21st November 2014

AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES COUNCIL: 10 NOVEMBER 2014

I am writing to provide you with a report on the outcomes of the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting which I attended in Brussels on the 10 November 2014.

I am copying this letter to the Convener of the European and External Relations Committee, for information.

RICHARD LOCHHEAD
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SUMMARY

1. Ministers reached a political agreement on the Commission's proposal for 2015/16 quotas for deep sea stocks and exchanged views regarding the use of the CAP budget’s crisis reserve to support producers affected by the Russian trade ban.

2. Under AOB, the Slovenian delegation provided information on a Ministerial conference held recently concerning the protection of the honey bee; Slovakia, on behalf of a number of Member States, presented a declaration expressing significant reservations regarding the proposals for revised organic production regulations; and the Hungarian and Austrian delegations asked the Commission to undertake further work on authorising plant protection products to fight corn rootworm.

3. Despite Scotland having the dominant interest in the quotas for deep sea stocks requests, including from the First Minister, for Mr Lochhead to speak on the item at Council were refused.

4. Requests in advance by telephone with the Secretary of State and at the UK pre-brief to join two of the three bilaterals the UK Secretary of State held - with the new Agriculture Commissioner Phil Hogan and the new Health and Food Safety Commissioner Vytenis Andruikaitis – were also declined. Although my request to join the Bilateral with Commissioner Vella, Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, was accepted.

5. Alongside Council Mr Lochhead held a bilateral with the Luxembourg Minister for Agriculture, Fernand Etgen, to discuss priorities for their forthcoming presidency in the second half of 2015. At the UK bilateral with new Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Karmenu Vella, the Cabinet Secretary discussed the long term agenda on fisheries.

6. Council was chaired by the Italian Presidency, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Maurizio Martina.

KEY OUTCOMES

2015/16 Quotas for Deep Sea Stocks

7. The single fisheries item on the agenda was a proposal for a regulation establishing Total Allowable Catches for Deep water stocks in 2015 and 2016. In initial interventions the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark agreed with the Commission that deep sea ecosystems and fish stocks were particularly vulnerable and needed to be fished sustainably to ensure the future of deep sea fisheries. At my request the UK also took the opportunity to stress the need to agree a proportionate and targeted deep sea access regime focussed on protecting vulnerable marine ecosystems and species rather than a damaging blanket ban on bottom trawling that would also catch many UK vessels that do not target such species. The Netherlands, supported by Germany, France, the UK and Denmark took the opportunity to express concerns about the timetable for agreeing the Omnibus Regulation, which will facilitate the coming into force of the discard ban (a key aspect of the Common Fisheries Policy reform). Vella said he was committed to ensuring a
smooth transition to the introduction of the discard ban and to facilitating agreement with the European Parliament on the Omnibus Regulation.

8. Political negotiations followed over the course of the day with those member states still unable to agree the proposals on deep sea fishing (not UK). These negotiations proved difficult and the Presidency were not able to table a final compromise proposal until after 7pm. This proposal adjusted several of the TACs upwards in response to the comments of Spain and others. A qualitative majority on favour was achieved with Spain and Portugal voting against.

Use of the Agriculture Budget Crisis Reserve

9. The majority of Member States got behind a call on the Commission to change their proposed amendment to the 2015 budget to the effect that the measures taken in response to the Russian ban will be funded out of the CAP crisis reserve. Twenty-one Member States signed a declaration calling on the Commission to leave the crisis reserve intact. Commissioner Hogan noted the comments from Member States and highlighted that conciliation talks on the 2015 budget were ongoing.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Regulation on Organic Production

10. The Slovaks presented a common declaration of seven Eastern European Member States warning that the Commission’s proposals for a new regulation on organic production went too far. They received broad support from other Member States and the Commission has committed to reviewing the proposals and working with Member States to produce a new iteration. The concerns raised included the proposal to prohibit parallel organic and conventional production and lower the de-certification thresholds, which Member States argued would stymie growth in the sector.

Protection of the Honey Bee

11. Slovenia presented a joint declaration by 10 European countries (including non-EU) signed at a recent conference on the protection of Honey Bees in Maribor. In particular, they called for limits to chemical residues and boost research into protection of the honey bee. Commissioner Andriukaitis stressed that he took bee health seriously and said that he would do all he could to protect bee health, highlighting that Member States and beekeepers also have a role to play.

Strengthening EU policies for Young Farmers

12. The Presidency (Italy) tabled a paper at Council highlighting the significant unemployment among young people in rural areas across the EU and proposing three solutions for overcoming some of the barriers to entry into farming. Namely: access to credit, access to land and experience exchange. This is also an area of focus for the new Commissioner, Phil Hogan, who has committed in early exchanges with the European Parliament to establishing an working group to examine ways that the European Investment Bank can support young farmers by co-financing rural development projects.
ICANN – Internet Domain Names .wine and .vin

13. The Italian Presidency asked the Commission to provide an update on their efforts to block the International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) from registering domain names with .wine and .vin without any protection of high quality wines. There is a concern among some member states that use of these suffixes could endanger protected geographical indications and mislead consumers.

Support for Peaches and Nectarines

14. Greece, supported by a number of other Member States, requested that the Commission provide aid to peaches and nectarines producers who’ve been badly hit by the Russian trade ban exacerbating existing problems in the sector. The Commission were non-committal, offering to continue monitoring the situation but noting that nothing could be done before budgetary discussions for 2015 are complete.

Plant Protection Products for Corn Rootworm

15. Austria and Hungary called for EU research into the spread of corn rootworm, a pest which affects maize crops. They argued that the Commission should take steps to speed up approvals for new pesticides capable of combatting corn rootworm. They were supported by eight other Member States.

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16. The next Agriculture and Fisheries Council will be held in Brussels on the 15-16 December.