in 2009 and prior to then, there were not the same prices available in the third-country markets. For example, China was not experiencing the boom in food prices that it has experienced over the past number of years. Markets such as China, and even the Philippines, have grown very strongly when it comes to pricing. At various times, even smaller countries have taken significant volumes off the world markets.

If you do have access, having the widest possible access makes you much more competitive. It is not a question of who but a question of what: what we can do to change that. What we can do to change that is put more resource into market access. Good work is being done. We have very good people out in markets such as China. Britain, for example, has an agriculture attaché working in Beijing doing very good work — Karen Morgan, who was appointed by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB). My understanding is that the Danish might have a dozen people in China.

**Mr McMullan:** But we have only one.

**Mr Donnelly:** It is that type of thinking that we need to move to. It is not simple, because we are asking for more support at a time when government is making cutbacks, but, at the same time, the opportunities to have a much more sustainable business and to have sustainable markets are significant.

**Mr McMullan:** You said that DEFRA's trade sector is being cut back.

**Mr Donnelly:** My understanding is that it has suffered cutbacks.

**Mr McMullan:** Because?

**Mr Donnelly:** I presume as a result of the general cutbacks that there have been, maybe since —

**Mr McMullan:** At government level.

**Mr Donnelly:** Yes.

**Mr McMullan:** How will that affect us?

**Mr Donnelly:** It affects our capacity to engage constantly. What we keep hearing about at industry level is the importance of having a constant voice in those third-country markets. For China and other markets, but maybe the Far East in particular, we keep hearing about the importance of building relationships and ensuring that people are on the ground. That is something that we appreciate. Local Ministers have been out there and have been doing good work maintaining those relationships. You cannot put a price on having that constant engagement, because it is what eventually breaks down the barriers and gets you a trade agreement. That is our understanding.

If you are running too tight a ship, you may not necessarily have the people to allocate to that. The business case for our market access in China is very strong based on what we would deliver back to the market here — the processor and the production base in Northern Ireland — to create a sustainable business. It is just about building up those relationships. That is really important.

**Mr McMullan:** We really need to do more for ourselves and be less reliant on DEFRA.

**Mr Tweedie:** I thank Jo-Anne for what she said. To be honest, as far as we are concerned, Great Britain is a net importer of beef and we are an exporter. We have to go through DEFRA, so it is a case of putting as much pressure on it as possible to fight our case. We believe that DARD is doing that, but I suppose what we are saying is that the more pressure that is put on, the better, so that DEFRA might realise that we are in a worse situation. We need to export 80% of our product, whereas the rest of the UK imports all its product. We must go through DEFRA, however, because we are part of the UK. It is up to us all to put pressure on DEFRA to fight our case in the situation.

**Mr McMullan:** It is hard enough getting markets for our product without having to fight the very organisation that is supposed to be there to help us.

**Mr Donnelly:** It probably is helping us, but it has to be said — to stay in the real world — that the speed of access is determined by the likes of the Chinese and American authorities. We realise that and have realistic expectations, but, at the same time, we believe that having more people of good standing and operating at a strong level of authority out there engaging would be very helpful.

**Mr McAleer:** I just want to follow up on something that Jo-Anne mentioned a while ago. I recently read about the whole debate around the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations. One thing that is being talked about is regulatory convergence, which is effectively the coercing or forcing of the EU to lower its level of regulation to enable transatlantic trade. That would enable US agricultural produce to be imported to here. The US has a much different quality from what we are used to. Hormones are used in its beef. The US uses pesticides, and it is reckoned that 70% of its processed food has been genetically modified. What is your thinking on the implications of TTIP if it came in here? How would it impact on the industry here?

**Mr Donnelly:** When you look at any trade agreement, you have to look at both sides of the equation. It is like anything in life: when you strike an agreement on something, there are pros and cons. At the



minute, from our point of view, there are significant opportunities if we get access to the American beef market. There is no question about that. If you were to take a balanced view of the longer term, you would say, "Is there potential for us to struggle to compete with imports?" That could apply to beef or other products. We represent the beef sector. At the minute, we see the benefits for us of having access to the US beef sector. Some of our members already have people on the ground, exploring sales opportunities for beef in the United States, where we have not got access. The South does, however. The opportunities are significant.

The US has very different production systems and credentials through its use of GM technology and such things. The US' view of quality is very different from what it is here. It puts a premium on marbling fat and such things and is probably less keen on lean meat. It is hard to know whether tastes have any impact on that. I think that you are right. You have to take a holistic view of the opportunity and of any downsides. We believe that the opportunities are very strong in the short term and in the medium term, but, in the longer run, we are concerned about beef coming in that is less —

**Mr Tweedie:** It all depends on the state of the market at the time. If the EU could ship a lot of beef to the UK, at the moment, that would lift its market and help us get a better price in Europe. On the other hand, if Europe were at a high level and the US was a lower market, it would be difficult.

We believe that Turkey is going to open its borders to Polish cattle. If that happens, it will help us, because it will mean Polish beef going up in price, which means that there will not be as much cheap beef coming into the UK. Therefore, it has an awful lot to do with the market. At the moment, getting beef into the UK from Europe would be a good thing because it would help our European market. However, in the long term, if European prices were to stay high and UK prices were low, it would deflate it. It is a difficult market situation. You make a decision based on the time.

**Mr McAleer:** There are, quite rightly, opportunities from opening up the US market, but one thing that we have worked very hard for here and in Europe is quality. The term "regulatory convergence" is doublespeak for lowering the levels here in the EU to bring them into line with those in the US. My fear is that, in such a scenario, we will compromise the quality that we have worked hard to build and open the floodgates for a pile of beef to come in from the US that is genetically modified and contains hormones. People in the US have become accustomed to a different standard. I think that it is important for the likes of your organisation and others to consider this very, very carefully, because TTIP is probably one of the biggest things that are happening at the moment, and negotiations are not even happening in an open and transparent way. They are happening behind closed doors.

**Mr Donnelly:** Some of our members have raised concerns about it. It is important, if we do end up with that scenario, that we are operating on a level playing field. We know that we do not always have that in the EU.

In the meantime, we will maintain access to America for us as a high priority. If you are looking to achieve market access in the USA, it is difficult then to have the backstop of not wanting USA beef coming here.

Regarding the regulatory burden that our producers and processors face, it is essential that the level playing field be maintained.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** Declan raised an important issue. Beef imports would have hormones, and all the rest. If that were to happen, it would undermine us, because we are expected to produce to a very high level.

The Committee is going to see the Groceries Code Adjudicator next month. Is there an issue that you would like to see us raise with her? Does anything in particular come to mind?

**Mr Donnelly:** Nothing in particular. If members had anything to raise with the Groceries Code Adjudicator, I suspect that they would want to raise it privately.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** Absolutely.

**Mr Donnelly:** It is not a conversation that our members would have with me, so I would not necessarily be aware of anything, but that is not a surprise to me. The commercial relationship between processors and their customers stays in that domain.

One of the challenges for the Groceries Code Adjudicator is to be able to step into a place where concerns raised can be heard. Where there are issues, I expect that they would be raised directly.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** As far as the Groceries Code Adjudicator is concerned, many of us had expectations, but her remit does not seem to allow her enough power, in the eyes of many of us, to deal with certain situations. She seems to be limited in her scope.

**Mr Donnelly:** We cannot really comment too much on that.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** No, that is OK. I would not expect you to.

Thank you very much for your presentation.

**Mr Tweedie:** May we mention one more thing? This is a concern of ours, and we wonder whether the Committee can help us with it. We believe that we have one of the top prices for beef in Europe, yet our processors and producers are suffering. The prices in Europe over the past two or three years have been way below ours, yet the European farming community does not seem to be complaining as much as we are. The loudest complaint that we heard came from French farmers, and it was that wolves were attacking sheep.

We have a big concern that a lot of state aid is being given to the farming industry throughout Europe, which we are not getting the benefit of in the UK. We asked the Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB) to look into that. Over the past two or three years, the farmer in Northern Ireland has been getting about £150 per beast more than his counterparts throughout Europe, yet European farmers have not been shouting. If they are not shouting, it is because they are happy, but they cannot be happy at the price, so we believe that a lot of state aid is being given out.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** Directly or indirectly, but in some way.

**Mr Tweedie:** In some way. We would appreciate the Committee's help, because we cannot understand the situation. We are facing a situation of cheaper European beef lowering our prices, affecting both processor and producer. We believe that there are different systems in different countries in Europe. Even the commissioner admitted that the only thing common about the common agricultural policy is the name. It would be helpful if you could look into that issue.

**Mr Donnelly:** It goes beyond even the common agricultural policy. There is national support, and there are even tax breaks. Over the summer, there were protests in France, and we heard of tax breaks being offered to beef producers there. Those are possibly coming on top of other levels of support that may have been there over the past number of years. We have raised that issue with the AFSB, but support from you would also be valuable.

**The Chairperson (Mr Irwin):** It would be interesting to find out. Thank you very much for your presentation. It was good to have you here.