

The Ulster Farmers' Union is encouraging beef farmers to negotiate with processors to gain a higher base price as abattoirs experience cattle shortage.

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The comment was made following the publication of data by the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC), obtained from the Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS), on lower cattle availability.

UFU beef and lamb chairman, Sam Chesney, said, 'Reports coming from the major processing plants have indicated a shortage of prime cattle coming forward for slaughter. This gives Northern Ireland farmers an advantage, and we urge them to negotiate on beef price and not be afraid to challenge what processors are offering. Too often beef farmers are price takers and as the primary producer, they end up taking the brunt of the price squeeze when farmgate prices plummet. The beef base price is aggressively below the three-and five-year average, but live markets have become stronger in recent weeks and there is a strong demand for beef cattle. Farmers need to look at all options for increasing revenue.

'The release of data on lower cattle availability, has presented an opportunity to our farmers. They need to champion the great work they do to ensure they receive the price they deserve for their commitment and dedication to upholding the highest production standards regarding animal welfare and environment. Not to mention producing Farm Quality Assured meat that consumers can enjoy without worrying about how it was produced or where it came from.'

There has been a continuous decline in beef calf registrations which represents the hardship beef farmers are facing. January-July 2019 seen a decrease of almost 17,000 beef calves registered to suckler cows which will have a huge impact on the Northern Ireland economy.

'With a Brexit extension and an election just around the corner, a no-deal outcome is not off the table just yet and once again beef farmers are left to endure this prolonging uncertainty which is unacceptable. The beef industry is a major contributor to the local economy, but the sector has never been so vulnerable having already experienced a substantial financial loss that doesn't take into consideration the rising production costs. The fall in beef calf registrations shows that farmers have already started to make serious decisions about their businesses.

'Alongside the other UK farming unions, we have called for a support package to address the dire situation of the beef market but we encourage farmers to make use of the data LMC have obtained, make their own voice heard and challenge processors to get the base price they deserve,' said Mr Chesney.

The UFU will continue to meet with Government officials and political parties to make the case for a beef support package and a variable premium, to provide some certainty for beef farmers going forward.

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