

Northern Ireland agri-food sector needs to urgently focus on food security – Poots

Soaring costs for fertiliser and feed as a result of the war in Ukraine mean Northern Ireland's agri-food sector needs to urgently develop home-grown and sustainable inputs to preserve its food security.

That's according to Northern Ireland agriculture minister Edwin Poots who said the industry is in an escalating crisis.

He was speaking after meeting with representatives from the grain and fertiliser sector, as well as the Ulster Farmers' Union.

"We are in a crisis now and I feel it will get worse," he said. "The main concerns expressed by the primary producers are the continued increase in energy, fuel and grain prices.

"There are concerns in industry about the cost and availability of grain and fertiliser. I believe grain and fertiliser prices will remain high beyond this year into next year and perhaps into 2024."

Such is the concern around the sector, Mr Poots has called for weekly meetings of the Agri-Food Industry Forum, a group set up in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic to deal with supply chain issues.

He said the industry could look to using organic fertilisers from anaerobic digester (AD) plants in addition to chemical fertilisers to "align to the circular economy and green growth principles."

“We are in the middle of a crisis that will only get worse, and we need to look at Food Supply Security as a whole and urgently look to other sustainable options. For example, supplementing fertiliser and feed stuffs from sources such as food waste and AD plants to support the Circular Economy, protect our Environment and ensure the continued success of our critical agri-food sector.”

More immediately, Mr Poots said he is lobbying the UK government to consider the 25% tariff on maize for export from the US, as well as the nitrogen application limits on agricultural land.