

Mr Finlay Carson MSP
Convener, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

22nd May 2023

Dear Mr Carson,

Thank you for the opportunity you gave us to present evidence to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee last month (April 26). One of the key issues raised during the session was the letter sent to your committee by the UK's Climate Change Committee. This letter called for large and – we would argue – thoroughly unjustified, cuts to Scotland's livestock and dairy herds.

Given how devastating such cuts would be to rural Scotland, we wanted to write to you and the committee and explain why we would encourage you to push back strongly against the Climate Change Committee's proposals.

The Climate Change Committee says it wants to see a 29 per cent cut in Scotland's dairy herd and a 26 per cent reduction in both beef cattle and sheep numbers. The committee believes this would help reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

Not only are we concerned that cuts of this scale would devastate rural Scotland, we also believe that reducing the livestock and dairy sectors in this way is completely unnecessary, not least because the emission of greenhouse gases from livestock production has to be balanced against the nutritional benefits it provides.

There is compelling evidence to suggest that the higher greenhouse gas emission (GHGE) cost of some meat and dairy production may be offset by their higher nutrient value (Drewnowski et al 2015). The GHGE cost of meat and dairy should not therefore be looked at in isolation without considering the nutritional value of meat and dairy in a balanced diet.

The red meat sector is already working on a net zero roadmap. That piece of work is not quite complete but, when it is, it will set out exactly where the emissions are coming from and how they can be cut dramatically – without slashing herd numbers. Specifically on the dairy sector, work has been undertaken by AHDB, Dairy UK and the farming unions under the banner of the Dairy Roadmap, which has been in place since 2008. This details how the UK dairy sector can decarbonise, and where production systems in Scotland play an important role in achieving these ambitions. There are a number of real, practical steps which Scotland's livestock farmers can, and will, take over the next few years, all of which will combine to bring down emissions. These include improved forage quality, feed additives, genetic improvements and selection, faster finishing of beef cattle and increasing the beef calving rate.

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What this road map will show is that Scotland's livestock farmers are ready and able to take action to reduce emissions and that the Climate Change Committee's simple and brutal conclusion that herd numbers need to be slashed is both extreme and unnecessary.

Many MSPs have rightly warned of the damaging effects of de-population on Scotland's rural life. If these proposals to slash livestock herds in Scotland were to be implemented, that process of de-population would be accelerated, to crisis levels in some areas. The preponderance of less-favoured areas in Scotland means that livestock farming is often the only real agricultural option.

The Scottish red meat sector is incredibly integrated and it relies on a critical mass in terms of animal numbers to sustain it. The Forfar mart closed earlier this year because of a 30 per cent drop in the number of animals going through it. This gives a clear indication of what could happen across the entire country if herd numbers fell by the numbers suggested by the Climate Change Committee.

The red meat sector supports 50,000 jobs in Scotland. Without processor and auction marts to service the butchers and producers, herd sizes will reduce further. This will have a damaging impact on all supporting businesses such as hauliers, vets and feed consultants and will perpetuate a circle of diminishing Scottish red meat production, wiping out businesses and livelihoods and damaging the rural economy.

We would be happy to return to your committee when our road map is published, to talk you through the practical steps that will be taken to reduce emissions from Scotland's red meat and dairy sectors. We want – and we will – reduce emissions but a blanket proposal to cut herd numbers is not the answer. We urge you and your committee to join us in resisting these short-sighted proposals.

Yours sincerely

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Chair
Quality Meat Scotland



QMS
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Paul Flanagan
Stakeholder Engagement Director
AHDB



AHDB