

Special Committee on Covid-19 Response
Meat Industry Ireland Opening Statement

(Friday 10th July 2020)

Introduction

Meat Industry Ireland (MII) is the Ibec trade association representing the meat processing sector in Ireland which accounted for almost €4 billion of food exports in 2019, into the UK, the EU and world markets.

The meat sector contributes to the incomes of 100,000 farmers, employs some 16,000 people directly and comprises approximately 50 major processing sites all over Ireland.

Current Covid situation in meat processing

While there have been challenging days for our sector in the course of this Covid-19 pandemic, the position on Covid-19 cases in the meat processing sector has significantly improved. Today, there are no active cases in our meat plants and our absolute focus is to maintain this position. Very substantial Covid measures have been put in place and we can confirm that over 97% of affected staff have now returned to work and the remainder are completing their isolation and recovery. The stringent control and mitigation measures in place, which are being verified by the HSE, HSA and the Department of Agriculture, will be maintained in the weeks and months ahead, with no room for complacency. Vigilance is the priority as general restrictions are lifted across the economy.

Immediate Reaction of the meat processing industry to Covid-19

Meat processing is a labour-intensive business, with limited automation available due to the complexity and product craftsmanship of meat processing. The sector, designated as an essential service, is one of the few sectors that remained open for business throughout the lockdown.

The first confirmed case of Covid-19 was reported in Ireland on 29th February and first stage restrictions were announced by Government on 12th March. By then, and weeks before we entered full lockdown, MII members had already introduced a series of mitigation measures which have since been updated to reflect evolving best practice. A full list of these measures has been provided to the Committee in the Annex to our submission on 17th June. It was not until 15th May 2020 that the HSE published its "Interim Guidance on Covid-19" specifically for the meat sector, some two months after MII members first implemented detailed mitigation measures across all meat establishments.

Where early cases of Covid-19 were detected, businesses quickly responded by following the appropriate self-isolation advice for all employees who showed virus symptoms or who tested positive. Mill members also traced close contacts who were also asked to self-isolate. The precautionary principle was followed, taking no risks with identifying positive cases and close contacts, and excluding them from the workplace. A range of measures were identified and put in place with a clear and singular objective, to keep people safe.

The State moved to a full lockdown on 27th March at which time the Government designated the meat sector amongst a range of essential services that would continue to operate during the lockdown. The first Covid-19 case was reported in a meat processing plant on 17th March. Further cases followed and as clusters began to form in certain sites the HSE provided collaborative oversight and assistance at local level. In all cases where clusters materialised, plant management engaged closely with the HSE and strictly followed their advice and direction. Contact tracing was recorded and transmitted to the public health authorities in respect of all sites and this has been publicly acknowledged by the HSE.

It became clear that many of the cases that emerged were identified amongst people who had shown no symptoms of the virus and who continued to work. Many of these 'asymptomatic' cases were detected as part of wider screening tests conducted at sites under the direction of the HSE.

This led to the emergence of a small number of clusters with significant positive cases and ultimately to the establishment of a "National Outbreak Control Team". This team comprises public health officials across a range of disciplines who continue to supervise prevention and control of Covid-19 cases in meat processing operations.

Social distancing and other protocols in factories

A comprehensive set of mitigation and prevention measures was implemented at site level - COVID-19 response teams established, risk assessments conducted by senior plant management, staff and union representatives were briefed regularly, training was provided, COVID-19 signage and notices in all relevant languages were installed as were additional and enhanced hygiene, sanitation and biosecurity protocols. Breaks and lunches were staggered to comply with physical distancing including creating additional canteen and amenity capacity.

Maintaining a 2-metre gap between people posed particular physical challenges for parts of the meat processing production chain, specifically in deboning of meat which is a labour-intensive activity. To address this, Perspex dividers to separate side by side contact between employees were introduced and visors were used for employees facing each other on the production line as recommended by current HSE policy guidance. Other steps taken included changes to rosters and shifts, line speeds were reduced, PPE was complemented by the introduction of masks, face visors or goggles and there were changes made to workstation layouts.

A key message to all staff was that they should not enter the workplace if they experienced any of the known symptoms of Covid-19. As part of this, employees entering sites were required to complete questionnaires about Covid-19 symptoms and were required to undergo temperature screening before entering sites. In addition, enhanced protocols were introduced in respect of all inbound and outbound animal supplies and product dispatch.

These composite measures, numbering 60 or more, were implemented across plants some two months ahead of the *"Interim Guidance on Covid-19"* provided by the HSE on 15th May which largely reinforced the robustness of the measures already put in place in meat plants. Where additional measures were recommended by the HSE guidelines these have been fully complied with. Verification of this has been overseen by both the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) veterinary staff who have a permanent presence in meat plants and also by a series of inspections conducted by the Health and Safety Authority.

Factor impacting Covid-19 outbreaks

The Covid-19 related challenges faced by the sector have led to concerns being raised about working and living conditions associated with meat processing personnel. It is still unknown why in meat processing facilities in countries such as the US, Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere, the infection rates are high in some facilities, while in other facilities, the infection rates have been lower - even in multiple site companies that had common protocols across all sites. The same issues arise in Ireland as to why there have been high level clusters, low level clusters and plants with no cases at all. There remains uncertainty as to how and why large clusters have occurred. This is recognised as being a complex multifactorial problem with no clear and distinct conclusions. MII members are working with the authorities to examine all learnings from this episode so that a recurrence can be avoided.

It is nonetheless true that there have been too many positive cases associated with meat plants, every single one being one too many; that applies to every affected sector, not just meat processing. It is equally true that meat processing has had to face challenges within plants at the same time as the virus was spreading at a rapid pace in the community. Asymptomatic cases have proven to be a feature of the virus spreading and made controlling the spread more difficult.

Some observers have made an issue of the presence in meat plants of large numbers of migrant workers. The vast majority, some 80% of meat industry employees are of Irish and EU/EEA origin. Irish staff continue to represent the single largest nationality. The majority, mainly European nationals, have worked in Ireland in the years since 2005, after EU enlargement, and have settled in Ireland with their families. But, in recent years, skills shortages across many sectors emerged and competition for labour intensified. When the meat sector reached the point where it lacked sufficient resources to service important export markets, it secured access to the Employment Permit System and has recruited Meat Processor Operatives and Skilled Knifemen internationally to fill vacancies. Permit holders currently represent some 20% of the workforce. All employees are covered by Irish employment laws and have the same employment rights, and minimum wage is not the prevailing pay rate.

Conclusion

In conclusion Chairman I want to assure you that the industry has worked tirelessly to protect employees throughout the course of this pandemic and continues to do so. It took very extensive measures early in the crisis to protect workers, and continually revised and enhanced its approach in line with all relevant guidance. Vigilance remains the priority.

MII members are proud of their committed workforce. We commend each and every one of them and all those in the extended supply chain for their efforts during these times. They appreciate and understand the fears and concerns of their staff and of their families. Now that 97% of all affected staff have safely returned to work, we reserve our best wishes for their continued good health and that of those that have yet to fully recover.