



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Committee Office, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

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From the Chair of the Committee

Victoria Prentis MP
Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

14 January 2022

EFRA Committee hearing on Farming Rules for Water

Dear Minister Prentis

On 11 January the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee held an evidence session to discuss the Environment Agency's (EA) interpretation of Farming Rules for Water, rules designed to prevent water pollution from agriculture. We held this session following serious concerns raised by farmers and other that the EA's interpretation was preventing farmers from spreading organic fertiliser in autumn for a spring crop, which would have severe adverse impacts.

There has been, and still is, significant confusion amongst farmers and others about what the rules mean in practice. We recognise that the EA is working on a risk-based basis, where the onus is on farmers to decide what organic fertiliser is appropriate to spread and when. However, there is clearly demand for further guidance that supports farmers, which is more nuanced and recognises the need to take a different approach for different organic fertilisers and soil types. This guidance must also be holistic –considering other water pollutants such as ammonia and phosphorus as well as nitrate pollution, and addressing the impact on air quality, net-zero and soil health. We welcome the fact that the EA is working with stakeholders to produce such guidance in Spring this year, which should provide much needed clarity in time for spring planting.

During the session it became clear that miscommunication was a significant cause of the recent disagreement between the sector and the regulator. We are grateful to the Environment Agency for candidly acknowledging that its communication effort could have been better and for committing to improving this in the future.

Witnesses were particularly focused on the impact the regulation is having on soil health. During the session we heard strong evidence linking a higher level of organic matter in soil to water storage, flood mitigation, climate regulation, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and crop fertility. We therefore ask that the Government and the EA review the interaction between the farming rules for water and the Suitable Farming Incentive, to ensure that farmers are properly incentivised to protect soil health while preventing water pollution. In the long term, we ask Defra to consider refreshing its Soil Strategy, which is currently over a decade old.



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Overall, we were encouraged by the tone of the session and the fact that all sides agreed that the situation has moved on and improved since we wrote to the Agency in October. We would like to recognise the Environment Agency's openness and willingness to put right this confusion as well as the strong recognition from industry that water pollution from agriculture is a serious issue that must be addressed. There is a shared desire between industry and the Agency to find a solution which will limit water pollution from agriculture, while allowing for sensible use of a natural bio-resource.

I'm copying this letter to TFA, Water UK, the EA, and ask that it is shared with the Defra led working group that is leading on the new regulations.

Yours Sincerely

Neil Parish MP
Chair of the Committee