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19 November 2009

From the Secretary of State
The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP

D Tessa

Thank you for your letter of 9 November enclosing a copy of an email you have received from a number of your constituents about the environmental impacts of meat and dairy farming.

The impacts of the livestock sector are complex and varied. While it is responsible for significant levels of greenhouse gas emissions, sustainable agricultural practices can also provide many positive opportunities for environmental and social benefits worldwide. It is important that each type of husbandry continues to maximise the benefits it delivers and minimise the negative impacts, and that consumers can make informed choices.

In support of this, the Government is doing a number of things. We are working directly with the agricultural sector to raise awareness and encourage behavioural change, for example through our Rural Climate Change Forum. We are building greater awareness of climate change among farmers, primarily through our *Farming Futures* communications project. Additionally, we are promoting the uptake of anaerobic digestion by farmers, businesses and local authorities, and announced additional funding of £10 million for anaerobic digestion and waste infrastructure in the 2009 Budget. Further to this, we have worked closely with the dairy sector to produce a Dairy Roadmap to develop opportunities to mitigate climate change impacts and assess the positive benefits of cattle husbandry to the landscape and biodiversity. A Beef and Lamb Roadmap is also currently being developed by the industry with Defra support and the newly formed Pig Meat Supply Chain Task Force will work with the industry's Pig Environment Partnership to deliver similar outcomes for the pig sector.

We are seeking to influence the policies of other nations and international organisations towards addressing climate change in agriculture, forestry and land management, and to promote sustainable agriculture more broadly, working both bilaterally and with our international partners. Our work is supported by a strong Farming and Food Science Programme, which includes a specific programme of research on agriculture and climate

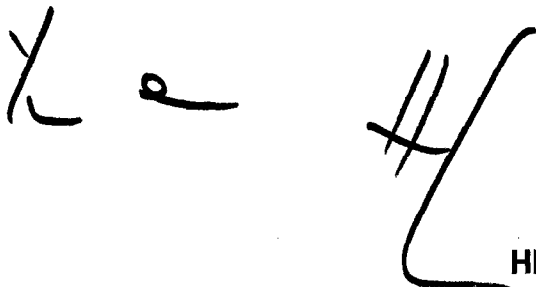
change (around £5 million per year), focusing on how to measure and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture and how climate change will impact on UK agriculture.

With issues such as soy grown for animal feed, it is important to assess the impact of the substitution of one system or crop with another before drawing conclusions about the desirability of changing land use. Defra is therefore currently co-funding a number of ongoing research projects in conjunction with industry (through the Government's LINK programme) to look at alternative home-grown protein-rich animal feed crops, such as lupin, and assess the impact of such alternatives for the environment and the livestock industry. For example, we are funding a LINK project to look at the sustainability of UK pig production by reducing producers' reliance on soya and rapeseed meal.

We share your constituents' concerns about the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which needs radical reform if farmers are to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. We set out our Vision in 2005, which can be found at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/policy/capreform/documents/vision-for-cap.pdf>. Our long-term vision is for a CAP that rewards farmers for the delivery of specific societal benefits that the market cannot otherwise provide. By 2015 – 2020, Pillar 1 should be abolished through a carefully managed transition, enabling farmers to plan. Instead, there should be a central, rather than a peripheral, role for CAP measures targeted on protection and enhancement of the rural environment. There are already schemes in Pillar 2 of CAP which are specifically designed to encourage farmers to adopt environmentally beneficial land management practices and there are signs that progress is being made. Such targeted programmes need to be continued and strengthened as the CAP is reformed.

With regard to the establishment of an independent supermarket watchdog, we are grateful to the Competition Commission for their work on this important issue. The establishment of an Ombudsman raises a number of complex and important issues for the grocery market and also to consumers and the wider economy. We will study the Commission's findings and recommendation carefully before reaching a decision. We are committed to fostering competitive markets, enabling businesses to compete freely and fairly, giving UK consumers more choice and better value. However, we are equally committed to ensuring that supermarkets recognise that in the long run it is in their interests, and their customers' interests, to have a sustainable UK-based supply chain. Defra will play an active role in determining the government's response, taking full account of the views of our food and farming stakeholders across the whole supply chain.

I hope this letter reassures your constituents and shows that we share their concerns over the impact of livestock and other forms of agricultural production on the environment and welcome a debate based on sound evidence. The challenge to us all is how to feed a rapidly growing world population in a more sustainable way to minimise the impact of food production in total on the environment.



HILARY BENN