

**Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food
and the Marine**

Chairperson Designate Joe Healy

Topic: Engagement with Chairperson Designate, An Rialálaí Agraibhia

6 December 2023

Chairman and members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for inviting me here today as Chairperson Designate of An Rialálaí Agraibhia. I am accompanied by the CEO Designate, Niamh Lenehan.

Firstly, I am delighted to have been selected as the Chairperson designate for this long-awaited Regulator, An Rialálaí Agraibhia.

As you know through your extensive involvement in the passage of the Agricultural and Food Supply Chain Bill 2022 through the legislative process, this follows on from a commitment in the Programme for Government to ensure fairness and transparency in the agricultural and food supply chain. It is expected that the date planned by the Minister for establishing the Regulator is 13 December.

This Regulator is something that the agricultural sector and in particular small food suppliers including farmers have wanted for a long time. I am confident that the Regulator has the powers it will need to act independently in promoting and enforcing the principles of fairness and transparency in the agricultural and food supply chain. In doing so, as provided for in the Act, the Regulator is required to have particular regard to the circumstances and needs of farming businesses, fishing businesses, and small food businesses.

To recap on the main functions given to the Agri-Food Regulator:

The Office will deliver a price and market analysis and reporting function for agricultural and food products to help increase the availability of market information along the agricultural and food supply chain with a view to strengthening the position of smaller suppliers against larger buyers with greater bargaining power.

The Office will also assume the functions of the Unfair Trading Practices Enforcement Authority currently based within the Department. The Regulator will be responsible for building awareness and understanding of agri-food trading law and overseeing its enforcement. There are 16 Unfair Trading Practices (UTPs) which relate to matters such as payment periods for suppliers of agri-food products, unilateral contract changes by the buyer and payments by the supplier for promotion or marketing for example where not agreed clearly with the supplier in advance. These UTPs are in place to help balance the bargaining power between smaller suppliers and larger buyers.

Since her appointment, the CEO designate has been acting as Head of the Unfair Trading Practices Authority and in that capacity has had extensive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders while making preparations with a team for the establishment of the new Office. Such preparations include the setting up of a physical office (the Regulator will be based at the Government shared offices campus in Backweston, Celbridge, Co. Kildare), the recruitment of staff, the development of communication channels such as a new website and social

media accounts but more importantly establishing and building relationships with key stakeholders.

Priorities now include putting in place robust governance structures. In particular, as required under section 39 of the 2023 Act, the Regulator must prepare and submit to the Minister a strategy statement for a three-year period as soon as practicable following establishment. The Regulator is also required to prepare an annual work programme stating the objectives and priorities for the year.

Fairness and transparency all along the agricultural and food supply chain to enable sustainability across different businesses within it is important for all of us. I acknowledge the work of this committee throughout the legislative process and I look forward to working with the Board, CEO and staff to build strong foundations for the Regulator to facilitate its work.

Thank you.