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To: Sarah Sutherland

The Regional Monitor article from Billy Armstrong MLA

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Waste Not Want Not

A higher standard of living has put enormous strain on our environment and successive EU Directives have increased our targets and challenges. Northern Ireland is no different when it comes to waste: historically the answer has always been 'dump it', however, as space for dumping is running out rapidly, urgent changes are necessary. Everyone, from the person on the street to the Managing Director in the corporate enterprise, must change their mindset regarding waste and the possibilities of its re-use.

Northern Ireland is more dependent on agriculture than any other region in the UK yet we would do well to follow in our farmer's example as he continually works to improve the environment: He spreads slurry/manure on his land, as it is full of necessary nutrients to enrich his crops and produce naturally grown foods. Some grow willow, for example, in order to produce energy while many look to wind turbines and biogas for renewable energy sources for their large farming enterprises giving a cleaner, greener image. Surplus Nutrients from the farm could be processed to become a valuable resource for the agricultural industry. Sludge pellets produced are virtually odourless and has the potential to offset the need to import certain fertilisers.

However, farmers have highlighted the huge financial investment needed to comply with the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme and have encountered many difficulties within that scheme which is oversubscribed and demands unrealistic deadlines. Farmers have huge financial and bureaucratic burdens as they genuinely try to comply with all the new directives yet they are continually hindered by Government changing regulations.

A lot of lip service has been given by Government in their long-term strategic vision for renewable energy but they have forgotten about the mountains of waste that they have been happy to put into landfill sites and the potential of these waste products. Much of Northern Ireland's renewable energy potential is dependent on the resources of agricultural lands and rural areas. To create a green, clean image the use of Wind and biomass energy could help to increase, diversify and develop renewable energy sources, providing a long-term source of economic opportunity and growth for rural communities. However, there needs to a better understanding within Planning laws to facilitate these ventures.

Waste is one of the biggest issues facing our District Councils and their current programmes for recycling materials is certainly a welcome start in reducing the amount of waste going to landfill. The most common materials recycles are paper, glass, plastic and cans and if all these commodities were taken out of our bins we are still left with over 60% to be disposed of in landfill sites throughout Northern Ireland.

The basis for any Waste Management Plan is that Landfill should be the least desirable and we must practice the 3 R's: Reduce, Re-Use and Recycle. To meet EU targets for the diversion of waste from landfill, we must have a new network of waste disposal and treatment facilities. All must recognise that energy from waste will be a necessary component of the mix of technologies required, particularly in light of the need to develop energy from renewable sources.

Let us be bold, follow the example of some European countries: there is no need to transport domestic waste hundreds of miles to end up dumped in landfill sites. I believe one solution is to locate about three major Waste to Power plants in prominent industry sites throughout Northern Ireland converting all types of waste into energy/power using the latest methods with low environmental emissions, thus reducing the need to purchase high-priced energy and thus contributing to a safer and cleaner environment.

Effective waste management strategies assist the conservation of our environment. As well as looking at recycling options, we must also look to reduce the amount of waste we produce. Northern Ireland produces almost 1.5 million tonnes of waste per year – industries alone account for on average 39%. Excessive packaging (including plastic bags), whether found in industry, on farms, at home or the supermarket, creates a large amount of waste, which must be examined and reduced. A trip to the supermarket these days is likely to result in almost as much packaging as food. Any reduction in the amount of packaging will produce a saving in the product cost as well as ridding the environment of the packaging as a waste product, thus benefiting everyone.

To conclude, the speed at which we are using fossil fuels simply cannot be sustained: everyone must find alternatives sooner rather than later. We have the potential to use Northern Ireland as a pilot area within the United Kingdom to tackle our energy crisis, being innovative in our approach to find uses for what we discard to generate heat and power from waste for future generations. It is time for Northern Ireland Government Departments to turn words into action and overhaul the energy supply chain locally. Government and industry must work more closely together to dump those old waste habits and simultaneously invest in a cleaner, greener environment. The people of Northern Ireland need the government's dedication on this issue. However, only through a locally elected democratic Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont, Belfast can these aspirations be realised for the sole benefit of its own people giving inspiration to others across Europe.

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