

Implementation of the Nitrates Directive

Background

To develop policy measures, in the form of an Action Programme and a financial support initiative, to ensure the agriculture industry's compliance with the Nitrates Directive, which is aimed at improving water quality.

Approach

Due to the environmental dimension and the impact on the agriculture industry, this policy has been developed jointly by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of the Environment (DOE).

The work involved an analysis of the Directive requirements with reference to:

- i) scientific evidence of water quality and soil status;
- ii) climatic patterns;
- iii) farming practices; and
- iv) financial impact.

Consultation and detailed negotiations with key stakeholders followed the development of policy options and resulted in an agreed Action Programme and a funding initiative.

Outcomes

Action Programme Regulations and a capital grant aid initiative – the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme – to assist compliance and improve water quality.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned included:

- the benefit of engagement with other member states, who had successfully implemented the Directive;
- the need to develop evidence based policy to aid negotiations with stakeholders and the European Commission;
- the importance of effective Departmental co-operation; and
- the benefit of engagement and close co operation with stakeholders throughout the process.

Key Features of Policy Process

The policy-making process was both forward and outward looking, with a view to long term environmental benefit and giving due cognisance to the European dimension.

An evidence based approach saw the use of complex scientific and economic data.

The policy process was inclusive due to the involvement of key internal and external stakeholders and the assessment of the financial and practical impact.

Joined up in line with the strategic objectives of both Departments (DARD and DOE), namely to achieve a sustainable environment. In particular, the effective departmental co-operation in developing a Northern Ireland environmental policy and presenting a united front to stakeholders was a significant element, which was remarked upon by stakeholders.

Communication with stakeholders throughout the process, press releases outlining progress at key stages and the publication of guidance for all farmers when Action Programme measures agreed.

Evaluation and review are built into the process with progress on some measures reviewed after two years and the Action Programme reviewed after four years.