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## UFU BRIEFING PAPER

### REVIEW OF ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

January 2025

- The UFU believe continued development of the existing structures would better deliver on environmental protection and therefore are **opposed** to the creation of an independent environmental protection agency in Northern Ireland.
- Farmers manage almost 80% of Northern Ireland's land and the farming community is supportive of environmental protection however there must be a **balance** between efficient production and protecting the environment. Farmers rely on a healthy environment to produce quality local food.
- The UFU believe that there is a need for environmental protection and changes in environmental governance however where there are difficulties in the present environmental governance set up – the UFU feel that it would be more environmentally effective to **address those difficulties and improve** in other areas, rather than creating a stalemate situation until a new body is set up.
- The UFU believes the key **focus should be on actions rather than structures**. It is highly unlikely that a new body would find it any easier dealing with the difficult environmental targets. The key focus must be on the protection, maintenance and improvement of the environment rather than focusing on the establishment of an independent structure.
- Although there are still issues regarding the interaction between Northern Ireland Environment Agency and farmers, the UFU feels that NIEA have an improved understanding the agricultural sector for the benefits of both the environment and those who operate within it. The UFU is concerned that this **engagement could be damaged** should a new agency be put in place.

- **Accountability:** NI Assembly and politicians must be therefore directly accountable for environmental protection as is their elected duty rather than an arm's length organisation such as an independent environment agency. The devolved government with active, transparent and robust scrutiny on how all departments and agencies are delivering on their environmental obligations, by committees of elected representatives, is more independent, accountable and effective.
- Northern Ireland Government is now under greater scrutiny to deliver for the environment due to the **introduction of the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP)** which provides independent advice and holds government and other public authorities to account.
- The UFU have never been provided with evidence to suggest that a new independent environment protection agency will be able to protect the environment any better than the existing structures, assumptions and opinions is not the grounds for a strong argument. This debate has been opened due to the fixation with structures in other parts of the UK and Europe, environmental protection is not achieved through structures it is achieved through actions and outcomes, just because Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK which doesn't have an independent environment protection agency is not a valid reason for introducing such an organisational change. **'Fine tuning' of what already exists** and it would result in not only improved environmental outcomes but also be achieved in a more resource efficient manner.
- **Resource concerns:** Adequate resources are vital to obtain good environmental governance. Many of the issues being highlighted with NIEA are due to a lack of adequate resources. The UFU believes that given the restrictions on the Northern Ireland budget this is unlikely to change even if an independent EPA was created. The UFU would be extremely concerned that an independent agency would inevitably lead to greater income raising measures through application fees, inspection fees and cost recovery from enforcement with the farming industry in particular, because of its very significant interaction with the environment, being an 'easy target'.