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Sir Robert Goodwill MP
Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Committee
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15 May 2024

Dear Sir Robert,

Soil health inquiry: Government response

Thank you for your letter of 17 April 2024, seeking clarification on a number of immediate queries raised by the Committee following the Government's response to the Soil Health Inquiry report. Below is a response to each question, which I hope provides the clarification the Committee's is seeking.

Soil monitoring

1. What "long-term monitoring capability" do you envisage for soil health after 2028 and what role will Defra and its arms-length bodies play?

The terrestrial Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (tNCEA) programme will collect data on key soil characteristics (physical, chemical, and biological). Soil monitoring is currently being undertaken by Natural England through the England Ecosystem Survey, Forest Research as part of their National Forest Inventory programme, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew with the Fungal Health Survey, and Natural England via the England Peat Map.

The tNCEA is setting up long-term monitoring capability at a national/regional level. NCEA will map the extent, condition, and change over time of England's ecosystems and natural capital assets. We've developed standard procedures for consistent data collection across different habitats, soil types, and land use. This will allow us to establish a robust baseline for soil health by 2028, in line with our EIP commitment. The next phase of capital investment, needed to complete the baseline by 2028, will be included in Defra's Research & Development Spending Review bid. We are currently exploring options with our delivery partners for the monitoring activity which

will endure post-March 2028 and how this could be funded and delivered most effectively.

- 2. You suggest that a provisional update on the tNCEA programme will be published in 2024: will this update explain how much of the £140 million investment funding is being dedicated to water, air and soil monitoring?**

£26.6 million has been set aside for soil and peat monitoring under the NCEA programme during the current Spending Review period (2022-2025). A best estimate has been provided; this figure includes some broader costs (e.g. obtaining permissions to access sites and NE internal costs), which are also associated with vegetation and landscape surveying that occurs alongside the soil monitoring as part of the England Ecosystem Survey.

Soil health indicators and testing

- 3. Why is the Government publishing tools and guidance for farmers on collecting soil health data a year before the national soil health indicators are established? Will you update these tools once the indicators are established to enable farmers to collect data that is aligned with these indicators?**

The government is publishing tools and guidance for farmers on collecting soil health data now to encourage early adoption and data collection and establish their own baselines. Once the national soil health indicators are established, these tools will be reviewed and updated to ensure alignment.

- 4. You have suggested that farmers might be encouraged to share their SOM data to assess the state of England's soils. What is the rationale for this narrow focus when soil health encompasses a variety of physical, chemical and biological characteristics?**

While it is true that soil health is multifaceted, encompassing physical, chemical, and biological characteristics, soil organic matter (SOM) is a crucial indicator. We encourage farmers to collect data on other relevant parameters alongside SOM. For example, under SFI, farmers are encouraged to assess soil type, texture, structure and biology, as well as any risks to the soil. The initial focus on SOM allows for easier data collection and paves the way for a more comprehensive approach in the future.

- 5. Can you provide further information on how the Big Soil Stocktake project will encourage owners of soil data to release their information and what success with this programme will look like?**

The EA has established an Anthropy group with Defra and NE colleagues to maintain momentum following the Big Soil Stocktake event at Anthropy in 2023.

This has brought together work not only to access data on soil better, but to build the skills and capacity to collate, manage and analyse that data in a way that delivers greater insight for the range of stakeholders for whom good soil management is important.

We can update the Committee later in the year on our progress if you wish.

Soil health targets

6. What are the reasons for not committing to a more ambitious long-term soil management target beyond 2030?

Setting a more ambitious target beyond 2030 requires robust baselines and established monitoring capabilities. We are currently focusing on achieving our current EIP commitment and building a strong foundation for any future targets.

7. How, and by when, will you work with the agricultural sector to develop a shared understanding of sustainable soil management? Will this be part of the “delivery pathway” to the target 60% of agricultural land being sustainably managed by 2030, and will this shared understanding be used to shape future iterations of farming incentives or regulations?

The EIP sets out our commitment to bring at least 40% of England’s agricultural soil into sustainable management by 2028 and increase this to 60% by 2030 will be achieved through our farming schemes.

Over that time, we will work with the agricultural sector through regular engagement, workshops, and established networks, including our ALBs, to develop a shared understanding of sustainable soil management that can help to accelerate progress towards achieving that commitment.

The January 2024 Agricultural Transition Plan Update

8. We would be grateful for your assessment of main findings of this call for evidence when the work is complete.

The Farming and Countryside Programme (FCP) is undertaking ongoing work with farmers and land managers on understanding the barriers they face in moving to sustainable farming practices. We will seek to improve our schemes continuously in response to what we learn. FCP would be happy to periodically update the Committee on this ongoing work.

Access to ELMs

9. While you state that the SFI Management payment has led to an uptick in applications from smaller farms, there are no figures for this or for other types of farmers and growers that might find access difficult. Given your previous commitment to providing us with quarterly updates on applications to the SFI (see letter dated 8 December 2023), we would like to see these updates include information on the diversity of farm types and sizes that these ELM schemes are attracting.

Surveys and co-design have indicated that the SFI management payment has attracted farm businesses to apply to SFI who would not otherwise have. This includes businesses with management control of smaller areas of land (under 50ha).

We are monitoring the number of businesses in SFI 2023 agreements with different land amounts by comparing to the amount of land that the business claimed in BPS in 2023. In April 2024, 26% of businesses in SFI 2023 manage 50ha or less of land. This is higher than the SFI 2022 offer where 15% of businesses manage 50ha or less.

Option-level summary data is being published as Official Statistics on 3rd May. This includes a breakdown of agreements by region. We will release additional information about their distribution (e.g. farm size) as part of monitoring and evaluation reports.

Reviewing and adapting ELM schemes

10. Can the Government explain whether it will publish an evaluation programme for ELMs, and if not, explain why? In its absence, what metrics will be used to review the impact of the SFI and Countryside Stewardship on soil health?

The Government publishes regular updates on Gov.UK regarding the monitoring and evaluation of its Farming and Countryside Programme schemes. Monitoring and evaluation of ELMS is well established and builds on the investment made in our evaluation of agri-environment schemes over the last few decades. Annual updates of the agri-environment scheme evaluations are available at <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6268335787606016> .

The latest update about the ELMS monitoring and evaluation is available on Gov.UK Defra Farming Blog: <https://defrafarming.blog.gov.uk/2022/03/28/monitoring-evaluating-and-learning-in-the-future-farming-and-countryside-programme/>.

We will continue to publish updates and outputs from its evaluations of Farming and Countryside Programme schemes on Gov.UK. Published outputs are cross-cutting (e.g. overall scheme impact) and theme/asset specific (e.g. scheme impacts on soil health).

Regulations and enforcement

11. Can you confirm if you will publish a formal response to the OEP's findings explaining how you will adapt soil protections in the future, including measures to tackle chemical and physical contaminants at source?

Once the OEP's report is published, Defra will carefully consider its contents, including any recommendations, and will publish a formal response in accordance with our statutory requirements. While we are committed to improving soil protections, it would be premature to outline specific responses before a thorough review of the OEP's final report.

Soil remediation and reuse

12. As part of its development of a landfill tax grant scheme, what assessment has been made of: - the potential impact on soil remediation efforts, compared to the overall estimated levels of contaminated soil in England; -

the risks of landfilling soil that could be remediated; - and other factors that are limiting soil remediation efforts and will not be addressed by this grant?

The potential impact on soil remediation efforts, compared to the overall estimated levels of contaminated soil in England:

The Land Remediation Pathfinder Scheme seeks to provide necessary rebate of the unaffordable element of landfill tax for remediation of land affected by contamination. The pathfinder scheme will be supported by a robust evaluation of the process and impact which will help to inform future policy decisions. The evaluation will provide evidence of how well the policy addresses barriers to land remediation as well as the outcomes and impact of the funded projects.

The pathfinder scheme is intending to fund pilot projects covering different environmental contexts, e.g. industrial, urban and coastal. A comparison against national levels of contaminated soil would therefore not be helpful given the relatively limited scope. The pathfinder scheme is intended to inform future policy decisions. If a future roll out of the scheme is considered necessary, then national comparisons may be appropriate.

The risks of landfilling soil that could be remediated:

Under the pathfinder scheme, only the material which cannot be remediated and must be deposited in landfill is able to qualify for the grant. As part of the application process, applicants will be required to explain why landfill is the only reasonable option to dispose of the remaining residual contaminated material after it has been treated to re-use, recycle, or recover as much material as practically possible. This must be evidenced through a Remediation Options Appraisal report carried out in accordance with the guidance in Land Contamination: Risk Management LCRM: Stage 2 by a Competent Person.

Other factors that are limiting soil remediation efforts and will not be addressed by this grant:

The government is aware that landfill tax is not the only factor preventing soil remediation, but it is a significant one. The grant scheme is a pathfinder and an evaluation of it will be undertaken to assess how effective it has been at increasing soil remediation efforts. The evaluation will aid understanding of whether further support is required ahead of a potential longer-term rollout of the scheme, subject to future funding agreements.

Guidance, skills, research and knowledge exchange

13. Is the Government open to funding more on-farm research that can help the agricultural sector understand what soil management techniques work best for soil health in different contexts? Could this be embedded and feed into its ELM schemes?

The government is open to exploring funding for on-farm research to understand soil management techniques and their impact on soil health in different contexts. We

plan to progress more on-farm research subject to a strong spending review settlement for R&D.

We are committed to ensuring that our environmental land management schemes are underpinned by the latest and best evidence. We will continue this cycle of learning and improvement as we develop future iterations of the programmes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "M Spencer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' and a trailing flourish.

Rt Hon Sir Mark Spencer MP