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"A Vision for the Common Agricultural Policy"

A report by HM Treasury and Defra

A submission to the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Executive Summary

1. The joint Treasury-Defra report rightly sets out the costly failings of the current CAP but it appears to lack a proper appreciation of the link between farming and farmland wildlife. Without farming the quality of our countryside, and the biodiversity it supports, would dramatically deteriorate.
2. The Government's attitude to CAP reform should be informed by a better understanding of the relationship between farming and the environment. The environmental consequences of the report's proposals are poorly understood and may be counter-productive. Support should be targeted at retaining land in good agricultural and environmental condition, and where land management supports wildlife. We have a number of suggestions as to how the CAP could be improved.

Farming, the countryside and the environment

3. The Treasury-Defra report is right to point out that some aspects of today's more intensive farming methods, promoted by the CAP and long deplored by the Game Conservancy Trust, have damaged bio-diversity in the UK among other adverse effects on the environment. However, in pursuing that argument it is all too easy to overlook the essential point that much of our wildlife actually depends on farming.
4. Farming has not only shaped our landscape but it has engendered and sustained the UK's biodiversity. Over the several thousand years that Britain's agriculture has been dominated by growing cereals and raising livestock, our unique flora and fauna has become adapted to it. The current breadth of species in our countryside is to a very large extent dependent on agriculture for its survival.
5. For example, many flowers like poppy, corn cockle, corn marigold and cornflower depend on annual cultivations, while others in hay meadows and pastures like clovers, vetches, trefoils and fritillaries depend on grazing and periodic mowing. Mammals like the brown hare and the

harvest mouse live in farmers' fields, as do birds like partridge, skylark, corn bunting and field fare. The report illustrates the impact the CAP has had on some of these by highlighting the decline in farmland birds since the 1970s. However, it fails to point out that many of these species would be in far greater decline if cereal farming were to be much reduced.

6. The report states that "European Agricultureshould berewarded by the market for its outputs, not least safe and good quality food, and by the tax payer only for producing societal benefits that the market cannot deliver". Given the intrinsic link between farming and farmland wildlife we question whether the two can be divorced to the extent the report seems to believe. If farmers operating "without reliance on subsidy or protection" fail to be internationally competitive, they will cease to farm. Admittedly the 2003 CAP reform seeks to prevent that land becoming wholly abandoned, reverting initially to scrub, and then woodland, by stating that "Member States shall ensure that all agricultural land, especially land which is no longer used for production purposes, is maintained in good agricultural and environmental condition". By this they mean that land that is out of production should be kept in such a condition that it could rapidly be restored to production. We would question whether large scale non-production can mean "good condition" from a wildlife and farmland bird viewpoint.
7. In "*The future of food and farming*", Sir Donald Curry recognised that the environment was something the taxpayer would be prepared to pay for. He recommended the development of a "broad and shallow" agri-environment scheme that could be adopted by most farmers. This idea has been adopted by Defra and the new Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) scheme was launched last year. It promises to be the best conservation initiative on farmland since the war. However, the logic of the Treasury-Defra proposals would involve dismantling the existing ELS scheme, which is predicated on the fact that the land is already being farmed.
8. It would be helpful if the statement in the report could be clarified: "EU spending on agriculture would be based on the current Pillar II and would support these objectives as appropriate, allowing a considerable reduction in total spending by the EU on agriculture". Is the report suggesting that EU spending on agriculture should be reduced to Current Pillar II (Euro 7 billion) or that Pillar II spending should increase to "support these objectives as appropriate"?
9. In particular, we believe that future agricultural policy should be based on two objectives: (1) support for land management that retains land in good agricultural and environmental conditions, and (2) ensuring that land is managed in a way that supports wildlife (which may mean that a considerable proportion of it has to be actively farmed). We think the recent 2003 CAP reform, as implemented in England, comes very close to doing just that.

10. However, there is room for improvement, and we would suggest the following:
- Correcting some unfairness that is presently built into cross compliance (particularly 2 m field margins) which penalises small traditionally-run farms more than large intensive ones
 - Allowing for greater rewards within the current ELS Scheme so that high value conservation options are taken up on a wider scale
 - Re-configuring set-aside so that it only refers to genuine conservation land
 - More comprehensive cross-compliance rules to reduce soil erosion, diffuse pollution and to improve soil organic matter content.

Teresa Dent & Dr Stephen Tapper, 26th January 2006