**20th February, 2017**

**Threat to Sligo Veterinary Laboratory Conflicts with Government Rural Policy says Harkin**

The proposal by the Department of Agriculture & Food to close Regional Veterinary Laboratories such as that in Sligo, and to centralise services elsewhere, has been described by Independent MEP Marian Harkin as flying in the face of good animal health practice and in contravention of recent government policies to stimulate development in rural areas.

“We have seen successive lip service plans to supposedly bring long overdue balanced regional development and the latest Ireland 2040 plan’s strategy is to ensure that ‘the enormous potential of the rural parts of our country are maximised’ ”, she said.

How could this aspiration be taken seriously in the North West when a service vital to the region’s most important economic sector was proposed to be removed, Marian Harkin asked. “The Regional Veterinary Laboratory in Sligo has been a vital service for the farmers of the North West region in helping them to identify and remedy animal health problems which adversely affected their incomes, she said.

“The Sligo laboratory also plays a significant role in helping to protect Ireland’s animal health status which is a major positive marketing tool in promoting the country’s food products on a worldwide basis”, the Independent MEP said.

It was absurd that a structure of regional laboratories, which relied on the continued co-operation of farmers to bring animal health threats to the notice of the authorities, should for a relatively small saving financially threaten the country’s exemplary animal health status, she said.

“In a region of part time farmers who would have the time for a 600 km round trip from the Inishowen Peninsula to the proposed centralised facility in Athlone, to bring a dead animal for the examination which would have significance for both the farmer concerned and for the build up of knowledge which is vital to protecting the country’s animal disease status”, she questioned.

She called on the Minister for Agriculture & Food to have regard for overall government rural proofing policies, and for the overall national interest, by immediately intervening in the present attempt to centralise veterinary services on the basis that ‘if it ain’t broke don’t fix it’, Independent Marian Harkin concluded.

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