EU AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES COUNCIL – NOVEMBER 14 2016, BRUSSELS

I attended the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council on the 14 November in Brussels together with the UK Minister George Eustice and Minister Michelle McIlveen from Northern Ireland. I am writing to provide you with a summary of the outcome of these discussions.

The most significant issues examined at the Council related to fisheries dossiers. There were a number of points relating to agriculture but all of only limited interest to Scotland.

Deep Sea Fishing Opportunities
Commissioner Vella presented proposals for a Council Regulation setting deep sea fishing opportunities for 2017 and 2018. Such fisheries are vulnerable to overfishing. Scotland no longer has a large interest in these stocks and receives only small quota shares. We supported the UK position in favour of continued restraint to ensure sustainable fishing levels for these fisheries.

After a long break, during which intensive talks between the Commission and the most concerned Member States took place (Spain, France and Portugal), the Presidency presented a final compromise text. The compromise mitigated some of the proposed cuts, whilst still providing adequate protections; and was therefore unanimously agreed.
North Sea Multi-Annual Plan
Commissioner Vella presented the proposal, explaining that it was part of the regionalised approach to fishery management under the new Common Fisheries Policy. The North Sea plan was inspired by the recently agreed Baltic plan whilst taking into account the specificities of the North Sea.

During the following exchange of views UK, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Belgium and Poland expressed their general support for the proposal. However I supported a UK intervention, which was echoed by France and Denmark, regarding concerns that some of the additional controls envisaged would increase the administrative burden without any commensurate benefit.

European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
Commissioner Vella pointed out that a number of Member States had not yet fulfilled all the ex-ante conditionalities to allow the Commission to approve their operational programmes. The Commissioner underlined the utmost importance of them doing so as soon as possible to allow financial payments to commence. No Member States intervened.

AOB from the UK on behalf of the North Western Waters regional group on the landing obligation
As chair of the North West Waters Regional Group, the UK introduced this item, drawing attention to good progress made so far in implementing the landing obligation, a key part of the last reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). However, the potential problem of 'choke species' – whereby quickly running out of quota for one species in a mixed fishery means you have to close the entire fishery as you can no longer discard or land the stock concerned, had to be dealt with. A point I emphasised to the UK Minister in our pre-brief. Unless solutions are developed in time, this problem could have a huge impact on the livelihoods of fishermen. The UK presented work ongoing in the regions on this issue and pressed the Commission to heed it. The UK points were supported by Portugal, Germany, Ireland, Denmark, Belgium, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Latvia and Sweden, with many thanking the UK for bringing this important issue to the table; and many giving specific examples of the problems ‘choke species’ could cause.

The Commission said it understood the concerns being raised and sought to encourage Member States to develop innovative solutions that can be devised under the flexibilities built
into the CFP Basic Regulation. While these flexibilities are welcome, most Member States still face significant challenges in implementing the landing obligation. Members of other regional groups pledged to support the ongoing work of the North West Waters regional group.

**Agriculture items**

In addition to the fisheries topics, there was a number of AOB items centred on animal health and welfare issues. These included discussions on a proposed animal welfare platform as well as points on anti-microbacterial resistance, endocrine disruptors and outbreaks of African swine fever and lump skin disease in central and Eastern Europe.

The next Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 12-14 December in Brussels.

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