17th February 2015

Dear Rob,

AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES COUNCIL: 26 JANUARY 2015

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 26 January.

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

Richard Lochhead

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AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES COUNCIL REPORT: 26 January 2015

1. The UK team comprised Defra Minister, George Eustice, Scottish Minister, Richard Lochhead, and Welsh Minister, Rebecca Evans.

Latvian Presidency Work Programme

2. Presenting their work programme at the opening of the meeting the Latvian Presidency highlighted that they would focus their efforts in agricultural policy on CAP simplification, achieving an agreement on the proposal for a new Organic Production Regulation and on the market situation in view of the Russian import ban. On fisheries, the proposal for a multiannual plan in the Baltic Sea was their prime objective.

Fisheries

Multiannual Plan for fisheries in the Baltic Sea

3. Although the Scottish Government has no direct interest in Baltic Fisheries, the Baltic Multi-Annual Plan (MAP) is the first ‘post Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) reform’ MAP. It will therefore set precedents for future MAPs. Introducing the proposal the Commission (Vella) stressed that it was based on scientific advice and the rules contained in the reformed CFP, including the principle of regionalisation. The Commission supported speedy adoption, taking into account new advice expected from the scientific bodies.

4. Baltic countries supported early adoption of the MAP in order to provide long term stability, a regional approach to fisheries management and updated rules in line with the reformed CFP. The UK and Scotland also favoured its adoption, welcoming the lack of any proposed new effort regime and stressing the need for the proposal to reinforce regionalisation.

The ‘Omnibus Regulation’ implementing the Landing Obligation

5. The alignment of technical conservation measures with the landing obligation is of great concern both the Scottish Industry and Government. The Presidency reported on a recent breakthrough in the stalemate between the European Parliament and the Council on the scope and content of the necessary amendments to the Technical Conservation Regulation (the proposal of the package of amendments is known as the “Omnibus regulation”). The Parliament offered to give up both their request to split out the demersal elements of the proposal and their request for a new derogation to allow undersized fish to continue to be landed for human consumption. However, in return the Parliament wanted to see agreement on a new obligation on the member states to submit annual reports on the implementation of the landing obligation.

6. Most Member States welcomed the breakthrough but were concerned about the possible additional administrative burdens associated with the new reporting requirements. Reacting, the Commission said the priority was to complete the negotiations as soon as possible. They could understand the concerns about the additional burdens. But they thought these concerns could be assuaged, along with those related to the remaining outstanding issues. The Presidency invited COREPER to continue its work on the basis of a new proposal and looked forward to a deal within the coming weeks.
Agricultural issues

Russian Import Ban

7. The discussion was held in two parts, in the first concerned reports that some Member States were undertaking bilateral discussions with Russia to seek a lifting of the ban in certain aspects. A small number of Member States, including the UK, intervened to make clear their view that the EU should maintain a united front with a view to see the lifting of the ban for all Member States simultaneously. Commissioner Andriukaitis for DG SANTE, echoed this view and reported that technical discussions between the Commission and Russia had taken place and that attempts by some to seek bilateral agreements are ‘totally unacceptable’.

8. The second part of the discussion focussed on various market sectors, particularly dairy, pigmeat, and fruit and vegetables. Commissioner Hogan for DG AGRI urged Member States to separate out the impact of the Russian import ban – which could be regional and limited – from wider structural or cyclical issues. The Commissioner pointed out that some emergency market measures had already been extended to mitigate the effect of the Russian ban in the coming months. For dairy products, he stressed the importance of obtaining updated information from the Member States, monitoring the market through the Milk Market Observatory and considering an action if needed.

9. The UK position included specific reference to the vulnerable situation of dairy producers in fragile communities, particularly on Scottish Islands.

Future of the sugar sector

10. At the request of the Italian delegation, the ministers discussed the future of the sugar sector which currently faces a difficult economic situation. By adopting the reformed CAP in 2013, the EU confirmed its decision to abolish the sugar quota system from October 2017. Since then market data have shown a constant price reduction in sugar prices in the EU. Several Member States pointed out that the end of the quota system for sugar had been decided in 2008 and that the reformed CAP had postponed the deadline by two years to facilitate the transition. The Commission announced its readiness to set up an expert group to take stock of the end of the quota system.

11. The next Agriculture and Fisheries Council will be held in Brussels on the 16 March 2015.

SGEU Office
6 Feb 2015