EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM TO

THE SUCKLER COW SCHEME REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2025

S.R. 2025 No. 41

1. Introduction

1.1. This Explanatory Memorandum has been prepared by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to accompany the Statutory Rule (details above) which is laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly.

1.2. The Statutory Rule is made under Section 9(1) of the Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) 1949 and Articles 52(9) and 70(4) of Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 and is subject to the negative resolution procedure.

2. Purpose

2.1. The Statutory Rule gives effect to the Suckler Cow Scheme that will launch on 1 April 2025.

3. Background

3.1. Section 9(1) of the Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) 1949 and Articles 52(9) and 70(4) of Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 allows to make schemes that will aid, improve and develop the breeding of cattle.

3.2. The Suckler Cow Scheme has been developed to help improve the productivity and efficiency of the suckler cow sector in Northern Ireland and to provide environmental benefits through greenhouse gas emission reductions, by reducing the age at first calving of replacement beef heifers and reducing the calving interval of suckler cows.

3.3. The Suckler Cow Scheme is planned to commence on 01 April 2025 and will run from 1 April to 31 March each year over a 4-year phased implementation period.

3.4. It will provide a payment to farm businesses for each eligible age at first calving or calving interval event of beef breed heifers and cows, that meets the relevant Scheme year's target.

3.5. The Suckler Cow Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 will set out the eligibility criteria for female bovine animals and farm businesses, the payments available for eligible calving events and the quantitative limit for the maximum number of calving events that can receive payment each year along with associated operational provisions.

3.6. The maximum age at first calving target in the first year of the Scheme will be set at 34 months reducing to 29 months by year 4. The year 1 maximum calving interval target will be 415 days reducing to 385 days in year 4 of the Scheme.

3.7. A proposed payment rate of £100 will be made on eligible live, aborted or stillborn calving events that are at or below the maximum age at first calving or calving interval for the relevant Scheme year. Payments will be limited to two eligible calving events in which an eligible cow has given birth to only aborted/stillborn calves.

3.8. This payment rate should provide sufficient incentive to meet scheme targets whilst avoiding creating an incentive to increase overall suckler cow numbers.

3.9. A Northern Ireland Quantitative Limit on the maximum number of calving events that can receive payment per annum is proposed to be set at 222,000 animals. This limit has been established using the average annual number of calving events registered to beef breed heifers and cows on APHIS (Animal and Public Health Information System) in the three years 2020-2022.

3.10. If in any scheme year, the total number of calving events eligible for payment exceeds 222,000, a linear reduction will be applied at a farm level on the number of calving events a farm business can receive payment for

4. Consultation

4.1. DAERA consulted from 21 December 2021 to 15 February 2022 on the Suckler Cow Scheme as part of the Future Agricultural Policy Proposals for Northern Ireland consultation. Stakeholder responses were considered and alongside analysis were included in the Future Agricultural Policy Decisions in Northern Ireland which was published on 22 March 2022.

4.2. The Scheme has been developed in co-design with DAERA's Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group. Proposals for the Suckler Cow Scheme were discussed with the Group on 23 February, 13 August and on 18 September 2024.

5. Equality Impact

5.1. Consideration has been given to the compliance of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. As part of the policy development process, an Equality Screening Exercise was completed in 2022 for the Agricultural Policy Programme and no differential impacts on Section 75 categories were identified. Separate Equality screening has taken place for the Suckler Cow Scheme and it has been found that there are no specific Section 75 categories that will benefit from the intended policy. This policy has the potential to impact positively on all people in Northern Ireland and potentially deliver benefit to all Section 75 categories generally, as it seeks to contribute to a sustainable agricultural industry through the operation of a voluntary Suckler Cow Scheme.

6. Regulatory Impact

6.1. A Regulatory Impact Assessment has been completed for the Suckler Cow Scheme and implementation does not go beyond minimum EU requirements and the Scheme is unlikely to impact on trade and investment. No direct monetised and non-monetised costs were identified. Indirect monetised costs may be incurred where adjustments to management practices are required.

7. Financial Implications

7.1. Subject to legislation, funding for the Suckler Cow Scheme in 2025/26 will be from a redirection of funding from the Farm Sustainability Transition Payment Scheme (which is funded from the NI Executive's 2025/26 Draft Earmarked budget for agriculture, agri-environment, fisheries and rural development). It is anticipated that £18 million in beneficiary payments is projected to be incurred in 2025/26.

8. Section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

8.1. Section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 has been considered and no potentially adverse impacts on human rights as a result of introducing this Statutory Rule have been identified.

9. EU Implications

9.1. This is not applicable as the Statutory Rule does not transpose a European Directive.

10. Parity or Replicatory Measure

10.1. This Statutory Rule does not replicate or maintain parity with legislation in other administrations.

11. Additional Information

11.1. For further information contact George Moffett, Agricultural Policy Division, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (George.moffett@daera-ni.gov.uk).