



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

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5th December 2024

Dear James,

Thank you for your letter of 11 September on behalf of your constituents, South Suffolk farmers, about the top priorities that impact farmers. I apologise for the delay in responding.

You listed five top priorities, which I will respond to in turn.

Water resources

We are aware that the Environment Agency's (EA) National Framework for Water Resources is leading to stronger multi-sector water resources planning and much greater collaboration between water users – with good progression in the agriculture and energy sectors in particular. While the EA is not able to guarantee water availability to any abstraction licence holder, the strategic approach being adopted is to work with farmers and growers to understand risks, improve water resources planning and to identify and implement actions to increase the resilience of water supplies.

As part of this approach, we expect Water Resources East and local water companies to continue to engage with all major water using sectors in the region including the agriculture sector, and to take account of those water needs in their planning. Developing regional plans, in consultation with water using sectors and Water Abstractor Groups, should help facilitate improved sharing of water rights and create opportunities for shared infrastructure, increasing water supply resilience.

A national programme of Local Resource Option studies is also enabling groups of farmers and growers to identify, screen and prioritise future water resilience projects in their areas. Several studies are taking place in Suffolk.

You have recognised that sometimes, there is a need to make changes to abstraction licenses to ensure that they are sustainable. Where the EA has identified that this is needed, it will endeavour to maximise notice periods of changes within the constraints of legislation which may require it to act sooner.

Supply chain fairness

We will deliver a resilient and healthy food system, with a new deal that ensures fairness for farmers. We recognise that fairness in the supply chain is critical for farmers across all sectors. We want all farmers to get a fair price for their products and are committed to tackle contractual unfairness where it exists. We will continue to work closely with stakeholders from all farming sectors on the best way to achieve this.

There are powers in the Agriculture Act 2020 which can introduce statutory codes of practice, which would apply to businesses when purchasing agricultural products from farmers. The Fair Dealing Obligations (Milk) Regulations came into force on 9 July to improve the fairness and transparency of contracts in the UK dairy sector. Richard Thompson was recently appointed as the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator, who will enforce the Fair Dealing Regulations.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

This Government places great importance upon our agricultural land and food production. The NPPF sets out how the best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land should be reflected in planning policies and decisions. We are maintaining the existing strong protection for BMV agricultural land – the land which is most important for food production. The NPPF is clear that where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality.

Plant health

Defra's agri-food science programme funds research and development (R&D) to improve UK crop breeding through our flagship crop Genetic Improvement Networks (GINs) Platform. This R&D to improve crops using genetics has a 20-year track record of success in breeding and fills critical sustainability, productivity and resilience gaps in applied crop R&D for the delivery of environmental public goods.

GINs identify genetic traits to improve the productivity, sustainability, resilience and nutritional quality of our crops. GINs also provide a platform for knowledge exchange for breeders, producers, end users and the research base, and a means for the delivery of scientific knowledge, resources and results to add value to our crops.

We have recently re-invested £15 million over five years (2024-29) in innovation in genetics to support breeding in key UK crops through the GINs Programme. This research will help farmers and growers produce stronger, more sustainable and resilient crops for the future. We have significantly boosted the innovation scope of the GINs R&D to keep the UK at forefront of crop breeding:

- For first time, to encourage use of precision breeding techniques to unlock innovation to help speed up the breeding process - enabled through the recent Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act. The GINs are a unique ready-made tool to catalyse new crop R&D on precision breeding.
- A new focus on alternative and novel crops to diversify the genetic resource pool available to breeders and farmers and improve productivity – which build on previous Defra research on both alternative crops and soft fruit which outlined the market failures and need for publicly supported R&D to bring about productivity gains.

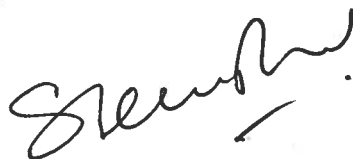
Agricultural budget

The Chancellor delivered the UK Budget on 30 October 2024. Defra has committed £5 billion to the farming budget over the next two years which will see the biggest ever budget for sustainable food production and nature recovery in our country's history.

The agricultural budget includes more money than ever for Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes: £1.8 billion to fund improvements to food security, biodiversity, carbon emissions, water quality, air quality and flood resilience. This will enable all of our ELM schemes – the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI); Countryside Stewardship (CS) Higher Tier; and Landscape Recovery – to continue. The SFI is open to farmers so they can make their businesses more sustainable and resilient. We will publish full details of the expanded CS Higher Tier offer and timings later this year, before opening the rolling application window in 2025.

The Budget also committed to rapidly releasing £60 million through the Farming Recovery Fund to support farmers affected by unprecedented extreme wet weather last winter, and to investing £208 million so we can protect the nation from disease outbreaks that threaten the industry, food security, and human health. Looking ahead, the Chancellor will hold a multi-year Spending Review next spring. This will set departmental spending totals, including the agricultural budget, for 2026/27 onwards.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Reed', with a stylized flourish at the end.

THE RT HON STEVE REED OBE MP