



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and
Rural Affairs

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed
Costs) (No. 2) Scheme (Northern Ireland)
2020: DAERA Briefing

26 November 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Declan McAleer (Chairperson)
Mr Philip McGuigan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin
Mr Patsy McGlone

Witnesses:

Mr Paddy Campbell	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Ronnie McBride	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Mr Patrick Smith	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We have Patrick Smith, Paddy Campbell and Ronnie McBride on standby. Can you hear us?

Mr Paddy Campbell (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Yes, it is Paddy Campbell here. I can hear you. Can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Go ahead.

Mr Patrick Smith (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): This is Patrick. I can hear you, too.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Patsy McGlone has a question. Patsy, go ahead.

Mr McGlone: The question is related not to this specific scheme but to the wider policy scheme. I am sure that the officials are anticipating what I will ask about. It is the scheme for Lough Neagh fishermen, which was indicatively running in parallel to this support scheme and which has been raised a number of times in the Assembly. Can you give us any indication about the progress on that scheme, please?

Mr Campbell: That is still under consideration by the Minister, Mr McGlone. There are still a few issues that have to be sorted out. That is all that I can tell you at the moment on that one.

Mr McGlone: Can you give us any indication about what issues have to be sorted out and are hindering the scheme? As you can appreciate, this one has been about quite a while, and we are running into the mouth of Christmas now.

Mr Campbell: I know that officials on the inland side have been working very closely and busily on this in order to try to resolve matters.

Mr McGlone: Is there anything more that you want to share with me?

Mr Campbell: It is on the inland fisheries side, Mr McGlone. We do not pry into their area.

Mr McGlone: Do you not have anything to do with it, then?

Mr Campbell: We are on the sea fisheries side, and we deal with the grants, but I know that there are some legal issues that those officials want to address. The Minister is still considering the matter.

Mr McGlone: Do you or do you not deal with the grants for that?

Mr Campbell: We will administer the grants scheme, but the policy to do with the scheme falls to our inland fisheries colleagues.

Mr McGlone: Right. Basically, what you are saying is that it is not your gig.

Mr Campbell: I am saying that I rely on policy colleagues in inland fisheries to advise us of what conditions and so on they want to put in the scheme. We will administer it. They are dealing with a few issues. Once those are resolved, it will, hopefully, be launched.

Mr McGlone: You do not have a green light or anything yet.

Mr Campbell: As we understand it, it is still under consideration by the Minister.

Mr McGlone: Chair, it might be useful if we could get an update on that for our next meeting.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Yes.

Mr McGlone: That is grand. Thanks very much indeed.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Paddy. It is good to see something here for small-scale fishermen. First of all, roughly how many vessels are registered as being under 12 metres in length? Do you have any idea?

Mr Campbell: It is around 200 vessels. The number will vary throughout the year. Some will drop in, and some will drop out.

Mr Harvey: Roughly how many meet the criteria? How many operators do you expect will apply? Do you have any idea?

Mr Campbell: I wonder whether my colleague Mr McBride is on the line. He might have the exact figure.

Mr Ronnie McBride (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Yes, Paddy. I think that I can be heard. With the eligibility criteria, we anticipate that there will be between 80 and 100 applications at the maximum. A lot of the registered boats are not actually active at the minute, and a lot of the boats belong to seasonal operators; theirs is only a recreational type of effort. They have been excluded from the scheme.

Mr Harvey: Could that be increased if necessary?

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): We would have to review and consider the eligibility criteria and then reissue advice to those who are considered ineligible. However, it is a possibility, yes.

Mr Harvey: That is great. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): I see that one of the eligibility criterion for the scheme is to have audited accounts. Would that disadvantage, say, smaller-scale fishermen who may not have that?

Mr Campbell: I will take that one, Ronnie. One of the criterion for the scheme is that fishermen must have a turnover of at least £10,000. We are not planning to compensate people who are not commercial fishermen or working in a commercial scale. We anticipate that most of those people who have a turnover above £10,000 will also have commercial vessel insurance. Therefore, they will be operating on a commercial scale. They should be able to provide accounts.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): Would you be satisfied that the majority of sea-fishing operators have audited accounts?

Mr Campbell: We have no evidence to suggest otherwise, unless, Ronnie, you have anything to add.

Mr McBride: The reason for the scheme for the fixed-cost element of what we are doing at the minute is really the continuation of the scheme that we ran between March and May for the entire fleet, that is, the smaller and larger vessels. One area of concern from a number of beneficiaries was that they were being underpaid for the actual costs that were associated with their boats. That is because you have the "super" under-10-metre boats and then the ordinary ones. One of the lessons learned when we evaluated the old scheme was that it should be based on actual costs, as defined by Seafish, on what is a fixed cost. It is important to note that, as those schemes were developed, we had virtually weekly meetings with the four industry representative groups. They were all aware of it and did not see the submission of financial accounts being an issue.

The Chairperson (Mr McAleer): That is great. Thank you very much for your response to that question.

Thank you, Ronnie, Patrick and Paddy, for coming online to answer those questions.