



FQAS Info

The Information Sheet of the Northern Ireland Beef & Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme 2003

History of FQAS

The Northern Ireland Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) for Beef and Lamb was launched in April 1991 and the first carcass was certified as Farm Quality Assured in November 1991. It is one of the longest established of all the farm quality assurance schemes, not only in the UK but probably worldwide, and is one of the strongest tools that the beef and sheepmeat industries can have for marketing their products.

Beef and lamb have always been produced in Northern Ireland from livestock raised by traditional methods using mainly grass and grass products. This “natural” image has been a major asset in marketing our beef and lamb. However, consumers have become increasingly even more discerning about how their food is produced.

The Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb (NIBL) FQAS was developed to give consumers assurances about the farm end of the production chain of their food. It is about **farm quality** – the quality of the production methods used, the quality of care for animals which is practised, the quality of the farm environment, and above all the quality of concern for the customer in producing beef and lamb which is wholesome, safe and free of unnatural substances. Its objective is to organise the certification of Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb as naturally produced, quality products which equate with customer requirements and perceptions, and which consumers can identify.

The scheme is thus designed to provide:-

- The best possible assurances for customers of uncompromising food safety, animal welfare and environmental care.
- An opportunity for producers and agencies acting on their behalf to promote a product which is distinguishable from others by scrupulous production methods.
- A straightforward code for meat wholesalers and retailers, and others, to assist the marketing of an identifiable, quality product, and which customers can clearly understand.

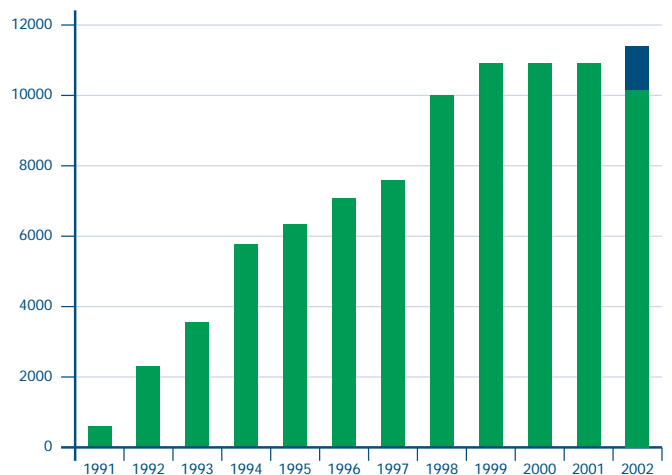
FQAS in the Market Place

As NI is a relatively high-cost producing region, it is the strategy of its red meat sector to ensure that products are marketed into the highest possible

premium outlets. In the UK marketplace and further afield, Farm Quality Assurance is an essential requirement of the highest paying customers for the products of Northern Ireland's beef and sheep production. It is critically important to continue to develop the FQAS arrangements so that the confidence of premium customers can continue to be enjoyed, and so that the developments taking place in other regions and within other quality schemes, particularly within the UK but also across Europe, can be at the very least matched, and in many ways exceeded.

In the 12 years of its operation, FQAS has developed significantly to reach a level of participation that is believed to be unrivalled anywhere else in Europe or beyond. There have been over 13,000 applications to the scheme, and the number of participants at the end of year 2002 stood at just over 11,000 (Fig 1).

Figure 1. NIBL FQAS Participation



NB: Participation numbers up to and including 2001 are based on the number of approved producers in the scheme. 2002 is the first complete calendar year in which annual renewal fees were payable, and the participation number is based on the number of participants paid-up (green) plus the number of participants with renewal fees outstanding at year end (blue).

Nearly all participants (99%) have beef cattle (63% beef only, 36% beef and sheep), over a third (37%) have sheep (1% sheep only, 36% with beef).

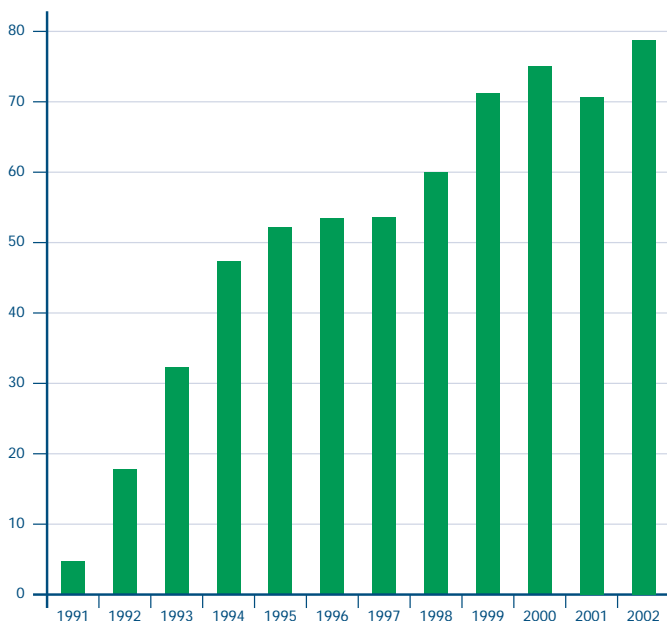
Beef participation represents 64% of the 17,500 beef finishers in Northern Ireland and the sheep participation represents 44% of the 9,500 sheep farmers in NI (Table 1).

Table 1. FQAS Farms and Product (% in year 2002)

	BEEF	SHEEP
FQAS Farms	11,150	4,200
Total NI Farms	17,500	9,500
% FQAS Farms	64	44
FQAS Kill ⁽⁰⁰⁰⁾	323	?
NI Prime Kill ⁽⁰⁰⁰⁾	408	580
% FQAS Product	79	?

With a computerised cattle information system (APHIS) recording the FQAS status of individual animals, it is possible to be exact in determining the proportion of the total NI prime kill which is FQAS. In year 2002 this was 79% (Table 1). For the scheme to have grown in 12 years to reach the proportion of four out of every five beef cattle that are produced in NI as Farm Quality Assured is an immense achievement. (Fig 2).

Figure 2. FQAS Proportion of Total Beef (%)



With a considerable proportion of NI's sheep production exported live, and the absence of a computerised recording system for sheep, it is much more difficult to be precise about the percentage of FQAS lamb. Best estimates suggest that this is around 50% of production.

Northern Ireland Farm Quality Assured Beef and Lamb is eligible to carry the FQAS logo, and if it is slaughtered and processed in an Assured British Meat (ABM) certified plant is eligible to carry the British Farm Standard (BFS) little red tractor logo. Customers are thus able to identify farm assured product, and meat retailers, from local butchers and farm shops through to the largest multiple retailers, are thus able to give their customers assurances about how their beef and lamb has been produced.



Product Standard and Scheme Rules

The Scheme's Standard (codes of practice) and Rules are drawn up by a Technical Committee comprised of producer and processor representatives, the marketing organisation LMC, and Government. Wide consultation takes place with industry bodies, retailers and consumer organisations. Since its launch the Scheme has been continually updated and revised as appropriate to meet changing market needs. The underlying objective in the continued enhancement of the Scheme is to demonstrate the ultimate ideal of standards to which it is expected that producers will aspire and achieve, which will be recognised by our customers as the norm in the production of our products. The Product Standard and Scheme Rules Manuals are published by the Scheme and sent to all participants and applicants. These manuals give full details of all the requirements which need to be met and of the regulatory procedures which must be followed.

There are seven main elements to the Scheme's Product Standard – (1) animal husbandry, stockmanship and welfare, (2) animal health, (3) animal nutrition, (4) animal traceability - identification, sourcing and records, (5) housing and handling, (6) transport and (7) environmental care.

The Scheme's Rules are concerned with administration, application, conditions of membership, farm inspections and certification procedures.

Administration

The NIBL FQAS is owned by The Livestock and Meat Commission of Northern Ireland (LMC) on behalf of the beef and sheepmeat industries, which appoint an Industry Board to oversee the commercial aspects of the Scheme. The Scheme was administered for ten years by LMC who were responsible for the registration of producers, inspecting farms, approving producers as members, as well as all the aspects of promotion of the scheme to producers, processors, retailers and consumers. However in 2001 new administrative arrangements were put into place as detailed below.

Scheme Development

In 2001, new developments evolved from requirements under EC Beef Labelling Regulations. Over the immediately preceding years a number of pieces of legislation had been introduced in regard to identification and traceability of livestock and of meat products, and specifically the Beef Labelling Regulations. These needed to be addressed within the scheme. In particular, any claim made about beef at any stage of the marketing chain, including the claim that beef is Farm Quality Assured, is required to be verified by an independent third party certification body which is accredited to the European Standard EN45011. A number of Northern Ireland's customers increasingly encouraged us to maintain and advance our quality standing. This has required that LMC transfer the functions involved in the certification process to a body which is independent of Scheme ownership. A company called Northern Ireland Food Chain Certification (NIFCC) has been contracted to provide this service and from 1 April 2001 assumed responsibility for:

- registration of participating producers
- all farm inspections
- certification of individual producers to the required standard.

Registration

FQAS is a voluntary scheme and membership is open to all producers in Northern Ireland who agree to maintain the Product Standard required by the Scheme, follow stringent codes of practice, practice record keeping which allows traceability of the product and inputs

(e.g. animal feed, veterinary medicines) throughout the production process, and operate with commitment to quality assurance within the Scheme Rules. Once a producer has read the Standard and Rules Manuals and concludes that he/she can comply, and wishes to join the scheme, he/she signs a declaration and sends an application to be registered to NIFCC. The initial registration fee is £50 + VAT, and the annual renewal fee £35 + VAT. Membership details and application forms can be obtained from the Registration Administrator, NIFCC, Tel: 028 9263 3017.

Farm Inspection

Farms are then independently inspected by NIFCC. Following acceptance into the Scheme, routine farm inspections are carried out at a maximum interval of every 18 months, but with 10% of participating farms subject to random spot-checks each year. The inspection record for years 2000 and 2002 is shown in Table 3.

Table 2. FQAS Inspection Record

	2000	2002
Participants	10,749	11,263
Inspections	8,812	8,141
% Inspected	82	72
Interval (months)	14.6	16.6

NB: Year 2001 was unrepresentative due to FMD.

Certification

During the farm inspection, the inspector completes a report form, on which is recorded the objective evidence acquired during inspection. Any non-conformances are recorded by the inspector and agreed to by the farmer, who signs the form in recognition of this. The completed inspection report is then submitted to the NIFCC Office, where it is reviewed by the Certification Officer. If the report meets with approval, a Certificate of Conformity is issued. If the non-conformances are listed in the Operations Manual as requiring remedial action before certification can be granted, a letter, detailing such and the time-scale in which proof is required, is sent to the producer. The final decision relating to certification rests with the NIFCC Certification Committee, but Appeals are permitted. Further information about NIFCC's Certification Services can be obtained from Dr. Noel Lavery, Operations Manager, NIFCC, 31 Ballinderry Road, Lisburn BT28 2SL.

Traceability

It is particularly important that abattoirs are able to validate the FQAS status of their farmer suppliers so that product can be labelled as such, and so that any trace required from onward customers at any part of the food supply chain can be fully verified.

For beef, the system for NIBL FQAS is probably unique. Northern Ireland has since 1988, had a computerised cattle traceability system operated by the Veterinary Service of the Department of Agriculture, and deemed to be fully operational by the European Commission. This system is now known as APHIS (Animal and Public Health Information System), and it not only records animal identities and movements, but also has parameters recording animal health/disease status, animal welfare, drug residues, ante- and post-mortem characteristics and meat hygiene inspections, as well as Farm Quality Assured status. Once a producer has been certified by NIFCC, the FQ status is added to APHIS for the approved herd and the individual animals within that herd. Every livestock market and abattoir in Northern Ireland has a live APHIS terminal, and the FQ status can be downloaded into the abattoir's own computer systems enabling direct FQA labelling of beef carcasses at the weigh/grade point. This data then "travels" with the product through the cutting, packing, delivery and retail sale chain.

This system is also proposed for extension to sheep, but until it becomes operational, a paper trace system is used. Individualised, serially numbered "passports" are issued by NIFCC to approved sheep producers, and once completed with consignment details and signed by the producer, must accompany sheep to a market or abattoir. Receiving operators add the lot and kill numbers, sign the passport and return it to the NIFCC Office to complete the trace. Market and abattoir operators can only attribute FQ status to sheep accompanied by the FQAS passport. Kill numbers are recorded by the abattoirs on the documentation to their customers, and any FQ status inquiry quoting these kill numbers can be verified by NIFCC.

Commitment

Northern Ireland farmers who participate in NIBL FQAS are demonstrating their commitment to producing beef and lamb in a natural and wholesome way, with emphasis on best practice in animal husbandry, meeting animal welfare requirements and freedom from medicines and drug residues. They conduct their farm businesses in a manner which cares

for, and will enhance, the farm environment by avoiding pollution and encouraging bio-diversity. The Scheme is complementary to all legal requirements in relation to farming practice.

In NIBL FQAS "best practice" in animal husbandry means the adoption of the highest standards of rearing and managing stock. The provision of a husbandry system and stockmanship appropriate to the needs of the animal in terms of health, welfare, behaviour, nutrition, housing, handling and transport has the highest priority. Good stockmanship is a key factor because no matter how good the farming system might otherwise be, without skilled, diligent stockmanship, the husbandry of animals cannot be adequately catered for.

Advice and Assistance

Northern Ireland has a well developed advisory service provided by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), in particular its Agri-Food Development Service, Veterinary Service and Science Service. Various Divisions within these services provide comprehensive advice on husbandry/production/business management (Farm Technology and Business Systems Development Division), environmental protection/waste management/pollution control (Countryside Management Division), animal identification and movement controls/APHIS (Veterinary Service) veterinary medicines/animal health and welfare/disease control (Animal Health and Welfare Division), home-mixing of animal feedstuffs (Quality Assurance Division) and drug residues (Veterinary Science Division). Advisory publications are also available from the various divisions of DARD. Many commercial organisations also provide advice (e.g. animal feed, fertiliser and medicine companies, private veterinary practitioners). The LMC Agriculture Department operates a Helpline for advice on the Product Standard, and how to meet its requirements. It should be noted that NIFCC is not allowed to give any advice as it is deemed to be a conflict of interests to provide advice and then to inspect that advice.

Further Information

Further information on commercial, promotional and helpline activities of NIBL FQAS can be obtained by contacting:

Dr Mike Tempest

FQAS Scheme Manager, Agriculture Department
Livestock & Meat Commission, Lissue House
31 Ballinderry Road, Lisburn BT28 2SL
Tel: 028 9263 3000 E-mail: fqas@lmcni.com
or the **Helpline** on Tel: 028 9263 3024
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