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Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee
House of Commons
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Des Neil

ROMANIAN 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 Romania’s EU Council Presidency priorities, in terms of Defra’s Council business. The overview is attached to this letter (Annex A).

Romania took over the rotating six month Presidency from Austria on 1 January 2019, and its term runs until 30 June 2019. It is the first time that Romania has held a Council Presidency since its EU accession. It is also the first Presidency of the new trio, consisting of Romania, Finland and Croatia.

The Presidency will be important to us for many reasons. This Presidency spans the UK’s exit from the EU and many of the files that will be agreed in the first three months will be relevant to us in the implementation period. Given that elections to the European Parliament are due to take place in May, it is expected that work on live legislative files will progress at speed until the end of March.

Should your Committee be interested in further information on the priorities for this Presidency, my officials and I 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, and copying my letter to the Clerks of both Committees.

I hope that this is helpful.

With every good wish,

Michael Gove
Annex A

Council Arrangements

There are two Environment Councils and five Agriculture and Fisheries Councils scheduled to take place during the Romanian Presidency.

Environment Councils are scheduled for 5 March in Brussels and 26 June in Luxembourg. An informal meeting of Environment Ministers is scheduled for 20-21 May in Bucharest. Given the UK’s departure from the EU on 29 March, we will only be attending the first Environment Council. The Romanian Presidency has yet to decide whether the UK will be invited to its Informal Environment Council meeting.

The first Agriculture and Fisheries Council of Romania’s Presidency took place on 28 January in Brussels. Further Councils are scheduled for 18 March in Brussels, 15 and 16 April in Luxembourg, 14 May in Brussels, and 18 June in Luxembourg. An informal meeting of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers is scheduled for 3-4 June in Bucharest. The UK will only attend the first two Agriculture and Fisheries Council in January and March given our departure from the EU. It is to be confirmed whether the UK will be invited to the Informal Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting.

Environment Councils

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

5 March

At March Environment Council we anticipate the main Defra business to be a policy debate on the Regulation on water re-use. The Presidency may seek to table a general approach on the recast of the Drinking Water Directive, together with an exchange of views on Greening the European Semester and a policy debate on The European Union Framework on endocrine disruptors.

26 June

General Approaches may be sought at June Council on the Regulation on water re-use, and if not secured for March Council, the recast of the Drinking Water Directive. There may also be a possible exchange of views on the Commission’s Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) initiative.

Key Environment Dossiers

The Romanian Presidency is the first of the new trio (Romania, Finland, and Croatia) covering the next 18 months, and their priorities will broadly coalesce around issues of climate, biodiversity and sustainable water use.
The Presidency aims to reach significant progress on ongoing legislative files by mid-February ahead of the European Parliament election recess. They are prioritising sustainable water use and aim to secure General Approaches on both the Water Reuse Regulation and the recast of the Drinking Water Directive. On chemicals legislation they aim to rapidly conclude the negotiations with the European Parliament on the Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) Regulation, to start the policy debate on the new proposed approach for managing Endocrine Disrupters, and to consider the findings of the Regulatory Fitness Performance (REFIT) review of EU chemicals legislation – excluding REACH which is due at the end of February.

Agriculture and Fisheries Councils

The following information is based on provisional agendas and refers only to items within my Department's remit.

28 January

At January Council, the Presidency presented its political priorities and work programme. Ministers also discussed the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post-2020 reform package and held a policy debate on the report on the development of the Commission’s Protein Plan.

A number of AOB items were also debated, including the establishment of an International Centre for Antimicrobial Resistance Solutions (ICARS), the outcome of the ministerial conference on the eradication of African Swine Fever (ASF) in December, the state of play on the dual quality of foods, and Rural Development and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

18 March

In March, it is expected that Council will exchange views on the CAP post-2020 legislative proposals. Further items that are scheduled to be discussed are the Bioeconomy and Task Force Rural Africa (TFRA). Under any other business, Ministers will likely be updated by the European Commission and the Presidency on the outcome of the workshops on water and agriculture, organised by the Task Force on Water.

15-16 April

At AgriFish Council in April, it is anticipated that the debate on the CAP post-2020 legislative proposals will continue. It is expected that Ministers will also exchange views from an agricultural perspective on ‘a Clean Planet for all: a strategic long-term vision for a climate neutral economy’. Ministers will most likely also exchange views on the market situation, including possible initiatives on market transparency. Under any other business, it is foreseen that Council will be informed by the Presidency on research and agriculture.
14 May

In May, it is foreseen that Council will hold another policy debate on the CAP post-2020 reform package. Ministers are also expected to exchange views on trade-related agricultural policies. It is likely that the state of play on the Protein Plan will be tabled as an AOB item.

18 June

At June Council, it is expected that Ministers will aim to adopt a partial general approach on the CAP post-2020 legislative proposals.

On fisheries, it is anticipated that Ministers will adopt the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Regulation (EU) No 508/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council. It is expected that an exchange of views on the Communication from the Commission on the state of play of the Common Fisheries Policy and consultation on the fishing opportunities for 2020 will also take place. Under any other business, it is likely that Council will be informed about the state of play on the Protein Plan and the G20 Agriculture Ministerial meeting.

Key Agriculture, Fisheries, Animal and Plant Health Dossiers

Agriculture

The Romanian Presidency is taking over two legislative files that are due to be finalised: the Spirit Drinks Regulation and the Directive on Unfair Trading Practices in the Food Supply Chain. During the Austrian Presidency agreement was reached at trilogue for both files and they are expected to be in force before the European Parliament election in May.

As regards the third legislative file that the Presidency is taking over – the CAP post-2020 reform package comprising three Regulations – substantive negotiations will continue. The Presidency will be producing new texts on the Delivery Model, Indicators, Rural Development, Greening, and Interventions, aiming to reach a partial general approach at June Council.

The Presidency will also put focus on a number of non-legislative items, including the Protein Plan following the Commission document and conference in November 2018. Bioeconomy will be another key item as well as linked research and innovation measures which will also be subject of Informal Council. Further topics to be followed up include market information and international trade updates, accompanied by the progress of the Commission’s Task Force Rural Africa.
Fisheries

On fisheries, the Presidency has committed to make progress in all areas of outstanding business. These include the transposition of Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation measures, the Western Mediterranean Multi-Annual Plan and Mediterranean swordfish recovery plan. These are, however, of minor importance to the UK.

The UK will be investing most effort in making progress with Romania, Finland (the next Presidency) and the Commission on how the UK will be consulted on files and 2020 fishing opportunities once we have left the EU, and the Fisheries Working Party at the end of March.

Veterinary

The Romanian Presidency have no live veterinary files, and residual work on implementing and delegated acts from the Medicated Feed and Veterinary Medicinal Products files is being managed by the Commission through expert level groups.

The Romanians plan to hold a conference on transboundary animal diseases and animal welfare during sea transport in Bucharest in June and a conference on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in Brussels in March. The Romanians are keen to emphasise the importance of the One Health approach to tackling AMR. Whilst ASF is not a named priority it is an ongoing concern to member states and the Commission and it is likely to appear on Council agendas over the next 6 months.

Food safety

The General Food Law proposal, which aims to introduce greater transparency in the EU risk assessment process and improve risk communication, is a priority for the Romania Presidency. The Presidency has put forward an ambitious timetable which foresees the trilogue stage concluding by mid-February 2019.