

Formal Hearing of Select Committee 1

Wednesday, 6th March 2024

Chairman

Introduction

Good afternoon Honorable Members, attending Officials, Ladies and Gentlemen and everyone listening via radio or live streaming. Together with my colleagues, we bid you a very warm welcome to this, the second Formal Hearing of Select Committee 1 (which I will refer to simply as SC1), from the Council Chamber at the Castle in Jamestown.

Constitutional Role of SC1

With regards to our Constitutional role, SC1 is a Select Committee of the Legislative Council. In accordance with Section 69A of the St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha Constitution (Amendment) Order 2021, and the Select Committees (Establishment) Order, 2022, the function of SC1 is statutory. Its primary function is to objectively scrutinise decisions, policies and activities of the St Helena Government. In particular SC1 is responsible for review and scrutiny of the following sectors of Government:

- (i) Health and Social Care,
- (ii) Environment, Natural Resources and Planning, and
- (iii) Education, Skills and Employment;

SC1 is protected to act independently and is not subject to the direction or control of the Governor, the Executive Council, or any other body or authority and, it has power to compel the Chief Secretary and any Portfolio Director to attend the Committee Meeting, in order to give evidence orally.

The Chair may also request attendance of any other public officers through the Chief Secretary or the relevant Portfolio Director, and may invite persons other than public officers to attend and address the Committee with respect to any relevant matter being considered by the Committee.

The scrutiny role of SC1 is seen as a mainstay of good governance, in terms of holding the St Helena Government to account.

Membership

The composition of the Committee comprises the following four permanent members:

Myself as Chairman Councillor Robert Midwinter

Member, Councillor Rosemary Bargo

Member, Councillor Gillian Brooks

Member, Councillor Ronald Coleman

Committee support is provided through the Clerk, Miss Anita Legg.

Unfortunately, due to a family bereavement, Councillor Rosemary Bargo is unable to be with us this afternoon. Our thoughts are with her at this sad time.

Update on SC one.

Before moving on to today's program of business, I just wish to acknowledge the fact that this is only our second formal hearing as a committee, and much of what we're doing today is therefore still very new to most of our members. I also wish to note that, following our first formal hearing on the ninth of August 2023, the topic of which was Fisheries a cross-functional review, a report with recommendations was produced

and shared with the relevant Officers and Ministers. This was then formally laid in the house on the 30th of November 2023, so is now available for dissemination to interested parties. Should any member of the public wish to obtain a copy of this report, they may do so by contacting the Select Committee Chair or our Clerk, Miss Anita Legg

Program of Business

Turning now to the program of business. As I've already noted, this is the second formal hearing of Select Committee one, whilst also being the first formal meeting of the Committee for 2024, and the topic that has been selected for scrutiny is farming support, land use review and poultry production, day old chicks and incubation unit. As such at this session, the Committee will obtain oral evidence on various policy and procedural matters related to farming, agricultural production, and forestry matters, such as the forestry land release policy. Unlike our previous live hearing, during this particular session, we are not looking at any specific items of legislation. I should also add that I am myself a member of the Agricultural Strategy working group that has been developing options for consideration in respect of a new agricultural policy.

As the primary function of SC one is to objectively scrutinize decisions, policies and activities of the Saint Helena Government, effectively acting as a critical friend, I see no conflict arising from my membership of this working group, as essentially the work of the Select Committee should be complementary to this, in that one is looking back at what has happened in the past, and the other is looking forward and considering ways that this could potentially be done better in the future.

Responsible officers have already taken their place at the table. Thank you for attending. For the benefit of the listening audience, and starting from my left, if you could please introduce yourselves and give a very brief overview of your role in relation to the matters that we are currently discussing today.

Good afternoon, and good afternoon to the public and listeners as well. I'm Darren Duncan, Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio. My role involves agricultural support, as I'm responsible for the agricultural development section in supporting the Agricultural Development Officer to implement policy and services for agricultural support.

Good afternoon, I'm Andrea Timm. I'm the Agricultural Development Officer, and I am responsible for the agricultural section which consists of three sections; the farmers support, pest control and veterinary and livestock.

Chairman

Thank you, the Committee will now scrutinize the afore-noted areas of policy and procedures as these are applied in practice. So before moving on to my colleagues, I would first like to ask the officers present to give an overview of the main policies that the portfolio has in place relating to the subject matters that we are scrutinizing today.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yes, the main policy that we have at the moment that is presently supporting the agricultural sector is our policy for the release of agricultural assets in the form of land and buildings. In the past, we've had various support policies, such as the public private partnership policy, but due to funding that we have, currently, a number of policy provisions has not been able to be actively pursued or policies have been removed from our policy portfolio, simply because we have never had the funds to implement them, or we have had exit strategies to move us away from that. So in terms of agricultural production assets, we lease our land and buildings under our assets policy. We have also a small water subsidy policy. And then we have support provisions also for clearance of land that we have specifically for government land. So it's in the form of a small partnership grant. We have a small herbicide policy where we subsidize the cost of herbicides and pesticides that are provided from ENRP's stock. And we also have a soil testing support provision as well.

And all of the other support services doesn't come under specific policies, but they are provided as part of the overall service provision from ENRP.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. I would now like to invite Councillor Gillian Brooks to raise questions regarding policies and procedures that are in place relating specifically to poultry production.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon. In the policy options paper for the provision of chicks for egg production, it states that when the operation of the poultry unit was first contract out to the private sector, specific targets were set, can you advise us what were these targets?

Agricultural Development Officer

So the targets were sat under the public private partnership arrangement that we had with a contractor at the time, and we were looking at them producing a number of chicks that they could be purchased by the private sector and smallholders in order to support egg production on the island.

Hon Gillian Brooks

So can I ask you were these targets met?

Agricultural Development Officer

They were partially met. During the PPP contract, which was for a duration of three years, we did encounter some challenges, and one of the biggest challenge we had was the outbreak of the Newcastle disease. And as a result of that, we had to cull a number of chickens on the island. Fortunately, that poultry unit didn't actually get the disease, they remained disease free. But also during that contract period, there was a plan to import stock, which at the time when the RMS was still going we were able to bring in embryonated eggs and or point of lay chickens. Unfortunately, we weren't able to go ahead with that plan because of the outbreak on the island at the time. And also outbreak of disease basically in the UK because at that time, we were only importing from the UK.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thank you. Was an inclusion of pullets in this divested contracts, and this is weighted up against issues such as keeping out diseases like avian flu?

Agricultural Development Officer

So we have quite a, I would say, in my opinion, a very good biosecurity policy in relation to animal diseases. And we are quite strict in terms of what we can and can't bring in. And we do check all units in terms of their biosecurity and the sanitary requirements before we import. So we do try and to ensure that no disease come in. With the Newcastle disease, which we had in 2013, there was no conclusive evidence as to how we managed to get the disease. There was some indication that it might have come in with chicken meat that was infected and it got ingested by poultry and as a result of this development, we had the outbreak of the disease, but there was no indication that it was actually imported in any way.

Hon Gillian Brooks

So can I ask, when was the first batch of day old chicks actually brought to the island?

Agricultural Development Officer

2018.

Hon Gillian Brooks

2018. Thank you, and what breed of chicks were brought in?

Agricultural Development Officer

So these were brought in from South Africa, and it's the Dekalb Amberlink.

Hon Gillian Brooks

And why is this a preferred breed? And if it is, what was the reason for that preferred breed?

Agricultural Development Officer

So previous to 2018, we had always imported our stock from the UK for biosecurity reasons. However, because of disease outbreaks there, because of shipping arrangements, it wasn't practical to bring in stuff from the UK. So the Senior Veterinary Officer did a thorough investigation, and he found a bio secure unit in Johannesburg in South Africa. And as a result, we explored that and we found the breeds that were available, this one was considered to be the best breed for the island.

Hon Gillian Brooks

So can we ask why do we need to bring in day old chicks? Why do we not produce these locally?

Agricultural Development Officer

So the poultry unit was under a PPP contract and as we explained earlier, we did have some challenges and we weren't able to meet the targets. So in order to kick start the industry again, it was decided that one of the ways to do it, since we were able to fly them in, day old chicks, with the airport opening, we decided to bring them in. The plan was always to go back and to provide stock on island through either parents stock or through embryonated eggs. But we saw this as an opportunity of actually a quick win and actually getting the poultry industry started again.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thank you. Can I just go back on something? That is when I asked was there an inclusion of pullets in the divested contract when it went out to the private sector?

Agricultural Development Officer

So yes, included in that contract, stock was included, yes.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thank you. And how many day old chicks have actually been brought in to the island?

Agricultural Development Officer

To date we have imported 5000.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Can you tell us what process is followed, should a flight be delayed or canceled and there is a consignment of chicks that is sort of destined to be freighted on that flight?

Agricultural Development Officer

So legally chicks can travel within a period of 72 hours. So it would very much depend on the length of the delay. So if it was beyond that, and it was considered through welfare reasons that they could not be flown to St. Helena, then unfortunately, we would ask the supplier to take them back. And hopefully they can make use of them while they're being flown to St. Helena.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

And just to add to that, we've had that situation before already, where chicks were bumped, as we refer to it in St. Helena today, and so they arrived early in the morning, and then only to know, an hour or two later that they wouldn't be included on the flight and then our supplier took them back.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Okay, so can you now go through for me or for us, the procurement process for bringing chicks in?

Chairman

Sorry Gilly, can I just interrupt that very briefly, because there's something further I would want to do, just check on that. Because Darren mentioned that this has actually happened. So just when that actually happened, did that end up to the supplier, to take them back or additional costs involved to the St Helena Government?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

No, because the arrangement we've had is that we would pay on receipt of the chicks arriving in St. Helena, and that is certainly been the case so far.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And just going back, so you confirmed that, yes, it was part of the original, divested contract to supply pullets. You did mention about the Newcastle disease outbreak. Was there any reasoning behind why that part of the divested contract didn't happen, was that because of the Newcastle, or was there a specific reason why pullets were not then produced on Island?

Agricultural Development Officer

So the main reason at the time was because we also couldn't bring in stock, which would have either been a point of lay chickens or embryonated eggs because the risk was too high at the time that we decided not to bring them in. We needed to ensure that the disease had been adequately controlled on Island.

Chairman

Okay, but then that would then suggest that the parent stock were no longer available on Island that it was only providing pullets from embryonic. Was there no inclusion in the divestment that somebody would maintain parent stock to produce those pullets?

Agricultural Development Officer

With egg production at the moment, we have what we called hybrid breeds. And their lifespan is between 12 and 18 months maximum. So, during the contract at the time, we had the outbreak of the Newcastle disease, the parent stock was coming to the end of their useful life, if I can determine it in that respect. And therefore the plan was to bring in stock to replace them. So it was likewise with the parent stock, and with delays, they have a very short lifespan where they are productive. There will be people who would say that they've kept them beyond that time, and they will continue to lay. But if you're going to be operating a commercial business or viable business, then you would generally keep them for the duration when they will be most productive.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. I will hand back to Councillor Brooks now, because I just wanted to clarify that because I know this is something that the public does ask about this. You know, what's happened there, particularly in relation to supply of pullets, but I'm happy to hand back to Councillor Brooks.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thank you Mr Chair. So if we can go back to the actual, if you could explain the procurement process for us, please of bringing chicks in?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Okay, yes, we can do that and I'll let Andy talk about the most part of that. But first, we need to make sure that the day old chicks, we do have that policy provision in place. So once the contract for the public private partnership for egg production, to be produced, to be completed locally on Island had finished, we then

need to move to looking at policy options for resupply of the island with pullets for egg production. And we established through policy, that day old chicks was a option that we should now try, as there were no avian influenza issues, no Newcastle disease issues and so we moved to adopting a policy provision that allowed us to bring in day old chicks fast. So we simply didn't just move from one option to the next. We then had, through the Economic Development Committee, policy approved to be able to then start bringing in day old chicks. I'll let Andy talk about the actual process.

Agricultural Development Officer

So we have an arrangement with a poultry supplier in Johannesburg. So we will contact them and advise them what our demand is. At the moment, we can only manage a maximum of 1000 Chicks because that is what we can adequately manage within the quarantine station. So we will place an order for batch of 1000. They will advise when they can be ready and we will through our import license we will say what disease they need to be free from, in terms of diseases. And they will also need to be vaccinated prior to coming to the island. We also would then have an agent in Johannesburg who would manage the freight and all the handling facilities. And then once all of that is done they book and then they arrive here at St. Helena.

Hon Gillian Brooks

And can you tell us what it costs to bring in the batch of 1000?

Agricultural Development Officer

So in 2018, the cost of bringing in a batch of 1000 chicks was five and a half thousand pounds and that covered the 2018/19 period.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

And then we also had an increased price then for the 2023 batch that we brought in, which was 6210 pounds.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Can you talk us through the process now that is required for the quarantine periods?

Agricultural Development Officer

So the chicks are, by law they're quarantined for a period of four weeks. And during that time, they are checked three times a day. So they're fed and they're given water. And we need to also control the temperatures to ensure that there is no draught that it doesn't get too hot. So three times a day staff go to the quarantine units to check the chicks. And that happens for the duration of the four weeks. At the end of the four weeks, and if they are observed not have any health problems, and we are happy that they are healthy, then they are released to the public.

Hon Gillian Brooks

And would you have

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Also then just to add to that, only authorized officers are allowed to be involved for quarantining. So that is, includes the Agricultural Development Officer, Andy herself, the Senior Veterinary Officer and the other members of the veterinary services. So no member of the public is allowed to go into quarantine until the quarantine period has been completed. And we found that those chicks then are able to be released to the public and then people are able to then go to the quarantine building to collect once the quarantine period is over, to collect their day old chicks that has been approved for their allocation.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thank you. And the cost you mentioned earlier, does that take in the quarantine costs as well?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes, it does.

Hon Gillian Brooks

So going to the public, is this cost discounted to the public, sold on to the public?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So no, the cost that we've had in the past have been subsidized for previous chicks that have arrived. So our recent consignment that came in, they were sold to the public at three pounds per chick.

Hon Gillian Brooks

So can I ask now how does this cost compare with how much it would cost, if ANRD were providing a Pullet incubation service?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Certainly the policy provision that was put in place wasn't based around comparison of costs, for example. So prior to bringing in day old chicks, when we operated the poultry unit ourselves, the cost per annum, for that was around, I think it was around 28,000 pounds a year. But the provision of chicks today isn't based solely on for example, the cost comparison between doing it ourselves and doing it through day old chicks simply on the basis that we haven't been able to get anyone to take up incubation, for example. I know the poultry producer group that has been established in 2020, that kind of opportunity was brought to the islands poultry producers who are some of the most experienced poultry producers that we have available on the island, but they always felt that was something that government should do. So providing a poultry service out of that 28,000 pounds because there's only a very finite demand on the island on an annual basis, we would never recover, for we previously didn't recover revenue that was full cost recovery from that sort of process whereas now we can through day old chicks recover full cost of bringing in day old chicks.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Okay, thank you and can I ask what has been the success rate after quarantine?

Agricultural Development Officer

The success rate has been really good. I would say probably 90, 95%.

Hon Gillian Brooks

That's good. Can we go on to ask now, what is the set criteria? Do you have the set criteria to determine who qualifies as a commercial egg producer?

Agricultural Development Officer

So previously I mentioned we had a policy in terms of the distribution of day old chicks, which was approved by EDC. Since then we've amended the policy and we've taken to our Advisory Board for approval. So, under the proposed changes to that policy, we have defined that a commercial producer would have up to 20 chicks, and 19 and below would be considered as smallholders.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Because I'm just going to go on to ask what the process is and how you determine how many chicks would be allocated to any one person?

Agricultural Development Officer

So this time around, we actually devised a form. And we had a set criteria in terms of assessing the form. So previously, in 2018-19, people just registered the names by calling into ANRD and they requested the number of checks they wanted. This time, they could still make that request however, it had to be on an

application form. It was assessed against the criteria and also, it was scored a number of points and the highest number of points, obviously, would be the ones who were allocated. However, within that criteria, we also looked at their marketing arrangements. So for example, if they had already had formal marketing arrangements in place, that they were selling to shops, or they had a customer base whereby people were depending on them to supply them with eggs. So that all fed into the criteria. What we found this time 2023, when we advertised for the demand for the chicks, we had more than 1000. So as a result of that, and so the actual demand was 2481. And we had a total of 130 applications and because the focus was more, we're trying to support the commercial producers as well, what we did, we actually gave people 50% of the requirements, because if we had given 100%, as they asked, we would have been supporting less people. And the plan, therefore, was to bring in another batch in October 2023. However, with the outbreak of avian influenza in South Africa, we weren't able to do that. And the ban is still in place up to today.

Hon Gillian Brooks

So how many egg producers or poultry farmers do you actually have registered to date?

Agricultural Development Officer

We don't have a register of poultry producers. So in terms of our assets, in relation to poultry production, we only have two assets. One is unlicensed, and one is vacant at the moment. So the majority of poultry producers on the island are operating on private land. And we don't have a number per se as to how many are actually farming in terms of poultry farming. But based on the applications we have for people wanting to have chickens, which was 130, I would say is probably in that region, or could even be a few more.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Just to say, to add to Andy, it is really difficult at any point in time to be able to pin down who might be a producer simply because of our cultural way of producing on the island. Somebody could be a producer in any particular year but also, our systems of policy provision and support in the past have never required people to register as a particular producer at any point in time. Maybe in the future, it'll be a way of helping to distribute support that the sector could be in receipt of going forward. But certainly, all of our policy provisions so far have moved away. We've certainly raised it in the past about people only for support from SHG should be registered producers. But we've certainly never had political support for people having to be registered in order to get government support simply because the way that producers move in and out of the sector from time to time.

Chairman

Sorry, can I just interject there, mainly because we've just had the animal census. Do they have to declare them during the animal census?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes, it is a requirement under the animal census. However, we haven't analyzed the data for this round. So we don't have numbers but yes, it is a requirement.

Hon Gillian Brooks

So, do you have like, or have you had and do you still continue to have either regular meetings or at least interaction with poultry farmers or egg producers, just to ascertain what has worked well, or has not worked well, I'm thinking of going forward.

Agricultural Development Officer

We haven't had a meeting with a producer group for a while. And the reason for that is, I think there were very little appetite to continue. We in terms of our farm visits, and with the veterinarian livestock section going around on the routine veterinary programs, we do engage with producers. But we haven't actually had a meeting with a producer specifically for at least a year, 18 months.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Okay, we may have touched on this a little bit before, but I just would like to just revisit this, in asking, is there an interest from the private sector to take over the bringing in of day old chicks, you know, under their own enterprise as such.

Agricultural Development Officer

That was discussed with the egg producer group, when we were having regular meetings, and at least from the egg producer group, there was no appetite to do that. They still wanted it to remain with government and as a result, we came up with a policy, which went to EDC in 2020. And that's why the policy was in place because there wasn't any interest from the private sector.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Okay, so is there interest in reestablishing a parent stock breeding program, or incubation program, either in the private sector or ENRP?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So certainly, we want to move to looking at now, either a combination of options in order to resupply the island with layers going forward. So once the poultry units have been refurbished, we want to then be able to look, first of all, to the public to see whether there is interest in that. So we often get people asking us about that when you're going to do that, oh, I might be interested in that depends if you know, SHG is going to pay me a subsidy to run it, for example, and that sort of thing. So what we want to try and establish is real interest in operating the facility. Going forward, it's clear that it's going to be very difficult for a business opportunity to just operate parent incubation of poultry on the island. So either it has to be in conjunction with another business opportunity in order to make it sustainable. Or we use a combination of methods of overall supplying chicks on the island. So whether that's a combination of day old and some incubation. So going forward, it's important for us to be able to establish interest so that we can include that in our poultry options paper for the future. And whether there is certainly private sector interest in both, not just in the incubation side, but also the importation of day old chicks because as Andy said, we've clearly established that that wasn't the situation in the past. But again, like many things on St. Helena, we knew we need renewed interests, or we'd provide a renewed opportunity for people to become interested. So that's certainly something we would want to do but the first thing to do is just to look at the public's interests as part of that options appraisal.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thanks, Darren. So when was the policy or any policies relating to egg production last reviewed?

Agricultural Development Officer

2023.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Quite recent then?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yeah.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Okay, thank you. In St Helena's economic development plan under substitute imports, the focus is buying and consuming goods that are produced on St Helena to reduce money leaving the island. With eggs been a vital staple to our diet, what is the intention going forward for egg production on the island? Has the units, for example, at ENRP, which were put in place for poultry production, have they been utilized?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yes certainly, the whole of the complex at Sydenham had been used for a combination of egg production activities, even up to recently. We've had issues with the overall utilization in terms of it couldn't be fully utilized until we were able to bring in another batch of day old chicks or replenish the island stock, for the particular producer that was leasing that facility. We were able to do that in 2023. The units aren't fully utilized at the moment simply because they're being refurbished. And the one at Farm Buildings was underutilized simply because of its condition, and not being able to have enough stock on the island for someone anyway to operate it, even if we had had it refurbished. So hopefully, both will be able to be operational under different forms of production, whether that is incubation or whether that is having layers in. Once we are able to have the existing prohibition reviewed for bringing imports from South Africa.

Hon Gillian Brooks

And so think of the refurbishment now, can I ask them what money has been initially spent and spent to date to get these units set up?

Agricultural Development Officer

The refurbishment for the poultry units is part of the IEP project. However, the poultry unit at Scotland is not complete. So I'm not sure Can we give this figure?

Agricultural Development Officer

Okay, so the contract value for the poultry units. So Farm Buildings cost, 41,355 pounds, and Scotland is 79,760.

Hon Gillian Brooks

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman

Thank you, I'll actually pick on a couple of those items. So I'll take the last one first, because obviously, there's the EDIP item, which is referred to at the end, which is on the increased agricultural production. And you mentioned the sums of money that has been spent there. So the intention is to have tenants within those, ideally private sector tenants, is that correct?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

That is correct. We'll continue as previously making sure that in the short term, there's the private sector, operating those units, unless it is established, otherwise, there's no interest, for example, at Scotland, Sydenham, there's no interest in the top unit, which will, we will want to look at as an option for incubation. The bottom unit, even though that's been refurbished, is still being leased. And we see that tenant being interested for the foreseeable future at the moment. Farm Buildings is vacant, which will be advertised and also then will be hopefully occupied by private sector, a tenant or tenants subject to being able to get the stock in to be able to support that.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And, and in relation to those ongoing leases with the private sector. Can you confirm that within those leases, there will be ongoing maintenance, that there'll be a requirement for because, again, one of the concerns of the public is capital expenditures being made on Crown assets. But then in a few years' time, more work needs doing at a capital cost? Because buildings are not being maintained. So can you just talk that through please?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

I think that's a fair point, to a certain degree until you know the details of that, for example. So the bottom units were not refurbished in its entirety when the tenant took over. So there were additional works that's been included in that the value of that contract for Scotland, for example, as well. So there was also some structural issues that we wouldn't want a tenant to be interfering with or doing anyway, as well. But there's

certainly requirements in the leasing arrangements for internal and external requirements for maintenance. And there's also a maintenance responsibilities on us as SHG ourselves. So we shouldn't forget about that, or just assign issues to do with a lease that a particular tenant might not be meeting the obligation. Certainly from a government point of view, as well, we haven't met all our obligations for some of our assets simply because we just didn't have the funding to be able to do that. So a delayed maintenance by ourselves could also incur a higher cost then in the future as well. But certainly farm buildings, there was just the I think it was the maintenance of the building and replacement of windows and doors, again, that we wouldn't necessarily have a tenant assigned to that to do as part of their requirements. And maybe something that is, you know, a door is 10 years old, and no matter how much you maintain it, it's simply depending on the location of the asset, also has to really be replaced as part of making sure that the unit is fit for purpose to be able to lease to the private sector as well. So it's a combination of making sure that tenant requirements are being complied with, but also as a landlord ourselves, making sure that we're also meeting those obligations that we should be as well.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. I've got one more on poultry related matters, but just before I do, Councillor Coleman is there anything that you want to raise on this? Okay. So that my last bit on the poultry side of things really relates to your wider role as a portfolio actually, because we see a lot of feral chickens running around the island these days. I'm a resident in Half Tree Hollow. I see a lot of chickens that I don't think belong to anybody. They just sort of roam around Half Tree Hollow and we drove down to Sandy Bay the other evening for a constituency meeting, and nearly hit a whole load of chickens running across the road by Cason's. Is this the situation that we are getting an increasing number of feral chickens? And is there anything being done about that? Because of course, they've reached a point where that could become a predator to things like our endemic invertebrates. So can you just talk through that please?

Agricultural Development Officer

I wouldn't say that the responsibility falls to ENRP. However, we do try and support people, especially with our residential areas where they have problems with feral chickens. So we have a number of cages, which we lend to people to actually catch the chickens. And then it's up to them how they wish to dispose of it, if they do it themselves, or bring them back to us. Most cases, they find someone who's interested in taking them. And we have also caught a few chickens in the Cason's area, because we see that the numbers are increasing there again. We have set a number of cages and we've caught quite a few chickens from that area as well. But I guess, within the nature of the chickens, they will breed really quickly. So I think it's going to be a challenge in terms of keeping numbers down.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

I think also just to add to that, I think we would like to do more if we could, certainly our priority for the Veterinary and livestock team is about making sure that our small animal clients and our livestock producers are supported as a priority with the small team that we have. So as we've told a number of people who've asked for assistance in the past, also, if I use Half Tree Hollow as an example, some people are encouraging feral chickens and don't want them to be controlled in any way whereas a neighbor might want to and then they will call us and ask can we set traps and that sort of thing. But it is just about also resources in terms of being able to direct the government resources to those areas of priority at the moment.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. So I will now move on to land use review on behalf of Councillor Rosemary Bargo. So, to start off with, the current asset policy entitled, to provide for the release of forestry land for residential and commercial purposes, and agricultural land and buildings for commercial purposes, was approved, on the 21st of November 2007. Can you tell me if this policy is still fit for purpose, taking into account the Ministerial system and the Minister's aims and objectives for driving the Island towards a sustainable agricultural sector?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

No, it isn't. So certainly that is why it is under review at the moment. And we'll or we had hoped to have been a little further along with it in terms of having the new agricultural policy helped to inform that review as well. So no, we want to make sure that even though it was established in 2007, we have made minor changes to it, those have mostly been administrative rather than specific process or policy provision, as well. But certainly, we aim this year to be able to have a completely new policy in place for both agricultural and forestry land and building assets.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And I do actually know the answer to the next question. But I'm still going to ask it because, of course, I'm on the working group. And that is that you've mentioned that a review is underway. So what consultation with farmers key documents and research and current best practice is actually forming part of that policy review?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Sort of establishing the options, we started with an option appraisal as to how we approach agricultural direction for the sector in the future. And certainly, we've looked at the working group, having a access to a bit of a situation analysis that we've provided from the portfolio, to be able to then help to inform options and be able to add flesh on the bones of those options. The next process that we've been undertaking in November and early December, up to the present time is targeting consultation with key producers on the island, both in the Eastern District and the Western District, to determine their views on those particular options, and also, the details of those options in terms of what the option might provide for. And so we've been getting various responses back, we've been getting some people adding additional options or varying the options that has been provided. So certainly, we're getting a reasonable response to those targeted consultation exercise, but it's certainly helping now to inform the next version of that options paper.

Chairman

Okay, and again, for the benefit of the listening public. And without going into too much detail, you're able to say what the actual options were that have already been conveyed to farmers that have been suggested?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Certainly not at the stage, I wouldn't, because we're certainly just reviewing the options and putting detail to them. Because the alternative options that have been raised haven't really, the producers haven't really provided the detail to that. So in order for the working group to be able to establish, to be able to consider those options, then we are having to put the kind of detail on it that we think is part of producers ideas that they wanted to convey to us.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And that being the case, you mentioned earlier that, you know, you've wanted to get this this through is a need to update the policy, is the timeframe that you are hoping to achieve this within.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yeah, so we would want to have policy approved by the second quarter. The overall main strategic policy approved by the second quarter of the new financial year 2024-25.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. Now, looking at the release of land itself. So, what practices are in place for the assessment of land to determine its viability for release for agricultural use, for example?

Agricultural Development Officer

So ANRD has what we call an assets portfolio, which historically is determined as agricultural land. So we do undertake a review to see whether land is still suitable and we have also on occasions changed the use of land from arable to pasture or vice versa. So predominantly what is historically agricultural land knowing that is still productive and we also have considered new lands coming into our portfolio if it is considered suitable as well. So, we look at the terrain, we look at the soil conditions, we look at accessibility, etcetera as part of the criteria

Chairman

Okay and so, there are other areas of the island that are considered in terms of their viability for agricultural land, it is an ongoing program then?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes it is, so we have our own what we consider is SHG's land that is managed by ENRP portfolio. But if it was a request from someone who asked for a piece of land, say for example, they wanted to cover production and therefore, doesn't have to be good agricultural soil because they are growing in a hydroponic system and they approach Crown Estates, then we have an arrangement we will discuss with client estates in terms of the release of the land or visual ENRP for our management.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And in relation to forestry land, how does the ENRP actually determine that forestry land is unproductive when they consider it for disposal for residential housing construction, for example.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So what we do is we look at whether that land is still in demand, we look at the productivity of it in terms of its suitability for forestry. And whether or not it's economical enough for forestry use, or whether it should become more of a business opportunity or private sector opportunity, or certainly suitable for the latter, as you mentioned, for residential. So we do always look at whether the land has potential for some other form of business activity before we even just say, it's not suitable for forestry, or should go over to residential. And then we also have the so that is foreign, for example, new residential land, but we also have from time to time, requests for a small piece of forestry land alongside of an existing residential area where somebody may wish to build a garage, and our land hasn't been in forestry production for some time, it might be on the edge of their own, from property. We also consider land swaps as well. You know, but it's certainly the big criteria is around the productivity accessibility for forestry purposes.

Chairman

So looking at this, who did make that determination? Is it the forestry officer? Who is it? Is it a case of ENRP is looking proactively at, you know, is this land still required for forestry? Or could we put that to another use? Or is it a case of, you know, somebody comes forward and says, you know, I'd like to build a house in that area. And then its given consideration as to, could that be used for that.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So certainly, that was the latter was the process. In the past where we had that sort of reactive, then action taken, what we've done over the last five years or so is having what we call forest rationalization exercises where we proactively go out and then look at the forest estate, and what we can actually foresee going forward, that we should be retaining as the government's productive forests estate. And as a result of that, we then look at also business opportunity for land that we feel should be rationalized out of the estate, and then also residential. So in as part of taking that exercise to rationalize the estate through what we call forest excisions, to ExCo. We often suggest what the land might be used for. But certainly, we can't say it should definitely be used. So as part of our recommendations, it's taken out of the estate, and handed over to SHGs, Crown Estate or property section. We often make recommendations or we say, this particular business might have been interested in this in the past, it hasn't been approved, but it could be now simply because it's coming out of the status of formal exercise. And that's just the way we've been moving over the

last few years. We also do get requests to ad hoc leads take land out of the estate, or to utilize it for a business purpose that doesn't involve, for example, excision of the land being taken out. So an example for that might actually would include the fun park at Merrimonts, for example, where we see that the objectives are aligned with ours in that area for forest recreation, for example. And we wouldn't want to see necessarily that be excised from the estate, because if it's no longer needed, we simply can then continue with it being part of the estate. What we try and make sure now in where we are now is that land that is excised from the forest estate is done as a, as a more formal and structured process instead of just reacting to ad hoc requests.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. I think that's particularly helpful. Under the, looking back at the policy to provide for the release of forestry land under Part C, forestry land and buildings for commercial purposes, can you explain the intention of Section 6 2.2, it currently states that land can be used for the purpose of renting out as a business venture, and for constructing residential accommodation for sale.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

As I mentioned earlier, we would look at our policy supporting land for business opportunities, and that doesn't have to be opportunities that are very far from the portfolio itself. And that is it could be used for we would lease it or release it on a on a basis where we want a property section to allow the freehold to be handed over to the business for agricultural purposes, or other purposes, that are aligned to the portfolio's objectives, or simply the wider objectives of SHG. And likewise, for residential purposes, as well. So we have through what we call comprehensive development areas, we have released tracts of forest land for those kinds of residential development opportunities for the Island.

Chairman

Okay, so in terms of that actual clause, the way it reads, it makes it sound as if it's actually looking for a developer to come along, develop houses and then sell those houses. So just to be clear here is that is what this is saying? Or would forestry land be considered for individual housing plots? If somebody wanted to build their own home?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yes, we would certainly look through properties, because we always encourage the property section to be the point of contact for a particular request to remove land from the forest estate. So instead of people coming to us, they go to the property section, for example, so that there's a joined up or coordinated approach to release of that land, or in whatever form, it may be either to leasing or residential, so at least they're able to advise on process and also be joined up, because we wouldn't necessarily be involved in the release of the land other than the excision of the land. So we may say, yes, we want to release that land and property section might say, well, we're not interested in developing or having that land come across to us to then dispose of it under SHG disposal policy. So we have to make sure that where requests are directed to us on an ad hoc basis that it comes through the property section, in order to make sure that the release decision and also the disposal part of that piece of land or building is joined up or at least both parties are well aware of what our intention is and why.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And I'm very mindful Mr Duncan that that this policy that I'm looking at here is significantly Darwinists making references in some places to for example, slaughterhouse, which there is no ANRD slaughterhouse anymore. So the next question that I have, again, relates to something similar, because it talks about the buildings to be released will include those that form part of any outsourcing or privatization in its initiative for the sawmill activities, and I think this document probably pretty well predates when that was divested. So again, similar question, is it a case of buildings will only be released to support software activities, or wood buildings be released for other purposes.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So for forestry buildings, those are really the only main buildings we've ever had, and still have. So that is why the reference to sawmill buildings is included in the policy. That's still the position today.

Chairman

Okay, thank you for that. In Section seven of the policy terms of release, can you tell me if these lease periods are favorable for agricultural or commercial use, bearing in mind that we need to encourage immense growth in the sector towards Ireland's sustainability?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So certainly, that is what we determined from producers themselves, what we determined from consultation exercises on two policies, land disposal policies that have basically been implemented, and consulted on since we had this policy come into effect. So, for example, under two iterations of land disposal policy for government, we've had 20 years included, and I believe in the draft policy that is existing already. At the moment, the 20 year lease period is also included for the agricultural estate. As well, we certainly have, and I'm only saying to Andy, I think it was last week, or, or so or last month, we certainly don't have requests on our files for long term leasing of assets in significant numbers or for longer than 20 years, for example. And so that is why our long term license arrangements is centered around 20 years, certainly when Ex ADA estate was divided up for the private sector, as well as some of the other key government assets at the time at the closing of the ADA Authority leases of 30 years were implemented. Since that period of time, we've only implemented up to a 20 year long term license.

Chairman

Okay, and in relation to that, what methods are in place within the lease agreements to safeguard agricultural land in ensuring that it is used to its full potential and not being left unutilized for long periods of time.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So certainly the long term leases that were in place at the time, and for some is still in place, because the 30 years hasn't come to an end doesn't require the detail to say that, for example, how we would manage that kind of arrangement, with leases being land being fully utilized to a specific point in time or a certain amount of cropping's, that should happen during the year, or that the land shouldn't be laying fallow for a specific period of time. Under our new policy that we're developing now, we would certainly want to make sure that either lease schedules are a bit more specific, if we're able to do that under a leasing arrangement to make sure that those kind of issues are covered. So one, we would want to have that included in policy. So that at least that is transferable then into a lease arrangement.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And thank you very much for the information that you did provide a sort of quite short notice from the database with all the land holdings. I think it was important for us to see that because clearly there seems to be a move towards shorter term licenses rather than the long term leases. But clearly, there are still a number of have larger areas of land with long term leases for for arable production, still on that list, and that is again of public concern. How many would you say and what sort of volumes of land would you say are still on those longer term leases? And how soon are those leases are due to come to fruition? Before you can issue new licenses? Are you able to give an indication?

Agricultural Development Officer

So the majority of the land that is on the long term leases are the pastures we have, I think it's just mainly one arable that is on the long term and the 30 year lease and I think we probably got about eight years remaining on that. But it's the majority for the pastures, which again is the large acreage.

Chairman

So, so the, the first sheet of information that you gave us only had the one listed. But since you gave us the extended information that didn't actually have one particular person included on that first detailed list, but having gone through the others, I certainly see at least six that seem to be on longer term leases. And there's, there's a couple of blanks actually, in the information that's been provided. There's a number of areas where it doesn't say whether it's a one or a 30, or 20. There's nothing against it. So again, I would just question, you know, are we only talking one? Are we talking more than one? Because I, when I looked at this information, it looked like there was at least six.

Agricultural Development Officer

Sorry, in terms of six for leases?

Chairman

In terms of well, there may be one individual lease that relates to a number of different parcels of land.

Agricultural Development Officer

Yeah, so But if in terms of tenants, so from an arable point of view, for the tenants, I think it is just the one but for the but in terms of the parcel numbers, it will show that there are, you will see the 30 it goes for a number of times because they have different parcels. And likewise for pastures just because again, they have more than one parcel of land.

Chairman

Okay. And then you did because the information you first provide us with entitled Lands that actually shows monitoring information at the as part of that, how regularly do you update and monitor the land use and update this database.

Agricultural Development Officer

Our aim is to do it on a quarterly basis. However, we do have limitations, we only have two members of staff in the farmers support section who are responsible for the land monitoring. With the fit the future review, we are hoping to look at the structure within our Portfolio and hopefully we will have additional staff. But at the moment, we do have limitations in terms of making sure we get around to the whole of the estate within the quarterly basis.

Chairman

Okay. And in relation to that one larger lease that covers a number of different areas of land. How much longer does that 30 year lease have to run? Do you know?

Agricultural Development Officer

I think at the top of my head probably about six, eight years.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. And then so what methods are in place, in particularly in relation to the arable plots, what methods are in place to ensure that they're well planned, they have well planned and well maintained irrigation systems.

Agricultural Development Officer

All of the lands don't have the irrigation systems in place. Majority we try to for the Ex ADA Estate because of the reservoirs we have there, but their license doesn't state that they have to have irrigation available for them.

Chairman

Okay, so I'm just questioning the methodology of that, if it's a, an arable plot that ANRD is providing, but it doesn't need to have irrigation.

Agricultural Development Officer

So the water is managed by Connect St Helena, where it is possible that they can have a connection, then that that happens, we have we do have a procedure in place that if water can be provided, ENRP will pay for the connection fee and for the usage to be paid for by the tenant. But again, because the water resource is managed by Connect it is up to them as to whether they can actually provide water to the individual plots.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. That's, that's good to have that clarification, I think. And then, in your professional opinion, what do you think is the best arrangement on an irrigation plan for the island going forward in types of terms of types of irrigation? You know, is it better where it is with Connect and the current system or does the island need to be looking at how we irrigate agricultural land?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yes, I think we can always make improvements in terms of irrigation we certainly are grateful for being able to have untreated irrigation to the extent that we do have it but we also know that it's going to be significant and costly to have untreated irrigation in other areas that we would like to have it and certainly the cost would far outweigh the benefit that we would have. So for example, Ex ADA is the biggest arable estate that the government owns. So it's, you know, it's sensible to have the level of irrigation and the kind of infrastructure that you have there, associated with that size of the estate. Likewise, at Harpers, where you know, you have a covered production facility where you have very good access, then to irrigation, then as a result of the nearby reservoirs. But for some of the small fragmented areas of the arable estate that we have in SHG, it simply wouldn't be cost effective, or a sensible way to use funding simply to then provide either untreated irrigation or make more sophisticated irrigation, simply then based on the very small scale of a particular plant or a particular operation. So I think there's always improvements that could be made, but it is about, you know, targeting, the improvement to the kind of scale that is available and the way the land kind of investment in sometimes is difficult to justify simply on that basis, as well as the scale really of production that happens.

Chairman

Okay, so I'm just trying to link this together. So under ENRP, there is also a body of work, which relates to the water resource management plan, is that correct? Yes, this then fall within that?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yes. So certainly, as part of that water resource management plan that has to be developed now. It will shortly be a tendering process for that. Provision within that water resource management plan will be to look at options for agricultural production, in terms of what we call in, say, agricultural water or irrigation. So we're not just looking at irrigation. We're also thinking about the livestock side as well, really, in terms of reducing irrigation. It's simply agricultural water that needs to be provided sustainably.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. I realize I went a bit off course there, but I just wanted to try and bring that back together. So back to the policy itself, it sets out pricing and rental fees. Are these fees still fit for purpose as determined in here? Or if not, what basis are you using to form the new fee structure on.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So the policy doesn't include the normal schedule that we use? So we have updated fees and charges for all of the discretionary and statutory fees that are provided by the portfolio and they are updated then on an annual basis as part of our MTF process. And so they are available and to the public or published as a result of that.

Chairman

So okay, in which case could you send? Because the obviously what Councillor Bargo was looking at was the policy there. And I did wonder if that schedule is updated regularly? Yep. So if we could just have a copy of the most current schedule sent through to the cloud, please.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

And certainly, we hope that fees and charges will be removed from the policy, new policy going forward, certainly will be then reference to the government notice on fees and charges for agricultural purposes, rather than having it included in the policy.

Chairman

Okay, thank you. That is everything that I have on behalf of Counselor Bargo. If I can hand over to my colleague, Councillor Coleman.

Councillor Coleman

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to ask a few questions on farming support. To start with, how many active farmers do we have on the island? Do you know or roughly?

Agricultural Development Officer

So in terms of our tenants who, these will be people who use Crown land we have 138 tenants. However, that doesn't include people who farm on private land.

Councillor Coleman

That is fine. And do these farmers have to be registered as a farmer?

Agricultural Development Officer

In terms of if they have a lease or license with us then they have a tenancy agreement, but I'm not sure if they need to be registered with any other Portfolio. But they just want it to be on our register as tenants of ENRP land.

Councillor Coleman

And they can be anybody, don't have to be a full time farmer can be part time.

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes.

Councillor Coleman

What are the areas of farming where you give a grant or grants are covered by the ENRP?

Agricultural Development Officer

We have very few grants at the moment, we do have one for the Pasture grant, whereby we make a contribution of £180 per acre to help clean in various weeds of the land. We also have the animal husbandry fund grant. And within this grant, we provide a support for breeding stock. So for male animals and female animals, however, under the legislation, it only extend to cattle and sheep, it doesn't extend to pigs for some reason. I can say however, it is an old piece of legislation, and we are looking at reviewing it.

Councillor Coleman

So going on to the grounds for pasture land is that for Crown land or private lands as well?

Agricultural Development Officer

At the moment it is for Crown land only.

Councillor Coleman

So you're looking at support in the form of grants for people who can't clean their own pasture land that has been leased to them. So who is responsible for cleaning their pasture?

Agricultural Development Officer

Under the lease or license arrangement, it is their responsibility and £180 per acre is only a contribution. So also in terms of fulfilling a stewardship function there are a number of pastures as well, that are key wirebird habitats. So we do see it as ENRP responsibility in some cases to help support that because we also helping to protect the environment, as well as for their benefit in terms of keeping the land free of invasives.

Councillor Coleman

Do you know how many acres of land you have on the pasture?

Agricultural Development Officer

1780.

Councillor Coleman

So that's quite a lot of money to find if everybody wants

Councillor Coleman

We don't offer support for all of the pastures every year. So we do an assessment and we look at pastures that most need support. And we also look at tenants who take up the support as well. So it's not. we unfortunately, we do not have the resources to support all of the land within one year, we tend to get turns to different tenants or different pastures.

Councillor Coleman

Is there assessments done to show who qualify each year?

Agricultural Development Officer

We do. Yes, we do go around and do assessments as part of the monitoring process as well. So yes, we do carry that out.

Councillor Coleman

Then under the Animal Husbandry fund, how do that apply?

Agricultural Development Officer

There is an application process for applying for funding from the animal husbandry grant. And again, we carry out an assessment. So for male breeding animal, the animal owner will contact us they've identified an animal, and if they wish to purchase in terms of to enhance the genetics within their herd or their flock, we will do an assessment that the Senior Veterinary Officer is also involved and if it is supported, then we will make a financial contribution to the purchase of the animal.

Councillor Coleman

And is there any conditions that the farmer?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes, one of the conditions is that if there are people wishing to use that animal for breeding, then they should offer that service. Sometimes it's not always practical, depending on the location, but that is one of the conditions.

Councillor Coleman

Thank you. So what sort of subsidies do you provide to farmers?

Agricultural Development Officer

We currently have two subsidies, the herbicide subsidy and the water subsidy.

Councillor Coleman

And does the herbicide subsidy work?

Agricultural Development Officer

The herbicide, subsidy ENRP and pay 60% of the cost of the chemical and the claimant or the applicant pay 40%.

Councillor Coleman

And is there a lot of people using that service?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes, we do. And particularly from people who have pasture lands.

Councillor Coleman

And that is for crown and private or just for crown lands?

Agricultural Development Officer

It is for both. However, to qualify, you have to have a certificate in safe use of pesticides so that at least we have some assurance if the person are able to use it correctly.

Councillor Coleman

Darren want to come in.

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Sorry, just to say that there is only two policies that provide specific subsidies, all of our agricultural service provision and support is heavily subsidized. Um, but we don't have an overarching policy that provides for all of our subsidy areas by a particular policy. It certainly is a given that all of our services are subsidized at the moment.

Councillor Coleman

But you still have a charging policy in place?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yes. And that is where we know that the majority of services where we charge for is heavily subsidized, as well as those that may not be charged for therefore it is a 100% subsidy on those.

Councillor Coleman

So what other types of support services you'll provide to farmers?

Agricultural Development Officer

So we provide soil testing so people's particularly on arable land who would like the source tested to check the fertility they can have that services provided, we have an agricultural pest control service whereby we carry out a spraying service that is for insecticide, herbicide and fungicide. We make available agricultural land and buildings to for production and also for storage. We have a livestock breeding program whereby we have a flock of Dorper sheep so therefore, we help to improve the genetics of the sheep, the flocks of sheep on the island, we provide an AI service for cattle and goats. We have a routine veterinary program whereby the veterinary livestock staff go round into the different districts on the island on every four weeks to do the livestock and neutering service for domestic animals. And we also have animal clinics whereby we treat animals we do worms, fleas, and treat any other ailments that is needed.

Councillor Coleman

So the veterinary service and animal clinics is supplied to the farmers or public at large?

Agricultural Development Officer

I would say the public at large and especially for the small animals would be for the public but for your livestock would be particularly for your farming community.

Councillor Coleman

The veterinary service itself is that animal clinics, these are free or people are charged with services or just for the medications.

Agricultural Development Officer

They are charged. However, as Darren mentioned early earlier, they are subsidized as well.

Councillor Coleman

So we've covered all the other support services. So in the support programs, can you decide the type of data that the Directorate collect and how to use it to supply farmers and merchants? What's the type of data you're collecting for that?

Agricultural Development Officer

So we find data collection, challenging in the sense that we don't and farmers are reluctant to provide data. However, there are a few farmers that do give us data on their production activities. We also collect data from various retail outlets, around the island which will determine its domestic sales. So we know what is sold through the shops, the majority of shops, I should say. However, it doesn't include produce that is sold informally, whereby people have customer quite a large customer base. We also collect import data. So we have a very good set of data on all of our fruit and vegetable imports. And we also have data from the Environmental Health section on the number of animals slaughtered. So we use that data between terms of trade and production data to see if there any trends of any patterns in production, or in terms of imports. So if for example, if we see production probably increasing, we probably will notice that imports are decreasing or vice versa. So it helped us to inform sort of policy and procedures going forward.

Councillor Coleman

So how do we get around things like shortage of potatoes and onions on the island?

Agricultural Development Officer

I think a lot of it comes down to collaboration or cooperation among producers. I mean, one of the things that we have tried on Ireland is to encourage producers or farmers to produce cropping plans whereby they can share amongst themselves so that instead of everybody planting potatoes at the same time, a few some will plant potatoes and some probably will plant carrots so you will have a consistent supply. However, I think for a lot of farmers they want to operate on an individual basis and plant what they feel they would like to plant even though we have encouraged that. On the other hand, I think we have to take into consideration seasonality of production as well. So for some crops this season, and again, some farmers prefer not to pay for water. So the afford, they will probably build some crops during the winter periods whereby the rain fed instead of having to irrigate their crops. So in terms of how do we get around the shortages, so like the peaks and troughs of production, I think a lot of it will come down to farmers themselves, in trying to work together. From an ENRP point of view, we have tried, we've set up workshops with the farmers and with merchants as well, in terms of trying to sort of have communication as to how best to get round or to set up future contract to kind of set up contracts. Unfortunately, it hasn't really been that successful. But we will keep trying.

Councillor Coleman

Thank you. So when it comes to the agriculture, use of land, the production, and also the buildings for production or storage, who manages that?

Agricultural Development Officer

We manage that ENRP. Yes.

Councillor Coleman

As mentioned before, you'll have a database of everything that's been leased out. And is this monitored And I think as regularly and updated?

Agricultural Development Officer

We do monitor regularly. We don't always see inside the buildings on a regular basis, because there are times when we do our monitoring, and especially for storage buildings, and even some production units they are locked. And we can understand that for security reasons of our tenants. But we can see external structures and but there are occasions where we do ask tenants if we can see the inside just so that we can check and make sure that they are used as the license.

Councillor Coleman

So what happens when land is left fallow, especially for long term leases?

Agricultural Development Officer

We try and work with tenants to encourage them to actually produce and to produce on the land, we understand that having land fallow for a period is part of the rotation. We understand that some of the challenges are one of the main challenges why some land isn't productive at the moment is because of labor shortage. And they are struggling to employ people to actually work the land. So I think it is something that we're going to have to continue to work with producers and try and address.

Councillor Coleman

So when leases are due, do you do assessments, especially when there's other competing forces for the same land?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes, we do. So if we notice that tenants haven't used the land during the year, we will do our monitoring during the year and then in January, I will be the final data that we would send them to advise that we will not renew their license special in their one year license in March. And they will have that period in which they need to vacate. So we have done that on a number of occasions. And we've done that again this year, this time around as well. And then the land will be advertised if there are other people who are interested.

Councillor Coleman

So that's both arable and pasture?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes, we find that there's a great demand for pasture and we don't often have a lot of vacant pasture land.

Councillor Coleman

Thank you. I think my final question is, do you look at the investment that government puts into these lands or pasture lands versus production coming out? Value for money?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

I think so in some cases, we wouldn't get necessarily value for money simply because pastures for example, are often or most of them are done only on a part time basis. So they are done by individuals or the production is done by a small syndicate for example of a group of people. But what we don't have is

often the pasture lands being operated or run on a commercial basis where you know, in, you have a unit then being run commercially. Certainly one of the options that have come out of the agricultural policy review that we're doing at the moment is whether or not some of the lands pastures could become larger units so that they can actually form a business so that the land could be run much more commercially. And reducing that sort of fragmentation where it's difficult to then see value for money that government might put into upgrade a pasture or a series of pastures where six pastures might be run by six individuals and very difficult then to have those units operating efficiently and providing value for money.

Councillor Coleman

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman

Thank you, Councillor Bargo was there anything further you wish to ask? I'm sorry, Councillor Brooks. Is there anything further you wish to ask him? Okay.

Councillor Brooks

No, thank you, Chair.

Chairman

Thank you. Okay. Before we move on, I would just like to raise one further question regarding compliance, and the handling of complaints or concerns raised by the public, I'm aware that you use the standard suddenly in the government complaint system. But do we, ENRP hold records of concerns or complaints raised and associated actions taken, and how the complaints process. So for example, we mentioned earlier, you know, the public raising concerns with elected members, that land is sitting unproductive, if a concern is raised about non-productive use of arable land, how was that followed up, you know, who should the person report to, and how was that be followed, followed up?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

So we, we try and just like on the marine side, we try and differentiate between, well, it may be a concern, or somebody raising a comment to what is a legitimate complaint. And so, if someone goes to an elected member, and that comes on to us about a concern they might have about land, then we either reply to that elected member, or we ask that person to come and meet our Agricultural Development Officer or our Farmer Support Officer, to then address that, but it may be that that concern is, is also in line with a concern that we may have coming up, where we are just about to write a letter of compliance to a tenant, for example. And so the issue can be then we are addressing it then formally in that way. Whereas somebody might just write something to an elected member or to myself and just say, well, you know, we noticed that piece of land is laying fallow, we're doing nothing, what you're doing about it, and then basically, you know, or what are you going to do about it in the future? So we reply to the person or we go to the elected member with a response.

Chairman

Okay, so noting that you have this monitoring information on your database, would that be tracked through that database? So if I, if I raised a concern about a particular plot that I saw, and I thought it doesn't be doing very well? Would that then be tracked on that database?

Agricultural Development Officer

Yes.

Chairman

Okay. Thank you. So before we wrap up, I just wanted to offer to yourselves if there's anything additional that you wanted to actually say, or provide further to the Committee?

Portfolio Director for Environment, Natural Resources and Planning Portfolio

Yes, I think certainly from my Policy Officer for the Portfolio, we certainly we take note of where policies, you know, outdated or we have provisions can be improved. And certainly, agriculture is one area where there's a real balance to be struck between retaining people on the land and as well as making sure that regulation and provisions is enabling, but at the same time, it's one area also where improvement is needed around compliance and enforcement and making sure that the Portfolio has the policy basis as well as the legal provision in order to support the improvement that is needed around compliance and enforcement and better utilization of agricultural land and buildings.

Chairman

Okay, thank you very much. So that concludes the Select Committee's questions on our program of business for today, and I would like to thank all Officials for attending and giving evidence in relation to the questions asked. The committee will now evaluate today's proceedings and submit a report to the Legislative Council, together with any recommendations shortly thereafter. In closing, we thank you the listening public for your interest in the work and activities of this select committee, and we express our gratitude to the South Atlantic Media Services for providing this live radio coverage.

Take care and enjoy the rest of your day.

Approved by Chairperson:



14th May 2024