GREENER UK

Wildlife and Countryside LINK

Commons Committee Stage of the Agriculture Bill: Briefing for MPs for line-by-line scrutiny of clauses 1-16

24 February 2020

Greener UK and Wildlife and Countryside Link priority amendments for Part 1 of the bill

Secure long-term funding for the sector (37, 38, 39, NC2)

Greener UK and Link supports amendment 37, 38, 39 and NC2. We welcome the inclusion of 'Multi-annual financial assistance plans', 'annual reports on assistance give' and duties to monitor the impact of assistance given in the new bill (Clauses 4, 5 & 6), but feel provisions for providing certainty of funding should be strengthened further. Specifically, a duty on ministers to lay out the budget that will be available during a plan period is required (37). That budget should also be informed by an assessment of the funding needed to meet the policy objectives (38, 39).

As a long-term industry, farmers need certainty over the funding available if they are to engage in future policy with confidence. In other sectors, funding for transport infrastructure, international aid and, most recently, social housing, have all been set and guaranteed beyond the lifetime of the current parliament. If the government is asking farmers to commit to long term investment in a new scheme, it must lead by example and provide the certainty and security of long-term funding.

Amendment 37 would require the Secretary of State to set out the budget available for each financial assistance scheme created as a result of the bill as part of the multi-annual financial assistance plans already provided for in the bill. An independent assessment commissioned in 2019 by some Greener UK members estimated the costs of meeting current environmental land management commitments alone in England would be £2.9 billion per year.[1] Amendments 38 and 39 would require Ministers to have regard to independent advice on the funding needed to meet the strategic objectives of relevant financial assistance schemes, with a potential role for the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) highlighting the critical role the Agriculture Bill will play in meeting the aims and obligations of the Environment Bill.

Relatedly, Greener UK and Link also support NC2.

Securing a level playing field with a strong regulatory baseline (36, NC9)

Greener UK and Link strongly support 36 and NC9.

As it stands, the Agriculture Bill does not provide a requirement, or even the powers necessary, to secure strong regulatory protection for farming and the environment. Although the policy statement published alongside the previous agriculture bill (2017-19) recognised such regulation as crucially important, this is still not recognised in the legislation. Greener UK and Link are concerned that a lack of a strong regulatory baseline, that is properly enforced, jeopardises the environment, animal welfare and public access, and causes uncertainty for farmers and land managers. Farmers and the public must have confidence that public money is being used to fund genuine 'public goods' over and above

basic minimum standards. If these minimum standards are not set and effectively enforced, then public investment in our countryside will inevitably be undermined by the minority who do not follow the rules.

While 'cross compliance', which required farmers receiving direct payments to comply with regulations and basic standards, was far from perfect, it did provide an important means to ensure standards and protections were being applied. With the Common Agricultural Policy's 'cross compliance' gone, 36 would provide a new mechanism for ensuring that basic standards are followed by those receiving taxpayers' money, ensuring that the aims of that funding are not undermined by bad practice or wilful pollution.

NC9 would confer a duty on the Secretary of State to establish a regulatory framework securing vital protections for the environment and farm animals. This would in turn set a baseline over and above which farmers and land managers can be paid for delivering public goods.

Giving ministers duties, not just powers (1)

Greener UK and Link believe the Agriculture Bill should not just grant powers to Ministers but should include duties on them. Although the bill includes a wide range of powers, there are few duties or requirements on ministers with regards to how these are to be used. This is a major flaw that fails to reflect the policy ambition set out by the government, or the urgent need for progress in developing future policies.

In particular, we would like to see duties for ministers to have environmental land management schemes by a set date. Amendment 1 would also place a duty on the Secretary of State to provide financial assistance to farmers and land managers for the purposes outlined in clause 1(1).

Avoiding the undermining of public goods (3, 12)

The Agriculture Bill should reflect the government's welcome commitment that future policies will be "underpinned by payment of public money for the provision of public goods". The list in Clause1(1) does a good job of setting out these goods but currently the bill does not require other public payments schemes outlined in the bill, including those for productivity, to contribute to their delivery. At the very least, the bill should ensure that the delivery of the identified goods is not undermined by other payments, including those for productivity. This would be achieved by amendments 3 and 12.

Ensuring the bill contributes to achieving net zero (13)

Climate mitigation is recognised as one of the public goods purposes outlined in clause 1(1) of the bill. However, given the urgency of the climate emergency, the bill could go further in setting an emissions reduction target for the agriculture and related land use sector. The NFU has already outlined a target for the sector to reach net zero by 2040, and government ambition should be not be lagging behind that of industry.

Amendment 13 will clarify that soil quality includes restoring vital peatland habitats such as blanket bog. Emissions from peat soils are responsible for half of all the emissions from UK agriculture, and restoring them to turn from a source of emissions to a sink will be vital in the fight against both the climate and environment emergencies.

Greener UK and Wildlife and Countryside Link priorities for the remainder of the bill

Ensure trade deals do not undermine domestic standards (NC1, NC4, NC7)

Greener UK and Link support NC1, NC4 and NC7. UK farming is one of the most exposed sectors to future trading relationships after the UK has left the EU. There is a risk that while we maintain high standards and regulations at home, new trade deals could allow agri-products into the UK market of a much lower standard. To avoid undermining UK farmers, or precipitating a race to the bottom, the government must ensure that future international trade deals do not undermine UK standards.

The government has not yet set out the specifics of how it intends to ensure that environmental, animal welfare, and food safety standards will be maintained throughout all future trade deals. Nor has it made a commitment that imported produce will have to meet the same standards as UK produced food.

NC1, NC4 and NC7 all place a requirement for imported produce to meet UK standards in law, giving certainty to farmers that they have a level playing field, and to consumers that their food meets the basic standards we currently enjoy.

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Endnotes

[1] Rayment M (2019) Paying for public goods from land management: How much will it cost and how might we pay? Final Report for the RSPB, the National Trust and The Wildlife Trusts

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