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Convener

Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform

Committee

Scottish Parliament

Your ref:

Our ref: A15930769

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Dear Graeme,

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCOTLAND OF THE OUTCOME OF THE REFERENDUM ON THE UK'S MEMBERSHIP OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Thank you for your letter of 22 September, requesting updates on the work undertaken in my Portfolio on the implications of the EU referendum outcome. I thought that it would be timely to give the Committee an update following the Parliamentary debate on the 27 October on "Securing the Interests of Scotland's Environment and Progress on Climate Change following the EU Referendum".

In opening the debate, I commented that it is regrettable, four months on from the EU referendum, that there is still no clarity from the UK Government on its approach to leaving the EU. Members will know that the First Minister is pursuing our vital goal to maintain a continuing relationship with the EU and membership of the single market.

I want to maintain this government's commitment to our environment and our natural assets, and I will continue to seek the support of Parliament for our ambitions and aims. A healthy natural environment is critical to our success as a nation. It underpins our economy, our health, our landscape, and our way of life. Scotland trades internationally on our reputation as a clean, green country producing wholesome food and drink.

We are recognised as leaders in climate change but we know there is more to do, which is why we are setting even more ambitious targets through a new climate change bill and working hard to achieve them. Climate change targets are challenging, and the best way of achieving them is to continue with collective effort, which is vital for delivering on Paris Agreement commitments.

Membership of the EU has allowed progress in protecting our precious natural assets, and the EU referendum result creates unnecessary uncertainty. In the event of Brexit our ambitions for the environment would be undiminished, but we must recognise that a future outside the single market would make these ambitions a lot harder to achieve.

It is not by chance that we enjoy high environmental standards within the EU. We have been able to develop and maintain our high standards because the EU has created arrangements for trade between partner nations that respect and promote progress in social and environmental protection. Many of the environmental challenges we face do not respect national boundaries. Being part of the EU makes it easier to take collective action needed to tackle these environmental challenges. It is important that bilateral trade deals support the achievement of environmental and climate change objectives. Whatever the good intentions of governments, we know that maintaining high standards is difficult without trading arrangements that allow this to happen.

I think that other contributions to the debate were largely constructive. I was pleased to be able to accept amendments on the important progress with the marine environment, and the need for careful consideration of the impact of trade arrangements. It is clear that whatever the future holds, Scotland needs a stronger voice in trade negotiations so that we can ensure that the terms of any agreements respect the needs of our environment and other policy priorities.

One other point that I would pick up from the debate is the fact that Norway was held up as an example of what can be achieved by a country in environmental quality outwith the EU. Norway has many advantages, not least its continued access to, and compliance with, the single market through membership of the European Economic Area. Recent statements from the UK Government suggest it is looking for a future considerably more detached from the single market than that.

It is clear that there are substantial challenges in the years ahead, and the Scottish Government is keen to continue to be actively engaged in discussions with stakeholders and those with expertise to offer. It will need a large collective effort in order to protect our natural environment and progress action to tackle Climate Change.

In July, I convened a stakeholder event where we explored all the potential implications of leaving the EU on Scotland's environment. This was an opportunity to promote collaborative working, and to share experiences and concerns on these difficult challenges. I welcome the establishment of the Environment and Climate Change Round Table, chaired by Professor Dame Anne Glover. This panel draws on different areas of expertise in academic and environmental organisations to advise the Scottish Government's Standing Council on Europe. These actions, along with the establishment of the Standing Council on Europe, demonstrate how serious we are about exploring all options to protect Scotland's interests.

Given how much we will be affected by leaving the EU, it is essential that Scotland has meaningful discussions with the UK Government in developing the UK position for the negotiations ahead. The environment has been a key competence of the EU for good reason. Progress in environmental and social goals has developed hand in hand with a single trading market.

Whatever the future holds, our ambitions for Scotland's environment will remain high. We continue to be committed to maintaining, protecting and enhancing our environment.

We had an interesting discussion touching on EU Referendum issues when I recently gave evidence to the Committee on Climate Change targets. I look forward to engaging further with the Committee on these issues, and expect to provide further written updates from time to time.

Yours,

ROSEANNA CUNNINGHAM