Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
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Neil Parish MP
Chair
Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee
House of Commons,
London, SW1A 0AA

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Dear Neil,

At the EFRA Session on 20th July, you raised your concerns with on-farm biodigesters, which relates to this government's policy on anaerobic digestion. In particular, you were concerned that the promotion of anaerobic digestion could be having a detrimental effect on land use in the UK, given anaerobic digestion plants (including on farm biodigesters) often utilise food crops such as maize to generate energy.

My officials have looked into this issue, and informed me that in 2019, 96 thousand hectares of agricultural land in the UK were used to grow crops for bioenergy. This area represents just over 1.6% of the arable land in the UK. In June 2019, the area of maize being grown for anaerobic digestion was 67 thousand hectares. This equates to 31% of the total maize area in 2019 and 1% of the total arable area.[1]

You suggested that government should look to encourage waste as a preferred feedstock for anaerobic digestion, rather than crops grown on the land. I agree that anaerobic digestion is an effective treatment for organic waste that produces renewable fuel, heat or energy and a nutrient rich by-product, digestate, which can be used as a fertiliser. It represents the best environmental outcome for the treatment of unavoidable food waste, in instances where it cannot be redistributed for human or animal consumption. The Environment Bill will require all local authorities in England to arrange for the weekly collection of food waste for recycling. This must always be collected separately from residual waste and dry recyclable materials so that it can be recycled.

The Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (NDRHI) supported the use of biomass in on-site biogas production (through anaerobic digestion), and the upgrade of this biogas to produce biomethane. From 2018, the NDRHI had a waste feedstock minimum of 50% for all new contracts. This meant that to be eligible for support, at least 50% of the feedstock used in the anaerobic digestion had to be waste. Moreover, the NDRHI was designed to be more economically attractive the more waste utilised.

The NDRHI closed to new applicants in March 2021. The biomethane element will be replaced by the Green Gas Support Scheme (GGSS), due to launch autumn 2021. In line

[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/943264/nonfood-statsnotice2019-10dec20v3.pdf

with the NDRHI, the Green Gas Support Scheme will also mandate biomethane producers to generate at least 50% of their biomethane from waste or residue feedstocks and this threshold will be reviewed mid-way through the scheme, looking to increase it if possible, subject to a number of factors, including the availability of waste.

Although there are many positives to promoting anaerobic digestion to support our work to reach net zero, the government is also working closely with the industry to support best practice to reduce potential impacts on air and water quality. We know that anaerobic digestion is a growing source of ammonia emissions when best practice techniques are not implemented. We also understand that maize, whether grown as food or for energy generation, presents risks for soil damage, erosion and associated run off to water, and is also a relatively poor crop for biodiversity. As such we carefully monitor the extent of maize grown.

In July 2018 we published a code of good agricultural practice which provides guidance for farmers on how to reduce ammonia emissions, and, as you rightly pointed out, the Environment Agency are responsible for enforcing rules on the storage and spreading of digestate in England. Innovation will also be important in this space. As such, in the response to the Green Gas Support Scheme consultation, BEIS have agreed to fund a technoeconomic study into ammonia reduction technology for anaerobic digestion.

Going forward, we recognise the importance of ensuring that we have a sustainable approach to energy generation, including energy generated through anaerobic digestion. In the Government's response to the Climate Change Committee's annual progress report to Parliament in 2020, we announced that we will publish a new Biomass Strategy in 2022. This will review the amount of sustainable biomass that could be available to the UK, and how this resource could be best utilised across the economy to help achieve our net zero greenhouse gas emissions target by 2050. The Strategy will also assess the UK's current biomass sustainability standards, which are some of the most stringent in the world, to see where and how we can improve them even further.

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