

Additional written evidence submitted by the National Farmers' Union (NFU)

Dear Chair

It was good to see you last month as part of the EAC's inquiry into air quality targets and I was grateful for the opportunity to give evidence on behalf of the NFU. Given that our session was cut short by parliamentary business, I wanted to follow up on a few points that we were unfortunately unable to cover; in particular the ongoing efforts of British farmers to reduce ammonia emissions.

Since 1990, emissions from livestock sectors have remained stable or fallen and emissions from fertilisers have halved. Yet, I must stress that there is still much to be done. In theory, the Government's targets on ammonia reductions are indeed ambitious enough to make a difference. However, the focus must be on the relevant support available to assist farmers in delivering these ambitions.

This will require significant support from Defra, the Environment Agency and Natural England in the form of funding and advice. We are conscious that agriculture is the largest source of ammonia (87%) and contributes to PM2.5 through chemical reactions in the atmosphere. The agricultural sector is therefore working relentlessly to minimise emissions of ammonia through industry-led action, adoption of best practice and investment in significant infrastructure to reduce emissions.

Case in point, from April 2024, the Red Tractor industry assurance scheme will implement 'Option 4' within its standard, requiring the application of uninhibited or untreated urea-based fertiliser to be undertaken exclusively between 14 January and 1 April each year. This marks the next step in delivering on the industry-wide commitment to voluntarily reduce ammonia emissions in England by 11.2KT by 2025 while saving the industry £13.8 million annually.

However, there remain significant challenges to overcome to ensure the Government's ambitions can be achieved. While many will naturally exceed regulatory compliance or have a personal interest in environmental improvement, such activities are rarely rewarded by the marketplace. It is the view of the NFU that government assistance through support schemes and guidance will be vital to ensure continued improvements especially where such investment does not equate to improved productive output. I believe this will open pathways for Defra to take supportive action through the 'public money for public goods' framework and support the industry in reaching the targets set within the Clean Air Strategy and Environmental Improvement Plan.

The huge oversubscription of the opening round of the Slurry Infrastructure Grant (SIG) is testimony to the appetite of farmers to reduce their ammonia emissions and improve their nutrient resource management. While I welcome the recent increase in the SIG budget, only 374 of the over 1200 approved applications were progressed to the full application stage. As such, the NFU would like to see the Committee's report recommend a continued expansion of the SIG scheme to satisfy demand.

As I know you will be aware, the planning system can be painstakingly difficult for farmers to navigate when seeking to reduce ammonia emissions by improving existing infrastructure or investing in new, more efficient buildings. Frustratingly for our members, development proposals that could otherwise have brought about positive environmental improvements on farm are being unjustly refused on the grounds it is impossible to empirically prove they will not have an acceptable level or no impact or cause harm to a protected site.

We would therefore like to see Defra and wider Government do more to resolve these contradictions within the planning system. Moving forward, industry, local authorities and Government bodies such as Natural England would benefit from the development of broader betterment guidance for LPAs that recognises the value of infrastructure improvements in reducing on farm emissions. This would reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on LPAs and agricultural businesses by:

- Providing clear guidance on the bearing of ammonia emissions on planning applications - improving the ability of agriculture to meet various commitments (whether regulatory or to meet net zero) and reducing the potential for impact upon the environment.
- Informing and reassuring LPAs of the positive work farming businesses are already undertaking.

Rest assured, the NFU will continue to identify solutions to reduce ammonia emissions and is actively engaging with Defra and Government in the development of policy to assist in the mitigation of emission potential. I look forward to reading the Committee's report and hope this inquiry can serve as a catalyst for greater support for farmers' efforts to improve air quality.

Yours sincerely

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Deputy President

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