

Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

Meat industry Ireland Opening Statement

(Thursday 13th August 2020)

Introduction

Thank you, Chair, for inviting Meat Industry Ireland once again to engage with the Special Committee on Covid-19.

Meat Industry Ireland is the Ibec trade association representing primary processing companies in the meat sector. Our sector contributes €4 billion to Irish food exports, supports the incomes of 100,000 farmers and directly employs 16,000 people. Its footprint is evident across the entire rural economy, with 50 major processing sites.

Current Covid-19 status

When we last engaged with the Committee, there had been some 22 clusters at primary processing plants, 6 of which were large clusters. As we have seen this week, there is a single primary processing site that unfortunately is experiencing its first Covid-19 outbreak. In respect of the original 22 clusters, these are no longer active clusters and 99% of affected staff have, thankfully, recovered and returned to work. In the two-month period until 4th August, across all our members' sites, just five additional cases had emerged. Disappointingly, that situation altered last week. However, it is important to reiterate that the majority of primary processing sites have had zero or very low numbers of positives.

In the period since early June we have seen the strong impact of stringent controls and mitigation measures that were put in place early in the pandemic and were strengthened on the 15th May with the publication of HSE protocols. The rigid enforcement of these measures, verified by government agencies through announced and unannounced audits, has served to reverse the trend of positive cases and restored the overall sector to relative stability.

Circumstances in primary meat processing sites

It is important to reflect on several facts as we judge the performance of the primary meat processing enterprises in the fight against Covid-19. This was a new virus, unprecedented in its nature and virulence, one which challenged the world's best scientists and public health officials. To this day, these experts continue to learn about the virus and, in doing so, regularly update and adjust their advice and response.

The meat sector was designated by Government as an essential service because it performed services that were deemed necessary for society. As such, the sector continued to operate while most other non-essential manufacturing sectors were closed. As a labour-intensive industry, where large groups of workers congregate, the workplace environment was transformed fundamentally to meet complementary objectives: to keep people safe while maintaining business continuity.

We introduced a rapid response in rolling out a comprehensive set of protocols across all sites that, over time, with the benefit of expert advice, and continuous learnings, enabled us reach the position of stability that has prevailed in recent months in all sites until last week's outbreak.

As we know, Covid-19, travels through communities into industrial settings, rather than vice versa. As manufacturing settings, irrespective of what they produce, are locations where large numbers of

people congregate, they provide the potential for the virus to spread, reflecting the dynamic between community and workplace.

As the pandemic accelerated across society, the HSE identified that many of the positive cases that emerged in meat plants were identified amongst people who had shown no symptoms of the virus and who continued to work. These 'asymptomatic' cases were detected as part of wider HSE screening tests. This process identified clusters where the vast majority of the positive cases were asymptomatic, a finding which reinforced the insidious and indiscriminate nature of the virus and the challenges associated in identifying potential cases.

In this latest outbreak there has been a rush to blame and complain that nothing has been done to mitigate and prevent the virus spread in this industrial setting. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Kildare Chilling case, this company survived the high points of late April and early May, recording no virus cases and when other clusters formed. So, there is no simple conclusion that can be drawn from what has now emerged.

Proposed new testing arrangements

As we now move into a new approach to Covid-19 testing, we remain fully committed to public health guidelines, including the additional screening proposals that Government announced in recent days. But we believe these can only work to keep people safe while maintaining business continuity if the following steps are put in place:

- Clear and unambiguous advance communication of the screening test protocols to ensure that everyone involved understands the procedures and follow up actions,
- A speedy and efficient sampling system, with test results returned within 24 hours of the sample being taken,
- An effective track and trace system into which MII member companies will continue to record and transmits appropriate information to facilitate contact tracing by the HSE.

Members of the committee will be aware of research carried out in other jurisdictions to try to establish whether there are conditions within the meat plant environment that accelerate the spread of Covid-19. I would like you to know that, in association with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and public health authorities, we have commenced a pilot research project that will examine, in an Irish setting, whether such factors can be identified and how these may be addressed.

And I also want to reinforce what we stated here on 10th July, that MII members welcome unannounced inspections, irrespective of whatever State Agency is empowered to conduct them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chair, I want to assure the Committee that our industry has worked diligently to protect employees throughout the course of this pandemic and continues to do so. It took very extensive measures early in the crisis to protect workers and to ensure business continuity. It continues to update and enhance its protocols in line with all relevant public health guidance. Vigilance remains the priority. MII members are proud of their committed workforce and we commend them and all those in the extended supply chain for their efforts during these difficult times.