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Ms Aileen Fallon  
Clerk to the Committee (Work Programme)  
Special Committee on Covid-19 Response  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2  
D02 XR20

Dear Aileen

I refer to your letter of June 8<sup>th</sup> 2020 to Brendan Gleeson, Secretary General inviting this Department to make a written submission on issues relating to the meat industry.

Please find attached as requested a submission from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to the Committee in relation to Clusters in Meat Processing plants.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aiden Kelly', written over a horizontal line.

Aiden Kelly  
Private Secretary

## **Written Submission by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to the Special Commission on COVID-19**

### **Clusters in Meat Processing Factories**

#### **The Meat Industry in Ireland**

1. The meat sector in Ireland, from farm through to processing and export, remains one of the most important indigenous industries in the national economy, supporting in excess of 120,000 family farms and generating total sales of €4.5bn with 2019 exports amounting to just under €4bn.
2. Approximately 15,000 jobs are directly provided by meat processing across rural Ireland with additional associated jobs in distribution, transport and services.
3. The overall industry is built upon the primary processing - the slaughter for human consumption - of some 1.75 million cattle, 2.78 million sheep, 3.47 million pigs and some 106 million poultry each year.
4. Farmers depend on the processing sector to provide adequate outlets for their animals and consumers depend on these facilities to ensure there is sufficient meat on supermarket shelves.
5. The poultry industry in particular and the pig industry, due to the short animal rearing period, are sensitive to any time delays to or interruption in slaughter capacity – where, if such occurs, there is potential for on-farm welfare problems to arise in a short period of time.
6. The Government categorised farming and food production as *essential services* under the COVID-19 Regulations. Irish food supply chains have continued to operate whilst other industries were closed, to ensure security of supply of safe, healthy Irish food for consumers at home and abroad.

**Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine statutory function in meat plants**

7. The Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM) deploys veterinary and technical staff in large slaughterhouses and processing establishments and provides oversight across a number of smaller meat processing establishments, which are visited on a regular risk-based frequency.
8. The Department has a 'permanent presence' of staff at all slaughter plants while they are in operation (49 premises) and carries out risk-based inspections/controls at other facilities (100 premises). This staff cohort consists of approximately 250 Department veterinary and technical staff, who are supplemented by a group of approximately 700 Temporary Veterinary Inspectors - private veterinary practitioners contracted by the Department - to deliver ante-mortem and post-mortem inspection of animals and poultry in meat plants.
9. The Department's responsibility at slaughterhouses and processing plants is primarily to ensure that such establishments operate in compliance with food hygiene legislation and focus on
  - a. the provision of the ante and post-mortem inspection service to ensure safety and wholesomeness of the food produced,
  - b. sampling for BSE, salmonella, residues, contaminants etc.,
  - c. controls on specified risk materials (SRM)
  - d. checks on food chain information and controls on animal identification, ensuring traceability,
  - e. controls on structural and operational hygiene standards,
  - f. checks on Food Business Operator's Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's),
  - g. audits of Food Safety Management Systems – including Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) programmes,
  - h. certification of products for export, and
  - i. trade checks on EU traded, and imported products

10. Without these inspections and control - which are required by statute - being undertaken by Department staff, products could not be placed on the market.
11. In addition, the Department staff also have responsibility in respect of animal welfare – during transport, whilst in lairages and at the time of slaughter - and also to carry out animal health surveillance in respect of exotic animal diseases such as Foot and Mouth Disease or Swine Fever and sampling/checks to support animal health eradication and control programmes.
12. Department staff furthermore monitor carcase classification in 32 beef (and 6 pig) slaughterhouses to ensure compliance with EU Legislation. During unannounced inspections, classification officers ensure that both mechanical and manual classification conforms to legal parameters set out in the above legislation. Additionally, classification officers also monitor carcase presentation (trim), carcase weights, the accuracy of factory weighing scales and carcase labelling. Classification officers work closely with the permanent DAFM veterinary staff who monitor carcase presentation on a daily basis.

### **COVID-19 in Meat Plants**

13. As farming and food production was identified as *essential services* under the COVID-19 Regulations, meat plants have remained open and have operated in compliance with EU and national food regulatory standards.
14. When initial cases became apparent, these were managed locally by HSE teams within their regular protocols and practices. Local outbreak control teams were put in place in accordance with HSE practice where clusters are identified. DAFM local veterinary staff provided support to these teams with their knowledge of infrastructural layout and operating systems.
15. Following the identification of a number of clusters in meat plants, a National Outbreak Control Team, including DAFM representatives, was established on 7 May. Specific guidance for meat plants from the National Outbreak Control Team was issued on 15 May.

16. Prior to that, meat plant business owners – and DAFM as employer of its staff who worked in these locations – were guided in their response to the challenge posed by COVID-19 by (i) the HSE - COVID-19 Guidance for the Business and Retail Sectors (18 March), (ii) NSAI - COVID-19 Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide (27 March) and (iii) DBEI Return to Work Safely Protocol (9 May).
17. Experience during the pandemic has been that clusters of COVID-19 infections have occurred in meat plants across the world. There are reports of such clusters appearing in the USA, Netherlands, Germany, France and Australia.
18. The temporary closure of a number of pig and poultry slaughter facilities in the USA as a result of COVID-19 infection in the workforce led to significant reduction in output, shortages of meat, a large backlog of pigs and poultry on farms necessitating the on-farm euthanasia of large number of animals with associated animal welfare concerns and financial and economic impacts.
19. Whilst it may appear that the meat plant environment and the nature of the work make it particularly challenging to prevent and control possible infection in this environment, there are numerous examples of large meat processing facilities where such clusters have not occurred. It is also notable that COVID-19 is a disease associated with congregation of people and clusters have appeared in many settings.

#### **Department engagement at and with meat plants**

20. Local DAFM managers of staff assigned to inspection duties at the various meat plants, in the context of mitigating the risk to our own staff and contractors, as well as staff generally, engaged directly with plant management to implement appropriate controls in the workplace. The mitigating actions followed HSE guidance and focussed primarily on hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and physical distancing.

21. As the plant design, operational systems, range of activities and infrastructure varied, different challenges were encountered in different locations. Where physical distancing was not possible, additional physical barriers/screens between workers were introduced. In some cases, line speeds were slowed, workers were grouped into pods and temperature checking of workers was introduced.
22. In relation to measures taken to maintain physical distancing within the meat plant environment, DAFM staff and its contractors sought to follow HSE Guidelines.
23. DAFM supplies PPE to its staff and contractors in meat plants. DAFM has minimised the extent that staff move from plant to plant, taking the necessary precautions when they do so.
24. DAFM contractors over 70 years of age have not been engaged for delivery of service for work, in accordance with HSE guidelines on cocooning.

**Official response to the clusters**

25. In the context of the pandemic, primary responsibility for public health policy and implementation rests with the Department of Health and the HSE.
26. Statutory responsibility for health and safety in the workplace rests with the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), under the auspices of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI).
27. Where local outbreak control teams were formed by the HSE in response to the identification of COVID-19 clusters, local DAFM veterinary staff participated and contributed their expertise and knowledge to these teams.
28. In support of the HSE local outbreak control teams' efforts to bring clusters under control, DAFM staff undertook to verify and report back to the HSE as to the effective implementation of any additional control measures that the HSE had requested of meat plant management.

29. A National Outbreak Control Team (NOCT) - COVID Outbreaks in Meat Factories in Ireland - has been set up by the HSE and included DAFM representation. The NOCT issued detailed guidance to meat plants on Friday 15 May<sup>1</sup>.
30. The guidance comes under four broad headings:
  - a. Infection prevention and control measures which should always be in place in order to prevent cases and control outbreaks – at the entry site, throughout the facility, in the canteen, in the production areas, in the locker room and toilets, and in the office.
  - b. Steps to be taken when an individual case is suspected or confirmed
  - c. Additional steps to be taken when an outbreak has occurred
  - d. Factors external to the working environment
31. The NOCT has provided regular updates to the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).
32. DAFM has assisted in the dissemination of the HSE guidance to the DAFM approved meat plants and has sought and received an update from plant managements on the measures which have been put in place in each plant to implement these guidelines.
33. During all this period DAFM staff and contracted veterinary practitioners have continued to provide their inspection and control activities and to ensure that the appropriate food safety, animal health and animal welfare controls are applied. In the context of the continuously evolving situation since March local DAFM managers have engaged as necessary with plant managers to ensure that there has been an appropriate response to new information and advice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/outbreakmanagementguidance/outbreakcontrolinmeatfactories/Interim%20Guidance%20COVID-19%20Meat%20Factories.pdf>

## **The Future**

34. DAFM staff and contractors will continue to deliver their services to ensure food safety, protect animal health, public health and animal welfare, mindful of the need to mitigate the public risk to themselves and other workers.
35. DAFM will continue to monitor the epidemiology of the disease and the advice from the public health authorities and will respond to any new public health advice.
36. As part of the whole of Government response to the pandemic, DAFM will continue to contribute to the HSE-chaired NOCT and will provide any support required to the HSE at local and national level.
37. DAFM will continue to support the HSE in any local outbreak control team response to any future clusters.
38. DAFM is currently finalising arrangements with DBEI and the HSA as to how best it can assist the HSA in monitoring and checking compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol in the range of businesses approved by the Department and in which DAFM inspectors carry out controls
39. In the context of discussions at the NOCT, DAFM is currently evaluating the feasibility of undertaking research into environmental parameters at meat plants that may assist in determining the relative contribution that meat plant environment might be making to the identification of clusters associated with meat plants.

16 June 2020

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