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To : MSPs; MPs
Cc : Scottish Parliament's Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee; House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee
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CORONAVIRUS: AGRICULTURE SECTOR UPDATE – ISSUE 1

- This briefing is intended to be a regular update to inform elected representatives of the impacts of coronavirus on the agriculture and rural sector. NFU Scotland (NFUS) is strongly engaged with the Scottish Government to highlight these impacts.

Soft Fruit & Field Vegetables

1. There is growing concern within the horticulture sector about the capacity for EU nationals to travel to Scotland to undertake seasonal work on-farm for the upcoming season. With many EU countries in lock-down (for example: Poland, Romania and Bulgaria) at this time it may be almost impossible for any workers still willing to come to the UK to travel.
2. Some workers are already in place, doing preparatory work however the vast majority of workers are not yet in the UK ahead of the seasonal peak for harvesting.
3. Without knowing if workers will be available growers will need to make business decisions on whether to proceed with taking crops through to harvest. For example, a large broccoli grower reports that to grow a crop of broccoli requires input cost of £1,300 to £1,500 per acre - so a 400-acre broccoli grower needs to commit circa £500,000 with no guarantee of having any labour to harvest. With only 15% to 20% sown we are at a critical time for growers to make decisions to reduce the remainder of their planned production.

Actions Required

4. Industry is looking to put together a matching service whereby individuals being put out of work could contact growers who are looking for labour.
5. If the Government could underwrite the cost of growing crops this would give growers the confidence to go ahead with production when there is so much uncertainty about over the availability of labour.
6. If workers can be found many of these workers are housed on farms in large numbers. Farmers are asking if there is any particular guidance that should be followed to keep a large number of workers who are working closely together safe and protected from the coronavirus.

Feed supplies

7. So far there does not seem to be substantial evidence of shortages to feed supply however anecdotally there are concerns, particularly in the Scottish islands. It is thought some may be panic buying feed, leading to a shortage for some suppliers.
8. Many farmers get draff direct from distilleries. Whilst there has been some rumours that some distilleries may reduce production or close at this time these reports are unconfirmed. Should this be the case then this would have an impact on the availability of animal feed.

Dairy

9. NFUS has been informed that at least one farm-based dairy who supplies milk to local businesses has seen orders collapse, which will have an immediate financial effect on the farm business.
10. Many dairy farms in Scotland have EU nationals working on them, and again NFUS is receiving anecdotal reports are that some of these workers are considering travelling home to the EU to be closer to family.

Farm-Based Tourism

11. The area which NFUS understands to have experienced the most immediate impact from the virus has been in farm-based tourism – NFUS has been informed of a large number of cancellations in bookings and refunds having to be made for stays on farm, farm tours, events etc. Some of these businesses would use tourism cash to pay feed and fertiliser bills. Some farms are reliant on the cash from their tourism business to support the family on the farm and to support the farm itself. This is clearly very distressing for the businesses involved.

Moving forward

12. NFUS welcomes the various support packages that have been announced by both the Scottish and UK Government and is encouraging as many members as possible to investigate what support might be available to them.
13. NFUS is also strongly encouraging members to submit their Single Application Forms (SAF) as in any other normal year in order to receive their agricultural support payments. NFUS understands that the impact of the virus will undoubtedly be felt in RPID offices across Scotland and is working closely with RPID and SAC to ensure applications are made as smoothly as possible.
14. NFUS is concerned about the impact that self-isolation may have on farm-based individuals or families who may already be isolated in their working environment or remote location. NFUS is working closely with RSABI to ensure there is emotional support where it is needed and through NFUS' own communications and regional networks is staying in close dialogue with members who may require some form of assistance.