



JOINT MEDIA RELEASE

RSPB Scotland 3 October 2007

Immediate Release

Rural organisations dismayed by Scottish Government's decision on environmental funding for farming

Knock on effects for wildlife could easily be avoided

Leaders of several of Scotland's key rural organisations have today expressed dismay at the decision by Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, Richard Lochhead, not to provide funding to farmers and crofters to maintain environmental management of their land.

The rural organisations wrote to Lochhead to express their "very serious concerns" about the damaging effects of allowing conservation management to cease. A hiatus in funding for important environmental work has occurred as a result of delays to a new European funding programme, a situation that Lochhead has said is unavoidable for now.

However, the organisations are convinced that a Scottish funding solution could be found, as it has in other countries such as England and Wales, given the will to do so. Now, however, there are likely to be serious impacts on some of Scotland's key species and habitats, and a deepening crisis of confidence amongst land managers in Scotland's agri-environment programme, already the lowest funded in Europe.

The organisations asked Mr Lochhead to "do everything in your power to find a way to ensure that the important environmental management that has been carefully built up over the last five or more years does not suddenly cease. Scotland's farmers and crofters must have the opportunity, available to those in other EU countries, to access funding in 2007 for this type of management".

Quotes

Keith Arbuthnott, SRPBA, said "The delay in the approval of Scotland's Rural Development Plan means that farmers have already had funds deducted (modulated) from their Single Farm Payment, but have no new scheme available to use this funding to continue environmental initiatives. We have made the case to the previous and current administrations that an interim short term solution for expiring agri-environment schemes is vital if the benefits already achieved are not to be lost. This plea seems to have fallen on deaf ears. Farmers need to make a living and they cannot afford to provide non-income earning benefits for society with no return, so there may be temptation in many cases to bring conservation areas back into production."

Stuart Housden, Director of RSPB Scotland said " This is potentially disastrous for the future of some of our key species and habitats which depend on positive management by farmers and crofters. I am hugely disappointed that all the hard work that over a thousand farm businesses have put into conservation management over the last five years could now be lost. RSPB

Scotland is asking the Scottish Government to find a way to avert this crisis, which will do untold damage to the natural heritage, and the long term reputation of schemes designed to support farmers and crofters in delivering these important public benefits. Why we cannot provide for our farmers as has been done elsewhere in the UK is beyond me"

Norman Leask, Scottish Crofting Foundation, said "Crofters involved in environmental schemes over the past ten years have adapted their management to benefit wildlife. They need to see that the government is similarly committed to agri-environment measures."

Paul Kirkland, Butterfly Conservation Scotland, said "The long-term future of many of Scotland's animals and plants depends on well-resourced, successfully targeted agri-environment schemes. Nature reserves alone cannot protect our wildlife, particularly in the face of climate change. This decision is another blow to Scotland's poorly supported agri-environment schemes, and should be reversed. Why should farmers go the extra mile to help conserve our unique range of species, if the government will not?"

Hugh Raven, Soil Association Scotland's director, said: "This is a huge blow to the expansion of Scotland's organic farming and food. We have seen year-on-year growth of 26% in UK organic sales, every year, since 1993. This decision means that Scottish farmers will be positively discouraged from playing their part in meeting the growing demand for healthy, wildlife and climate-friendly food."

Additionally, the rural bodies and conservation NGO's were supported in their call by two prominent MSP's representing rural parts of Scotland.

John Scott MSP, Scottish Conservative Party, Member for Ayr, Deputy Convener of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, said "I am extremely disappointed that these key payments will not be available this financial year. This puts at risk much of the good work which farmers have been carrying out over many years through successful past agri-environment schemes many of which I personally have been involved in on my farm. The risk extends not only to the management carried out on the individual farms affected but may discourage other land managers from applying to new schemes in the future".

Jim Hume MSP, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Member for South of Scotland, said "The importance of these schemes in enabling farmers and land managers to nurture the natural environment cannot be understated.

"I visited a LEAF farm (Linking Environment and Farming) at the start of the summer recess and it was clear that the farmer wouldn't be able to fund his environmental projects without the help of the Rural Stewardship Scheme (RSS). Being able to see at first hand the immense benefit to the land in terms of species variety, both flora and fauna, was incredible.

"For purely economic reasons, many farmers and land managers may have no option other than to begin farming the land which for the last five years they've set aside for conservation reasons simply because there won't be a seamless transition to the next round of RSS payments. This is a great pity and I would once again urge the Scottish Government to re-think its response to rural stakeholders and consider making some form of stop gap payment.

"The European Commission has until December to approve the Scottish Rural Development Programme and this is too long to wait for an answer."

Notes:

The organisations supporting this statement are:
RSPB Scotland
Scottish Rural Property and Business Association
Scottish Agricultural College

Scottish Crofting Foundation
Butterfly Conservation Scotland
Woodland Trust Scotland
Council for Scottish Archaeology
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Scottish Environment LINK
Soil Association Scotland
Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust

Background notes on agri-environment expiry

1. 1,332 Rural Stewardship Schemes, Environmentally Sensitive Area Schemes Organic Aid Schemes, Habitats Schemes and Countryside Premium Schemes have already ended or will come to an end in 2007. Land managers have been in these schemes for at least five years. Those that also took part in the older schemes may have been involved in schemes for over ten years.
2. The lack of schemes to go in to means that farmers may have to consider putting land they have reserved for conservation work back into active agriculture.
3. It is predicted that the new Rural Development Contracts (RDCs) which replaces these will be open to new entrants at the end of this year or start of 2008. This however, depends on the European Commission approving the programme and Scottish legislation being passed in time. There is potential for delays.
4. After a very few applicants to the Rural Stewardship Scheme in 2006 were successful (only 23% got in), there are signs that farmers and crofters are losing confidence in agri-environment schemes.
5. Key agricultural and environmental rural organisations sent Richard Lochhead a letter on the 3rd September stating their concerns with this situation. The Cabinet Secretary replied saying that the government could not extend agreements because there is no provision in the EU Rural Development Regulation to set up agreements of one year and that the £6m needed would divert funds from the SRDP.
6. The organisations signed up to this press release would like the Government to consider using national funding or, if necessary, opening RDCs at their own risk before the programme is approved to allow farmers to continue environmental work.
7. Other European countries have continued to allow farmers access to agri-environment before their rural development programmes have been approved.

Ends.

For more information/interviews/images, please contact RSPB Scotland's National Media Officer Davey Fitch on 0131 311 6500, 07894 173 116.

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