LMC Livestock & Meat Commission
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FQAS delivers access to the world's most lucrative beef market for local livestock farmers

The importance of the Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) for Northern Ireland's ruminant livestock sector cannot be underestimated. Put simply, it facilitates entry for local beef and sheep farmers to the world's most lucrative red meat market: that controlled by the retail sector in Great Britain.

What's more, FQAS has the scope to adapt to changes in technical standards and consumer demand in a very effective and flexible manner.

Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern (LMC) Chief Executive, Colin Smith, takes up the story, "We live in a fast changing world where beef and lamb trading processes are concerned. The UK has signed up to a free trade agreement with Australia and New Zealand, two of the world's leading producers of red meat, sheep meat in particular. Meanwhile the European Union has committed to an extensive trade agreement with South America's Mercosur Group. The end result of all this is the greater direct and indirect threat of beef and lamb imports coming into the UK. And no doubt all these suppliers of red meat will be actively extolling the virtues relating to the traceability, high production values and safety of the meat they will be trying to sell UK customers. Fortunately, through FQAS, LMC delivers full and independent verification of all these criteria and more on behalf of Northern Ireland's beef and lamb sector. This means processors can continue to secure critically important contracts going forward and maintain a competitive advantage through these assurances and of course provenance. Moreover, all the UK's supermarkets and food retailers fully recognise and accept this fact. And we want to build on this for the future."

Colin continued, "FQAS also underpins all the beef and lamb marketing work undertaken by LMC in Northern Ireland. So continuing to make the scheme relevant for red meat buyers and consumers, both on the home market and further afield, is vitally important."

Approximately 98% of the price reported prime cattle produced in Northern Ireland are FQAS certified at point of slaughter.

All stakeholders agree that the scheme must continue to deliver for the red meat sector on a value-for-money basis with full cognisance taken of the fact that its operational costs are met in full.

A £10 increase (£95 to £105 excluding VAT) in the initial application and annual renewal fees takes effect on April 1st this year. The change follows a review of costs undertaken by the FQAS Industry Board.

Colin Smith again, "FQAS is run on the basis of fee income matching the outgoing costs incurred. There is no excess in the system or large reserves that can be drawn down to absorb increases in expenditure that are incurred. Looking ahead, the FQAS Standard Setting Committee just recently approved a new approach to the review of standards. Last year saw a review undertaken of all the farm quality assurance schemes that operate in the UK. FQAS standards in Northern Ireland are formally reviewed by its Industry Board and Standard Setting Committee every three years. The FQAS review will be undertaken against the backdrop of a core, guiding principle: 'delivering maximum market opportunity for minimum audit burden."

Colin Smith further explained, "And so much of this can be achieved using new digital technologies. Take the issue of completing an FQAS animal health plan. Up to now these have been completed on paper by the farmers involved, which can be a cumbersome process. But, even now, this procedure can be fully automated by connecting up the various animal health databases that already exist in digital form. And it's not a case of the information required being directly accessed by LMC or FQAS: it can be anonymously hosted by an independent third-party organisation. It is possible to embrace new technologies while protecting individual farmers' own data."

He concluded, "FQAS gives consumers assurances about the farming systems used on Northern Ireland's beef and sheep farms. Standards are centred on the production methods used and the quality of care for animals which is practiced. In addition, farm quality assurance drives farm-based environmental standards while also re-assuring customers that the beef and lamb they are eating is wholesome and safe. Farm assurance is critical to the future of the beef and lamb sectors and is delivering necessary guarantees on quality to consumers. But it must be delivered in a streamlined manner that meets the needs of farmers in full."

Delivering support for Northern Ireland's sheep sector is a priority

Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland (LMC) Chief Executive, Colin Smith has welcomed the assurance given by the management team at Sustainable Ruminant Genetics (SRG) to the effect that meaningful genetic improvement will be secured across Northern Ireland's ovine as well as the bovine sector over the coming years.

The specific commitment to the sheep industry in this regard was referenced by SRG chairman, Victor Chestnutt, at the recent launch of the company's vision for the rollout of the new Bovine Genetics Project (BGP). This will see the creation of a comprehensive genomics data base across Northern Ireland's suckler and dairy sectors.

Colin Smith commented, "It is important the sheep are not left behind when it comes to the implementation of genetic progress as a means of securing significant advancements in animal performance over the coming years."

The momentum that is now building behind BGP coincides with the recent establishment of a Sheep Support Working Group. The membership of the new group embraces all the stakeholder organisations that were involved in the establishment of Northern Ireland's Sheep Taskforce.

The LMC representative views the setting up of the new grouping as a significant step forward in securing additional support measures for the sheep industry.

He further explained, "All the stakeholders involved, including the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, are committed to building a case for specific measures that meet the needs of the sheep industry."

It's envisaged that the support schemes proposed by the new working group will reflect the public good that can be generated by the sheep sector into the future.

There is also a growing recognition that sheep can be used to produce high quality food in areas of Northern Ireland where this would not otherwise be possible.

Colin Smith again, "We have seen a significant drop-off in sheep numbers over recent years, particularly in hill areas. And this has come at a significant environmental cost. It is more than significant that wildfire outbreaks in hill areas have increased significantly over the past decade. Brush and scrub becomes tinder dry during periods of warm weather: thereby heightening the risk of fires breaking out. But the same brush and scrub would not be there had sheep been given the opportunity to graze it down in the first place. Such grazing activities also make our hill and mountain areas more accessible to the general public and those wanting to enjoy these tremendous outdoor resources."

He concluded, "Where future sheep support measures are concerned it is highly probable that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will want to see an increase in sectoral efficiency in tandem with a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and an improvement in environmental standards. Improving flock health and welfare are also priority issues for the sheep sector. And, again, support measures can be developed to meet this need. The end result of these processes must be a full recognition of the economic, environmental and societal roles that sheep production plays across Northern Ireland. And if these objectives can be achieved then our sheep industry can look forward to a sustainable future."

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