

Environment, Planning and Countryside Committee – 23rd March 2006

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Report from the Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside

A. Actions from Previous Meetings

1. Dairy Strategy Review

During the last Committee meeting Members asked for an update on the Dairy Strategy Review.

In 2005, the Dairy Strategy Group for Wales commissioned a review of the Welsh Dairy Sector. The research undertaken by the consultants included an in-depth questionnaire sent to all dairy farmers in Wales (22% returned); interviews with 15 main processors plus two not currently operating in Wales; and interviews with other key stakeholders associated with the dairy industry in Wales.

The Dairy Strategy group is due to meet in early April to agree the final version of the Dairy Strategy Review. I will see this document shortly after that and will report back on its findings to the Committee.

2. Tir Mynydd Consultation

On 11 January 2006 I launched a consultation on options for Tir Mynydd in 2007 and 2008 only. The consultation deliberately did not cover the post 2008 position given that the Welsh Assembly Government intends to review the Rural Development Plan (RDP) axis II measures when we are able to take informed decisions about the impact of CAP reform.

Over 400 copies of the consultation paper were sent out, several copies were despatched by e-mail and the document was also available on the Assembly's website.

The closing date for comment was Friday 10 March 2006 and by Monday 13 March 2006 over 45 responses had been received. These are now being analysed and a detailed summary will be produced which I shall circulate to the Committee for the meeting on 24 May 2006.

3. Welsh Development Agency Property Strategy

As highlighted at the Committee meeting on 16 February 2006, issues relating to the Welsh

Development Agency (WDA) are properly a matter for the Minister for Economic Development and Transport and the Economic Development and Transport Committee to consider.

I have been advised that issues relating to the sale of the Agency's property and the implications for the Mid Wales economy were discussed by the Economic Development and Transport Committee at its meeting held in Newtown on 26 May 2005. At that meeting the Committee resolved to consider the issues and the WDA's Property Strategy in more detail and the subject has been scheduled in its summer work programme. I will therefore provide a note to this Committee following their scrutiny of the matter.

4. Targeting of Tir Gofal

Officials from my Department and Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) are looking at the feasibility of targeting Tir Gofal. It is too early to come to any conclusions but any firm proposals would of course be brought to the Committee.

B. Other Issues

5. Countryside Council for Wales Headquarters

My officials and I have been working closely with the CCW to address their headquarters accommodation problems in Bangor (their HQ offices are based on a split site at Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor and some of the buildings are in a poor condition).

An independent value for money study and sustainability appraisal of the possible options has been undertaken, including the possible relocation of all CCW headquarters staff onto a new site.

The study came out strongly in favour of the CCW exploring with their current landlords to see if a solution can be found whereby all headquarters staff could be co-located to CCW's existing premises at Maes y Ffynnon, Bangor. I favour this option, not least on the grounds of sustainability and value for money - and work is now in progress to fully assess the feasibility of this.

6. National Park Appointments

Members will wish to know that interviews were held in January 2006 to fill six vacancies on the three Welsh National Park Authorities. Two vacancies in the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, one in the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority and three in the Snowdonia National Park Authority.

A subsequent vacancy has arisen on the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, and I have now agreed to the appointment of Mr Martin Buckle, Mrs Julie James and Ms Jacqueline Charlton to the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority for three year terms beginning on 1 April 2006.

Dr Ruth Williams has been appointed to the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority for three

years with effect from 1 April 2006 and I have agreed the appointment of Mr Geraint George and Mr Peter Weston from 1 March 2006 for three years and IoIo ap Gwyn for three years from 1 April 2006 to the Snowdonia National Park Authority.

7. Regulating the use of motorised vehicle driving off road in the countryside

I have recently published new guidance on practical measures to assist enforcement action against off-roaders in the countryside. I have written to the Chief Executives of local highway authorities and the Chief Constables to commend the guidance.

The information note has been developed in conjunction with DEFRA, and the document highlights the powers available to local authorities and the police, as well as examples of how motorised vehicles groups can work proactively with the police and local authorities to tackle illegal off roading.

I am very concerned about the problems illegal off-roading is causing in parts of Wales. I firmly believe that practical steps such as those illustrated in the guidance are needed, both to get the most out of the existing legislation and to effectively tackle irresponsible and illegal off road driving.

The guidance includes a number of case studies from Wales including the Safer Swansea Partnership, the Wales off-road motorcycling steering group (facilitated by Forestry Commission and CCW) and measure being taken by Brecon Beacons National Park Authority to deal with illegal off-roading.

Link to the guidance. <http://www.countryside.wales.gov.uk/fe/master.asp?n1=366&n2=679&n3=211#motor>

8. Sustainable Development

I would like to update the Committee on progress of Sustainable Development projects:

- With the assistance of the Wales Fair Trade Forum, the Welsh Assembly Government has produced a leaflet Being World Aware to support Fair Trade fortnight. It tells consumers 10 ways they can "change the world at the checkout".
- A joint Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) / Welsh Assembly Government event aimed at local authority Leaders and Chief Executives took place on 3rd March 2006, with the Minister for Local Government and Public Services and Jonathon Porritt (Chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission).
- The Sustainable Development Commission's Celtic Nations Conference took place in Cardiff on 15th March 2006 at the MacDonald Holland House Hotel.
- The Welsh Assembly Government is being assessed this month against the Green Dragon level 5 standard for environmental management of the Cathays Park buildings.
- Work on indicators is proceeding, to the timetable outlined in last month's report.

9. National Fallen Stock Scheme

With the onset of the lambing season, reports of the service provided by collectors within the National Fallen Stock Scheme have been favourable with no complaints recorded to date.

There have been no reported delays in collections, and currently collections are taking place within 1.16 days.

Collections so far this year are 50% up on the number of collections this time last year and are already in excess of the peak hit in March last year.

The National Fallen Stock Company and Assembly Officials are monitoring the situation closely, particularly in North Wales to ensure the best service possible is provided.

10. BSE: Cattle slaughtered under the testing regime - update

The Pembrokeshire Meat Company, Withybush, Haverfordwest has become the second plant in Wales that has been approved to process Over Thirty Months (OTM) cattle. It joins Caernarfon Abattoir as the only other abattoir in Wales approved under the BSE testing regime.

There have been no positive cases to date.

11. Animal Welfare Bill – Report Stage and Third Reading

Report Stage saw the UK Government offer a free vote on tail docking of dogs. This free vote effectively removed the Assembly's responsibility for deciding under clause 5 of the Bill this issue on tail docking of dogs. The results saw a complete ban for tail docking defeated by 11 votes on 485 votes cast, leaving a ban on tail docking for dogs but with an exemption for working dogs.

If this becomes law, the Assembly will be able to regulate the breed/s of animals able to be docked and make provision about the giving by veterinary surgeons of certificates.

A number of other areas on enforcement codes of practice and abandonment, cross border issues (Scotland) were also considered.

12. New subordinate legislation

I would like to make you aware of two items of subordinate legislation that will be programmed shortly:

Infectious Diseases of Horses Order

Purpose

To extend the list of diseases in the current Order to take account of certain new and emerging diseases. This will provide the Assembly with the powers to control the spread of diseases detailed in the Assembly's contingency plan for Specified Type Equine Exotic Diseases (STEED).

Effect

- Provide controls against the spread of notifiable exotic diseases;
- To extend the list of diseases;
- To incorporate lessons learned during previous disease outbreaks; and
- To set out a mechanism for paying compensation.

Scope

Remake of the Infectious Diseases of Horses Order 1987 to provide sufficient legislative powers to control the following diseases:

Borna Disease (new), African Horse Sickness (new) Contagious Equine Metritis, Dourine, Eastern Equine Encephalitis, Epizootic Lymphangitis, Equine Infectious Anaemia, Glanders, Hendra Disease (new), Japanese Equine Encephalitis, Murray Valley Fever, St. Louis Encephalitis, Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis, Western Equine Encephalitis, West Nile Fever.

In addition to prepare a mechanism whereby compensation may be paid to owners of possibly compulsorily slaughtered equines under the Animal Health Act 1981.

Standing order number

This will be implemented under Standing Order 24

Avian Influenza (Vaccination) (Wales) Regulations 2006

Purpose

To implement Directive 2005/94/EC which authorises Member States to introduce procedures for vaccination of poultry in the event that Avian Influenza is found in Wales

Effect

To introduce vaccination measures so that in the event of an Avian Influenza outbreak authorisation can be given quickly to vaccinate as appropriate.

Scope

No scope for distinct Welsh Policy because Great Britain is a single epidemiological unit.

Standing order number

This will be implemented under Standing Order 24.

The Committee is invited to consider whether it wishes to scrutinise either of these regulations. A draft timetable setting out target dates for their making will be circulated to Members as soon as it is available

13. Single Payment Scheme (SPS)

Payments

Members may wish to note that around 94% of Welsh farmers received an interim payment (£167m).

SPS Balance Payments commenced on 24 February 2006 and as at 9 March 2006 over 60% of claimants had received their balance payment. We are aiming to complete balance payments by the end of June 2006.

Tir Mynydd

Payments commenced on 28 February 2006, with £31.64m in farmers' bank accounts by 1 March 2006. As at 8 March 2006, £32.34m had been paid to applicants. We are aiming to complete these payments by the end of April.

2006 Single Payment Scheme Application Pack

We are aiming to issue over 19,000 packs to Welsh farmers by the end of March 2006.

C) Notification of forthcoming general legislation

14. Sex Discrimination (Public Authorities) (Statutory Duties) Order 2006

This Order will come into force in June 2006 under Standing Order 26.

The Order will impose an obligation upon public authorities to publish a gender equality scheme by 6th April 2007.

I am notifying Committee of this forthcoming legislation in line with agreed protocol that all Standing and Subject Committees must be notified.