

712 - To ask the Minister for Agriculture in view of the further serious difficulties that have now arisen for the agriculture sector if he proposes to provide additional financial resources to the farming sector and if he will make a statement on the matter. - Brendan Smith TD

627 - To ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in view of the further difficulties that have arisen for the beef sector if he will ensure that the €24 million unspent in BEAM 2019 will be made available to beef farmers as a matter of urgency and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Brendan Smith TD – Cavan/Monaghan

628 - To ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to outline the proposals he put to the EU Agriculture Commissioner to assist the farming and agri-food sector through the serious difficulties arising from Covid-19, if he has discussed these proposals with the Commissioner, the outcome of such discussions, if any, and if he will make a statement on the matter. Brendan Smith TD – Cavan/Monaghan

I will take questions 627, 628 and 712 together.

I am acutely aware of the issues presented to the agri-food sector in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. My Department and I are working to ensure that business and services to farmers can continue, keeping food and other processing facilities operational, ensuring that payments and commercial activities that are necessary to protect farm incomes can continue.

There are likely to be significant economic impacts for the agri-food sector, arising from reduced demand in key markets around the world. The loss of high value food service customers is already of significant immediate concern.

The response to the economic impacts on the sector should include a strong, shared EU response, using the instruments available in the Common Agricultural Policy. I have already highlighted to Commissioner Wojciechowski the serious consequences for farmers and the food industry and the need to ensure that the full range of market supports available under the Common Market Organisation Regulation are available for deployment. These supports include Aids to Private Storage and Exceptional Aid measures, flexibilities when it comes to on-farm inspections and early payment of the Basic Payment Scheme.

Communication between my Department and the EU Commission is ongoing in this regard. I have spoken to the Commissioner as recently as Wednesday evening on the matter and am working with other Member States to build a case for a strong EU response.

I am also working with my colleagues in Government to ensure that all businesses, including those in the agri-food sector, get access to suitable supports, and the measures in place are being kept under review.

Working with my colleague Minister Humphries, I have ensured that 40% of the €250 million COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme will be available for food businesses. Similarly, 40% of an additional €200 million tranche of the Future Growth Loan Scheme will be ring fenced to provide long-term investment support for primary producers and food businesses. I continue to liaise with the banks on liquidity for the primary sector, and also want to highlight the availability of working capital assistance to farmers and fishers through Microfinance Ireland's COVID-19 Business Loan. We will continue to keep the finance needs of the whole agri-food sector under review.

With regard to the use of unspent funds from the BEAM Scheme in 2019, I have already provided an additional €20m in supports for the beef sector in Budget 2020, on top of the €20 million provided last year for the BEEP pilot. This year's scheme – the Beef Environmental Efficiency Programme (Sucklers), will deliver a maximum payment of €90 per suckler cow for the first 10 cows, and €80/head thereafter. This is a significant increase in the payment available compared to the BEEP Pilot in 2019. This extra funding is available to suckler farmers right now. It is a straightforward scheme, which can deliver a significant cash-flow injection, and I would urge you to encourage suckler farmers to apply before the deadline of 15 May.

Conscious of the cash flow pressures on farms at present, I have brought forward €26m in GLAS payments by a month, and these funds will begin to arrive in bank accounts as early as next week. I have also increased funding in my Department's Calf Welfare Investment Scheme from €1.5 million to €4 million, to assist farmers with extra calves. A range of practical flexibilities have been introduced in departmental schemes, including, for example, the extension of completion deadlines for TAMS by 3 months, and the submission for Nitrates records to the end of June. My Department has also worked to ensure that the supply chain continues to function. Critical state services in dairy and meat processing plants continue to function so that farmers have an outlet for their produce, a protocol has been developed for the continued operation of marts, albeit on a limited basis, and the critical certification and other services required to support exports of live animals and products continue to operate.

My Department and agencies will continue to monitor the impacts on the agri-food sector as the situation evolves, and to provide appropriate supports to the sector. Senior officials from my Department remain in constant contact with stakeholders right across the sector to share information on emerging issues and contingency planning, and we will continue to develop appropriate supports as the situation evolves.

98. To ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when he proposes to announce a package of measures to assist the farming and agri-food sector through the serious difficulties that have arisen due to the Covid-19 crisis, if funding will be provided from the EU and the national exchequer and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Brendan Smith TD

I am acutely aware of the issues presented to the agri-food sector in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. My Department and I are working to ensure that business and services to farmers can continue, keeping food and other processing facilities operational, ensuring that payments and commercial activities that are necessary to protect farm incomes can continue.

There are likely to be significant economic impacts for the agri-food sector, arising from reduced demand in key markets around the world. The loss of high value food service customers is already of significant immediate concern.

The response to the economic impacts on the sector should include a strong, shared EU response, using the instruments available in the Common Agricultural Policy. I have already highlighted to Commissioner Wojciechowski the serious consequences for farmers and the food industry and the need to ensure that the full range of market supports available under the Common Market Organisation Regulation are available for deployment. These supports include Aids to Private Storage and Exceptional Aid measures, flexibilities when it comes to on-farm inspections and early payment of the Basic Payment Scheme.

Communication between my Department and the EU Commission is ongoing in this regard. I have spoken to the Commissioner as recently as Wednesday evening on the matter and am working with other Member States to build a case for a strong EU response.

I am also working with my colleagues in Government to ensure that all businesses, including those in the agri-food sector, get access to suitable supports, and the measures in place are being kept under review.

Working with my colleague Minister Humphries, I have ensured that 40% of the €250 million COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme will be available for food businesses. Similarly, 40% of an additional €200 million tranche of the Future Growth Loan Scheme will be ring fenced to provide long-term investment support for primary producers and food businesses. I continue to liaise with the banks on liquidity for the primary sector, and also want to highlight the

availability of working capital assistance to farmers and fishers through Microfinance Ireland's COVID-19 Business Loan. We will continue to keep the finance needs of the whole agri-food sector under review.

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Conscious of the cash flow pressures on farms at present, I have brought forward €26m in GLAS payments by a month, and these funds will begin to arrive in bank accounts as early as next week. I have also increased funding in my Department's Calf Welfare Investment Scheme from €1.5 million to €4 million, to assist farmers with extra calves. A range of practical flexibilities have been introduced in departmental schemes, including, for example, the extension of completion deadlines for TAMS by 3 months, and the submission for Nitrates records to the end of June.

Finally, and in relation to the specific flexibilities raised by the Deputy, on ANCs, I am concerned that relaxing this requirement may have an adverse effect on farmers seeking to sell stock so I am reluctant to implement such a measure at present. In any event, this would require an amendment to the Rural Development Programme. Teagasc has already developed a flexible approach to Green Certs including online training. A protocol has been developed for the continued operation of marts, albeit on a limited basis. To date 74 of the 84 marts have been approved to re-commence activities and my Department is continuing to work with marts and marts organisations in this regard.

My Department and agencies will continue to monitor the impacts on the agri-food sector as the situation evolves, and to provide appropriate supports to the sector. Senior officials from my Department remain in constant contact with stakeholders right across the sector to share information on emerging issues and contingency planning, and we will continue to develop appropriate supports as the situation evolves