

# Pass on fuel duty cuts to struggling agri-food sector – NI agri minister

Fuel suppliers in Northern Ireland need to quickly pass on the Chancellor's reduction in fuel duty to help agri-food businesses survive during one of the most difficult periods for the sector on record, the agriculture minister has said.

Edwin Poots, in one of a raft of Executive releases published ahead of the election purdah period, said it is incumbent upon fuel retailers not to ignore the five pence a litre cut in duty announced in the Chancellor's Spring Statement, nor a slide in the price of crude oil.

His comments come as farms and food processors alike struggle to cope with the recent price hike for a range of inputs, including the red diesel used by tractors and other forms of refined oil used by agri-food businesses.

Having quickly tracked the ramp up in crude oil prices as a result of the war against Ukraine, it has been hard to identify the impact at the pump of the Chancellor's duty cut since then.

"The Russia-Ukraine conflict is having a direct and damaging impact on our local agri-food sector," the minister said. "It's only right and fair the prices at the pumps come down whenever crude oil prices decrease, as quickly as they were raised.

"The Chancellor's 5p reduction should be met with substantial reductions from suppliers as well."

The conflict has also pushed up the price of nitrogen fertiliser – another key input for farmers – close to £1,000 a

ton from around £300 last years.

While prices for grain have also shot up – to just over £300 a ton from £180 last year – Northern Ireland is home to only a small number of cereal farmers compared to the substantial livestock sector which has to buy grain and other animal feed at the inflated price. While cattle farmers can increase their reliance on grass to mitigate that risk, the poultry and pig sectors, where grain is the main feedstuff, are particularly vulnerable during the current period of input inflation.

In addition, the agri-food sector has had to pivot its export channels following the cessation of P&O's Irish Sea services.

Mr Poots said the sector has adapted quickly to the abrupt interruption but needs the routes to be operational as quickly as possible.

“While our agri-food sector is extremely flexible and has so far adapted their supply lines quickly to ensure that fresh food in particular is getting on to our shelves, the situation is not sustainable for any length of time.

“Once again, the importance and resilience of our agri-food sector is front and centre. I would like to extend my thanks to everyone who works in agriculture, processing, distribution, packing and retail for their work in keeping food on our shelves. I also want to extend my thanks to Stena Line for their quick response in putting on extra sailings.”