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Rt. Hon Theresa Villiers MP
Secretary of State for Defra
Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs,
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Thursday 25 July, 2019

RE: Healthy and sustainable food, farming and fishing priorities

Dear Secretary of State Theresa Villiers,

Congratulations on becoming the new Secretary of State for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs.

I write as the chief executive of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming. We represent around 100 national public interest organisations and work with many more at local level. Our alliance is interested in a great many of your policy areas, but are particularly interested in the following four at the moment.

1. Securing robust environment and agriculture legislation

The Agriculture Bill has been stalled for several months now, but we are hopeful that this first major UK legislation on agriculture in 50 years will help the government take decisive action on climate change and greenhouse gas reduction. You have said you are "worried" about the future of the planet and "the frightening impact of humanity on the natural world" so we are hopeful you will seize this opportunity to help farmers meet the goal of net zero emissions, restore nature, champion better farm livelihoods and working conditions, and improve public health and animal welfare. Robust environmental legislation is also imperative to deliver on such goals.

We want to see government supporting and incentivising farming methods that promote public health and support whole-farm systems that can deliver on multiple climate, nature, social and animal welfare benefits. We want to see fair dealing and fair terms of employment across the supply chain to protect farm livelihoods (including implementing the spirit of the Unfair Trading Practices directive) and better pay and conditions for farm workers. We also want to see the Agriculture Bill amended to ensure that imports of agri-food products must meet the same high standards expected of British farmers, to prevent unfair competition.

Given your work championing animal welfare, we would ask for your help in amending the Agriculture Bill to ensure that imports of agri-food products must meet the same high standards expected of British farmers, to prevent unfair competition. Our briefing on how the Bill should be amended is available here: https://www.sustainweb.org/foodandfarmingpolicy/agriculture_bill/

2. Ensuring 'no deal' Brexit does not disrupt food supplies, British farmers and standards

One third of our food currently comes from Europe and £13bn of British food is exported either to or through EU countries goes the other way; serious disruption in either direction will have a devastating effect on British farmers and food producers, as well as consumers.

Over 8 million of our fellow citizens in the UK already live in food insecurity and do not have the means to stockpile or cope with even a short-term disruption in food supply in the event of a no deal Brexit; nor to afford higher prices associated with scarcity or currency fluctuation. In addition, we are very concerned that food donations to food banks could dry up, last year providing 3 million emergency food parcels to people in crisis. In March 2019, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Amber Rudd briefed Parliament that the Government was considering a 'hardship fund' for those set to be negatively impacted by no deal Brexit. Given your commitment to pursuing No Deal as an option we ask you to ensure that plans for this are accelerated to be in place for 31 October.

We suggest this could be funded from the estimated £1.37 billion predicted to be raised by the Soft Drinks Industry Levy in 2020 - 2024. The Levy was established with public support that it should be ring-fenced for schemes that improve children's health, and yet there have been no approaches to the Treasury from any department to use future revenue towards these aims.

Sustain's members and thousands of people responding to the Department for International Trade's recent consultation, have also expressed alarm at suggestions that the UK might suspend or diminish our food regulations and initiation of trade discussions with countries such as the United States have also caused concerns that trade deals might lower food standards, farming and pesticide standards, environmental regulations, animal welfare and farm antibiotics stewardship. Given there are no regulations about food labelling in places like hospitals, schools or restaurants, and for ready-meals, UK consumers will not know that they are eating products that do not meet British food standards.

Recent government research shows that over three-quarters of the British public want to support British farmers. However, farming unions have been clear that our farmers' livelihoods will be put at risk if they have to compete against cheap, lower standard food imports. Those farming unions fear a no deal Brexit, as do leading food manufacturers and workers' unions.

3. Renewing Government's commitment to the National Food Strategy

In June 2019, the Sustain alliance warmly welcomed the launch of the National Food Strategy, and were pleased to be able to support the launch by providing a quote for the Defra press notice. We think the National Food Strategy could play a pivotal role in delivering sustainably produced and healthy food for everyone, as well as better livelihoods in food production. It could also support the transition to environmentally friendly farming and fishing that are now imperative. Our members are already very excited about the ideas, collaboration and optimism that the Food Strategy has started to generate and hope it can fix our faulty food system. In the first instance we will be submitting information to the call for evidence and would be happy to provide expert witnesses for the proposed citizens' assemblies. We look forward to helping your government put together something that has a really positive and lasting impact.

4. Supporting a sustainable fishing industry

Our vision is that the UK achieves the best-managed and most plentiful fisheries in the world. Our seas have historically been an abundant source of food, income and employment, but at the moment are failing to meet their full potential. Two thirds of UK stocks have been overfished but if left to recover could generate 45% higher landings and an additional 4,900 jobs.

A range of measures must be implemented urgently to ensure that we conserve and restore precious fish stocks and marine ecosystems. This includes marine protected areas, scientific assessment of stocks and conservation status, an accelerated shift to sustainable fishing methods, and a reliable market for those fishers managing stocks and ecosystems sustainably.

To deliver growth in fishing, we must see all stocks restored and maintained above biomass levels capable of producing the maximum sustainable yield as soon as possible and fisheries management decisions based on best available science. When the UK leaves the EU, we need to keep the more helpful aspects of the Common Fisheries Policy, including mutually-agreed catch limits, and fully transparent fisheries data, where all catches are recorded, with the help of CCTV on all boats.

To enhance coastal communities, we would like to see the current fishing quota divided up more fairly, with more quota going to smaller boats who fish sustainably, and hence more income to coastal communities and local economies. Grants from European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, to which the UK currently contributes, must be replaced by a UK fund that can continue to support the transition of all fishing activity to a sustainable basis, including gear modification, data collection and the costs of sustainability certification.

Thank you for considering this letter and the issues important to the Sustain alliance membership.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kath Dalmeny', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kath Dalmeny
Chief Executive of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming
Commissioner on the RSA's Food, Farming and Countryside Commission

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