Dear Edward,

**INTER-MINISTERIAL GROUP FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS (IMG EFRA) MEETINGS**

This letter updates the Committee on the key points from the Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs meetings held on 13 January and 17 February 2020. It also provides an update on the meeting scheduled for 23 March 2020.

The January meeting was held in London and chaired by the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Theresa Villiers MP (UK Government). The main items of discussion were Preparations for EU and Rest of the World Negotiations, Primary and Secondary Legislation, Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol and Domestic Preparedness for January 2021.

The February meeting was held in Belfast and chaired by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots MLA (Northern Ireland Executive). The main items of discussion were Preparations for the EU and Rest of the World Negotiations, Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol, Domestic Preparedness for January 2021 and Defra’s primary legislation programme.

A read out of the meetings and summary of attendance are included in the attached communiqués and have been published on the Scottish Government website.

Due to the rapidly developing situation on Covid-19, the scheduled IMG meeting on Monday 23 March 2020 was postponed. This was to have been hosted by the Scottish Government,

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via video conference. Ahead of the meeting, Ms Cunningham issued a press release calling on the UK Government to halt current Brexit negotiations to ensure all available resources can be put towards mitigating the effects of Covid-19 on the environment and rural economy. This was published on the Scottish Government website. A copy is included below.

We anticipate the next IMG meeting will take place on 27 April 2020. We are working with Defra and other devolved administrations to review the situation, given the urgent priority to focus on the Covid-19 response.

We hope this summary is helpful. A letter to the Convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee in similar terms has also been sent.

Yours sincerely,

FERGUS EWING

ROSEANNA CUNNINGHAM

MAIRI GOUGEON
Inter Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (IMG EFRA)

13 January 2020

The Inter Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs met on Monday 13 January at the Defra offices in 2 Marsham Street, London. The meeting was chaired by Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Theresa Villiers MP.

The attending Ministers were:

From the UK Government: Theresa Villiers MP Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice MP, Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Douglas Ross MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland, David TC Davies MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Wales and Lord Duncan, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

From the Scottish Government: Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy, Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (via VC from Edinburgh); and Mairi Gougeon MSP, Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (via VC from Edinburgh);

From the Welsh Government: Lesley Griffiths AM, Minister for Energy, Environment and Rural Affairs;

From the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Norman Fulton, Head of Food and Farming Group and Rosemary Agnew, Brexit Director, attended the meeting on behalf of Edwin Poots MLA, Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

All Ministers welcomed the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive and looked forward to welcoming the new Northern Ireland Agriculture Minister, Edwin Poots MLA to future meetings.

The Chair updated on political events following the General Election which took place at the end of 2019, noting that progress was being made in passing the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill in the UK Parliament in order to secure the UK’s exit from the EU on 31 January 2020. Ministers from the Scottish and Welsh Governments welcomed that the immediate risk of a no deal exit had subsided but were concerned the self-imposed deadline to conclude trade deals by the end of 2020 put the UK at risk, once again, of an exit without an effective relationship with our biggest trading partner.

The group discussed preparations for trade negotiations with the EU and other countries around the world, focusing on the joint technical work that officials would need to undertake in order to support negotiations including sharing relevant data and analysis per nation in order to understand opportunities and impacts. Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers raised concerns that there would be insufficient time available to negotiate a trade deal with the EU unless the implementation period was extended beyond the end of 2020. The Chair emphasised that the UK and EU have a shared intention to conclude a trade deal this year and that with determination, energy and pragmatism from both sides it will be possible to secure a successful deal that is mutually beneficial.
Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers raised concerns on the impact of new tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, particularly in terms of exports to the EU, and that the UK would concede on key EFRA issues in order to secure rapid trade deals with Third Countries, however the Chair reiterated the Government’s commitment that it would not compromise on the UK’s high environmental protection, animal welfare or food standards in any trade negotiations. Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers emphasised the importance of devolved administrations having clear and meaningful roles in the preparation and negotiation of trade deals in order to ensure that any trade deals work for the whole of the UK. The devolved administrations also sought assurances on the UK Government’s future immigration policy, particularly on salary thresholds for visas, with a view to ensuring sustainable access to labour upon the ending of freedom of movement from the EU.

The group discussed Defra’s primary legislation plans, noting the intention to introduce Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment Bills early in the current session, and the need to work collaboratively on any issues that touch on devolved matters. The group recognised the strong example of productive joint working demonstrated in the EU Exit secondary legislation programme, and agreed that officials should continue to work together to design the new programme of secondary legislation that will be required in 2020.

Defra and DAERA officials provided an update on the joint work taking place to assess the delivery requirements associated with the Northern Ireland Protocol provisions of the Withdrawal Agreement. The group agreed that technical work should take place with Scottish and Welsh Government officials as appropriate to ensure impacts and implications across the UK were being adequately considered.

The group noted that further work was taking place to review the EU Exit project portfolio to assess which key deliverables would still be required at the end of the implementation period once the future relationship with the EU has been negotiated and implemented.

Welsh and Scottish Government Ministers noted with disappointment the absence once again of a Treasury Minister or senior official, emphasising the need for greater certainty on future funding. The chair confirmed that a Treasury Minister would be invited to attend.

The meeting concluded with a commitment to continue working through matters of mutual interest in IMG meetings and the group noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place in Belfast in February.

END
The Inter Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs met on Monday 17 February at the DAERA offices in Dundonald House, Belfast. The meeting was chaired by Edwin Poots MLA, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

The attending Ministers were:

From the UK Government: George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

From the Scottish Government: Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism (via dial in from Glasgow), Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform.

From the Welsh Government: Mr Tim Render, Environment and Rural Affairs. Lesley Griffiths AM, Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs, sent her apologies.

From the Northern Ireland Executive: Edwin Poots MLA, Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

The Chair opened the meeting by welcoming ministers and officials to the first meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Group to be held since the UK’s departure from the EU on 31 January 2020 noting the challenges and opportunities for the year ahead.

In preparation for the EU and Rest of World negotiations, ministers from each of the administrations highlighted priority sectors and issues noting the risks of not reaching a trade agreement with the EU. In particular, Scottish ministers pressed for an update on areas in which UK Government would seek equivalence, highlighting seed potatoes as one immediate example where any delay in applications would be critical and damaging. Following the meeting UK Government confirmed they have applied for equivalence.

The Northern Ireland Minister indicated that a trade deal which consisted of zero tariff and zero quotas would be highly desirable and highlighted Northern Ireland’s unique position in relation to regulatory alignment with the EU.

Scottish ministers also sought assurances on how the UK Government would meet the commitment to maintain the highest standards of environmental protection in future agreements and respect devolved responsibilities in this area.

Ministers from the Devolved Administrations repeated concerns on the need for their meaningful engagement in the preparation and negotiation of trade agreements. Defra agreed to share documents as early as possible and encourage other Whitehall Departments to do likewise.

The Group considered the Northern Ireland / Ireland Protocol and agreed the need to undertake further detailed work on a cross administration work plan to progress this constructively.

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To ensure domestic preparedness for January 2021 the Group also agreed to produce a shared set of planning assumptions to prepare for broad scenarios at the end of the transition period and discussed border preparations and business engagement.

In closing, the Group noted the progress of the Defra primary legislation programme and acknowledged the highly ambitious and complex programme of secondary legislation required to ensure a fully functioning statute book for the end of the transition period. In calling for further detail as early as possible, Scottish ministers reminded on the need to respect the responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament and other devolved assemblies.

Under AoB, Devolved ministers noted with disappointment the absence once again of a Treasury Minister or senior official, emphasising the need for greater certainty on future funding. Scottish ministers pressed UK Government to provide further details on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and to reconfirm its previous commitment to provide equivalent funding to that received under EU funding programmes.

END
Scottish Government Press Release

Monday 23 March 2020

Planning for Brexit

Call to put all available resource towards tackling COVID-19.

Environment Secretary Roseanna Cunningham has called on the UK Government to halt current Brexit negotiations to ensure all available resources can be put towards mitigating the effects of COVID-19 on the environment and rural economy.

Ms Cunningham was speaking ahead of today’s Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs being hosted by the Scottish Government by video conference.

She said:

“This is a truly unprecedented and distressing period for the entire country. Therefore all available government resource needs to be put towards tackling COVID-19 and mitigating its effects on almost every area of Scottish society.

“In this context, the Scottish Government feels that a Brexit Scotland did not vote for, and does not want, is an unwelcome and unnecessary distraction. Continuing to plough on could seriously harm our ability to tackle a virus which threatens lives and livelihoods across these islands.

“There is considering scope to discuss the pressures of COVID-19 at today's meeting, something which is very much welcome. However, the UK Government are determined to press on with leaving the EU at the end of the year. A considerable amount of work is required to ensure this can be done in such a way that minimises the impact on the economy, people and the environment but the resources required for this activity should be devoted towards dealing with the current crisis. Furthermore, parliamentary timetabling cannot physically accommodate the work required to move forward the required legislation.

“We are therefore calling on the UK DEFRA Secretary of State to make the case in the UK Cabinet to halt current Brexit negotiations, which would allow us to refocus these Inter Ministerial Groups fully to co-ordinating and liaising across the four nations on our collective response to COVID-19.”