

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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Government response to the Committee's report into Farm Regulation Taskforce

I write on behalf of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee following our consideration of the Government's response to our report on the Farm Regulation Taskforce.

We welcome the Government's positive response to the Committee's recommendation on enshrining a non-regulatory approach within the policy-making process and its commitment to voluntary and outcome-based approaches.

However, we do not think that the Government response provides a sufficiently detailed response to our recommendations and we request further information on a number of points.

We recommended that Defra's response to our report should set out the policy areas where it considers increased responsibility-sharing is appropriate. However, although reference is made to the new Animal Health and Welfare Board as an example, the response fails to set out the policy areas where increased responsibility-sharing is appropriate. We expect the Committee's recommendation to be fully addressed in the Government's final response to the Task Force.

We are pleased that the Government has accepted the tenor of the Task Force's recommendations on using earned recognition to better target inspections. However, we ask the department to respond to our concerns about the implications for small farms of instituting a system of earned recognition.

We are disappointed that the Government's response has not provided the commitments the Committee sought on gold-plating and engagement with the European Union. We request that the department commits to publishing its review of gold-plating of EU regulations, which the Government response states is being conducted as part of the One-In One-Out Process. While the Government response recognises the need to carefully

evaluate EU regulatory proposals and establish a sound evidence base, it has not responded to our concern that staff numbers are inadequate to deliver this increased level of engagement. We request that the department provide its analysis of the effect of redundancies at the department on staffing of EU-facing policy teams. The Government response refers to the requirement for Ministers to report to the Foreign Secretary on early influencing priorities and engagement strategies. The Committee would be grateful if the department could provide it with Defra's reports to the Foreign Secretary on these matters.

We recommended that Defra's initial response sets out the Strategic Regulatory Scrutiny Panel's terms of engagement with Defra to clarify how it will hold Ministers to account for their implementation of this report (paragraph 56). Defra's Interim Response to the Farming Regulation Taskforce did not set out the Panel's powers or how it would hold the Government to account. The Committee would be grateful if the department could provide a clearer statement of the powers and role of the Strategic Regulatory Scrutiny Panel by the time of publication of its final response to the Farming Regulation Taskforce. We re-iterate our view that it would be appropriate for Ministers to have to justify why they have not followed the recommendations of the Scrutiny Panel.

The Committee recommended enhancing the procedures for Parliamentary scrutiny. We are disappointed that the Government response merely states that the recommendation is not addressed to Defra – as a response on behalf of the Government as a whole the Committee would have expected Defra to have liaised with the Leader of the House on this issue.

Our report highlighted the importance of prompt implementation of the Task Force's recommendations in order not to miss this window of opportunity to transform Defra's approach (paragraph 57). The commitment to an outcome-based approach should apply within Defra's too – undertaking a review of regulation is not enough without practical action. We regretfully note that, despite the passage of five months between the publication of the Task Force's report and Defra's Interim Response, there are few examples of where recommendations on regulations directly affecting farming businesses have been implemented. We look forward to the action plan published with Defra's final report and trust that this will lead to the swift implementation of the Task Force's recommendations wherever possible.

We look forward to the Government's fuller response to the Task Force early next year and expect to review Defra's success in eliminating unnecessary regulatory burdens once this response has been published.

Miss Anne McIntosh MP
Chair