BULGARIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION - PRIORITIES FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES

I am writing to provide you with an overview of Bulgaria’s EU Council Presidency priorities, in terms of Defra’s Council business. The overview is attached to this letter as Annex A. Bulgaria took over the rotating six month Presidency of the Council of EU Ministers from Estonia on 1 January, and will run until 30 June. Bulgaria forms an EU Presidency trio with Estonia and Austria, which will run until the end of this year.

Should your Committee be interested in further information on the priorities for this Presidency, I and my officials would be happy to assist with an informal briefing session.

I am writing in similar terms to the Chairs of the Commons and Lords Scrutiny Committees.

I hope that this is helpful.

With every good wish,

Michael Gove
Annex A

Council Arrangements

There are, provisionally, two Environment Councils and six Agriculture and Fisheries Councils scheduled to take place during the Bulgarian Presidency.

Environment Councils are provisionally scheduled for 5 March in Brussels and 25 June in Luxembourg. An informal meeting of Environment Ministers is scheduled for 10-11 April in Sofia.

Agriculture and Fisheries Councils are provisionally scheduled for 29 January, 19 February, 19 March and 14 May in Brussels and 16-17 April and 18-19 June in Luxembourg. An informal meeting of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers is scheduled for 3 June in Sofia.

Environment Councils

The following information is based on provisional agendas, and only refers to items that have a Defra focus.

5 March

We anticipate an exchange of views on the Greening of the European Semester and the delivery of the Circular Economy Action Plan with a focus on i) the recently published EU strategy on plastics, ii) the interface between chemicals, products and waste legislation and iii) the monitoring framework for the circular economy.

25 June

The June Council is likely to have a policy debate on proposals for the revision of the EU Drinking Water Directive and a proposal to reduce CO2 emissions from light duty vehicles (first reading). In addition, a policy debate is expected on the review of the EU adaptation strategy and the adoption of draft Council conclusions on the follow-up to the Circular Economy Action Plan (particularly the EU strategy on plastics/chemicals, products and waste interface). Under any other business the Bulgarian Presidency is expected to update on the state of play of current legislative proposals, as well as on the Work Programme of the incoming Austrian Presidency.

Key Environment Dossiers

The core environment priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency will be the circular economy and eco-innovation, with other areas of focus being air quality and better regulation. On the Circular Economy/Waste Package we anticipate that there will be a vote on the provisional agreement at a forthcoming Council.

On the delivery and follow-up to the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Presidency will hold an exchange of views at March Environment Council on three documents: the Commission's recently published (16 January) Communication on a European Strategy on Plastics; Communication on the Interface between Chemicals, Products and Waste; and a
monitoring framework on the circular economy. The Presidency will aim for the adoption of draft Council conclusions on these at the June Environment Council.

The Presidency will also begin work on a fitness check for EU chemical legislation (REACH) and set out new proposals for the Regulation of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). Proposals for a revision of the Drinking Water Directive will be issued later this month whilst proposals to deal with waste water reuse will follow shortly after.

Air quality will be addressed by the Bulgarians as part of their focus on eco innovation. As such, the Presidency, together with the Commission, will be holding the 21st European Forum on Eco-Innovation on 5/6 February in Sofia, with air quality the main focus. Air quality will also be the focus of their Informal Meeting of Environment Ministers in April. Improving air quality is a top priority for the UK, and we will continue to actively engage with our European partners such as Germany, France, Spain and Italy to tackle air pollution.

The Presidency also hopes to find political agreement with the European Parliament on CO2 emissions for new Heavy Duty Vehicles, with Working Groups to begin examining the proposed Regulation shortly. A policy debate is expected at the June Environment Council.

**Agriculture and Fisheries Councils**

As for Environment Councils, the following information is based on provisional agendas, and refers only to items within my Department’s remit.

29 January

At the January Council, the Presidency is expected to introduce its work programme for the remainder of its term. Council will exchange views on the European Commission's communication entitled 'The Future of Food and Farming', which sets out initial thinking on the Common Agricultural Policy after 2020. The European Commission is expected to provide information on the situation in EU agricultural markets, and an update on trade-related agricultural issues.

19 February

In February, Council is provisionally scheduled to continue its discussion on 'The Future of Food and Farming'. The European Commission is expected to present a road map for the development of an EU Protein Strategy.

19 March

In March, Council is provisionally scheduled to discuss a multi-annual plan for demersal species in the Western Mediterranean Sea.

On agriculture, Council is again provisionally scheduled to discuss 'The Future of Food and Farming'. The European Commission is expected to inform Council of progress in strengthening farmers’ position in the food supply chain and tackling unfair trading practices, and provide a further update on trade-related agricultural issues.
16-17 April

In April, Council is provisionally scheduled to discuss ‘The Future of Food and Farming’. The European Commission is expected to update Council on progress made in tackling food loss and food waste, following Council conclusions reached in June 2016.

14 May

In May, Council is again provisionally scheduled to discuss ‘The Future of Food and Farming’. There will likely be an exchange of views on a proposal to improve the EU food supply chain. The European Commission is expected to update Council on the situation in EU agriculture markets.

18-19 June

On fisheries, it is expected that Council will discuss a communication from the European Commission outlining initial thinking on 2019 fishing opportunities. The European Commission is provisionally scheduled to present a proposal for ensuring compliance with the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy.

On agriculture, Council is again provisionally scheduled to discuss ‘The Future of Food and Farming’.

Key Agriculture, Fisheries, Animal and Plant Health Dossiers

On agricultural matters, the principle file for this Presidency to progress is a new Spirit Drinks Regulation, on which the Presidency will aim to achieve a Council General Approach. The UK will continue to support smooth progress on this Regulation, which will notably cover whisky. We hope for a conclusion to the Regulation, which must be negotiated with the European Parliament, by the end of this year.

The Presidency will facilitate a thematic debate on the initial thinking for the Common Agricultural Policy after 2020, following the European Commission’s communication ‘The Future of Food and Farming’. While the UK will not participate in the negotiation of the next round of the Common Agricultural Policy, my officials will share ideas on the common challenges farmers across Europe are facing, and take note of the thematic debate with interest. The Presidency will also continue discussions in Council on tackling unfair trading practices in agricultural supply chains and on dual quality foodstuffs.

On fisheries, the priority dossier for the Bulgarian Presidency is a multi-annual plan for North West Waters. A proposal is due in January, and it is expected that Ministers will discuss the proposal at the March Agriculture and Fisheries Council. The Presidency will also look to progress trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament on technical measures, expected to commence in March.

On veterinary matters, the Presidency is expected to progress two files, on Medicated Feeds and Veterinary Medicinal Products, via trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament. A Council position on Medicated Feeds was agreed in December, and trilogue negotiations are expected to commence in January. The Presidency is expected to raise a number of animal health issues for discussion, including a conference planned for April on animal welfare in transport.