Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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Neil Parish MP
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24th January 2021

Dear Neil,

Thank you for your letter of 14 January 2022 following the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee hearing on Farming Rules for Water (FRfW). Once again, I am grateful for the interest and time you and the Committee have dedicated to gathering a wide range of evidence on the Farming Rules for Water regulations and the concerns that have been raised about them.

As you will be aware, I agree with your concerns about the confusion the sector has reported on the meaning of the FRfW, specifically Rule 1, and with the need for further guidance to help farmers and land managers reduce pollution while making best use of organic matter. I also share your optimism following the EFRA Committee sessions on this issue that real progress is being made towards developing a solution that fairly accounts for all perspectives.

It is too early to comment further on the contents of this guidance, but I can confirm two things. Firstly, that the guidance will reflect the need for a holistic risk-based approach, providing greater clarity on what farming practices are and are not acceptable. This will include recognition of the importance of promoting soil health and the risk of causing pollution swapping that has no net environmental benefit. Secondly, the collaborative work of the Industry Guidance Group is well underway to fulfil its brief to provide feedback and supporting evidence on the current issues, and the objectives and details of the further guidance being developed.

I also note your wider concerns about soil health in addition to its careful consideration in the new guidance. I can confirm that we are continuing to review how our regulatory approaches align with the new schemes we are delivering, such as the Sustainable Farm Incentive, to deliver a coherent and complementary package of policies to improve soil health at the same time as reducing pollution.

In response to your request for Defra to consider refreshing its Soil Strategy, we are currently developing a Soil Health Action Plan for England. The Action Plan will deliver a coherent plan for soil health by providing a single, strategic approach to multiple

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measures, identifying the need for intervention, evidencing impacts of current and emerging land management actions, and driving improved soil health across England. It will ensure a strategic vision is taken to improve soil health (for all soil types and land uses) by considering the numerous biological, chemical, and physical attributes of soil. It will also set out a natural capital approach that focuses on preventing soil degradation and improving soil health, such as by increasing soil organic matter and improving soil structure. We currently plan to consult on the framework in the Spring, with the intention of publishing the Plan in 2023.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the urgency with which the department and I, and the Environment Agency, are working to address concerns around the FRfW regulations so that we can provide farmers with the clarity they need to successfully plan for the year ahead.

Yours sincerely,



VICTORIA PRENTIS MP

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