

# Northern Ireland: agricultural no-man's land



*“Bar the relaxed movement of seed potatoes from Scotland into Northern Ireland, nothing has changed or improved since 2020.”*

BRUCE STEELE

The impact on trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland post-Brexit has been so significant, that one County Down agronomist felt he had no choice but to sell his agri-merchant business. *CPM* shares his story.

By Janine Adamson

**F**our years ago, an independent pesticides regulatory regime was implemented in Great Britain as part of the Brexit transition. In many ways this could be perceived as positive – no longer being governed by the EU means British farmers already reap the benefits of new ‘home’ plant protection product registrations.

However, there was a sting in the tail. Under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement and Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP), EU legislation continues to apply in Northern Ireland despite it being part of the UK. This was implemented to avoid a ‘hard border’ between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The fallout from this was shared at the British Crop Production Council (BCPC)’s annual Congress by Bruce Steele, Northern Ireland representative of the Voluntary Initiative.

And even the most cold-hearted of

individuals would find it difficult to not sympathise with his story, because for Bruce, it’s meant making the most difficult decision of all – selling his once thriving business. He began by providing context: “The population of Northern Ireland is currently 1.9M which is 3% of the UK, or two thirds of the population of Manchester.”

## FARMING OUTPUT

“Around 75% of the land is used for agriculture – 1M hectares – with grassland accounting for 80% of the farming area. In 2022, farming output was estimated at just over £3Bn, generated from around 26,000 active farming business at an average size of 40ha.”

He reminded that Northern Ireland is predominantly a mixed farming landscape based on grassland with some cereals mostly for home use; the arable sector accounts for just 8% of gross agri output.



## In the middle

**Bruce Steele shared his personal take on the impact of Brexit on agricultural trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.**

As for potatoes – a crop historically synonymous with Ireland – the area has reduced substantially to just under 3500ha in recent years due to land availability and the cost of specialised equipment, highlighted

► Bruce. Subsequently, Northern Ireland represents just 1.3% of the UK's agro-chemical market.

"Since Brexit, there's a perception that Northern Ireland is in a favourable position to benefit from trading into and from the EU because it remains in the EU's single market for goods. While this is true, the difficulties arise when trading with the rest of the United Kingdom – mainly moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland," he said.

"And the UK Government claims it's fixed many of our day-to-day problems through the Windsor Framework [for smooth trade within the UK internal market], but I can assure you, bar the relaxed movement of seed potatoes from Scotland into Northern Ireland, nothing has changed or improved since 2020."

Bruce highlighted that despite the Northern Ireland Protocol being amended, there's still a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, although it's widely accepted it's much softer than it used to be.

To explain, he reminded that on the island, two currencies are in operation, different laws and tax systems exist, and agriculture as a system, is delivered and funded in a completely different way between the two countries.

"The Republic of Ireland even has its own plant protection product registration and accreditation body, PRCD (Pesticide Registration and Control Divisions). However, greater issues arise as a result of the Irish Sea border."

He said the first of which was access to, and use of, plant protection products. "For one, Northern Ireland has to comply with all current amendments from Brussels yet has no direct representation at the negotiating table, as we're still regarded as part of the UK.

"As such, our position is far weaker when it comes to defending our industry and the nuances of having a western, maritime climate."

Bruce pointed out that consequently, Northern Ireland has diverged away from GB when it comes to MRLs, particularly in fresh produce. "This situation is causing great concern for growers who rely on the shipment of goods into GB, which is also the case in reverse – if product arrives in Belfast carrying an MRL which is not of the EU specification."

According to Bruce, supplying

Northern Ireland with product is increasingly perceived as a 'hassle' due to the price of logistics and associated bureaucracy. "We've always relied on product manufacturers to absorb the costs of supplying our relatively small market. But now we're aware of some cereal herbicides and fungicides not being offered to us at all.

"It's especially the case if the timing of EU registration or renewal doesn't coincide with the product coming to the GB market. This could have a significant impact on access to products including certain insecticides, which are critical to those growing niche crops."

## QUALITY ASSURANCE

This supply issue has been compounded by the fact that plant protection products registered in the Republic of Ireland can't be used by Northern Irish growers if they wish to comply with UK quality assurance schemes, he added.

"Therefore we don't have the option to obtain specific products from the Republic, despite some EU officials believing that we should."

Another issue for Northern Irish growers is access to cereal seed, which Bruce said was the primary driver for selling his merchant business just over two years ago.

Although growers can purchase seed from the Republic, with no restriction of seed northwards irrespective of dressings applied, most of these varieties aren't featured on the AHDB Recommended Lists. "Northern Irish growers are levy payers, so why shouldn't we benefit

from that research and service?" he questioned.

However, he acknowledged that the movement of seed potatoes from Scotland to Northern Ireland successfully resumed in 2023 as a

consequence of the Windsor Framework. Otherwise, that industry would have been wiped out, he suggested.

To further explain how complicated the movement of seed has become, Bruce outlined the timescales for pre- and post-Brexit. Before the change, Northern Irish growers could access seed in the same way as any other grower in the UK, working with merchants and referencing the RL.

"The whole ordering process probably took no more than 5-6 days, whereas



## Avoiding a 'hard border'

**Under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement and Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP), EU legislation continues to apply in Northern Ireland despite it being part of the UK.**

now, it's a complete disaster," he stressed. "Not only are growers restricted to the few varieties being offered, but they're supplied with one seed dressing only and in one limiting pack size."

Following the application of various permits, lab testing and obtaining the various certifications required to adhere to the new rules, plus haulage, it can take 5-6 weeks for seed to arrive in a merchant's shed. "For winter cereals, which are sometimes planted within days after harvesting the previous crop, this makes obtaining seed from GB near-on impossible.

"As I said, it's not difficult to see why I ceased trading out of sheer frustration and disappointment at the lack of support. Myself and others have pleaded with Defra and Daera to have some of these rules relaxed, or for a more flexible process to be implemented, but to no avail.

"And, as the so-called grace period expires on 1 January 2026, we can only expect the situation to get even worse."

Bruce commented that Northern Irish merchants now have to gamble on what seed to order, or along with farmers, are storing seed into the next season to guarantee supply.

He claimed that most of the restrictions placed on Northern Irish growers and their businesses have been political with no regard for the impact on the general public, particularly the farming industry.

"It's a relatively small sector, but 50,000 jobs are linked to Northern Irish agriculture so it's a sector which must survive and hopefully thrive. I've tried to not appear too negative about the situation but it's difficult to remain positive.

"We very much look forward to a day when the ability to trade with other parts of our country returns to a level of normality," he concluded. ●

***"I've tried to not appear too negative about the situation but it's difficult to remain positive."***