

Rural Affairs and Environment Committee: suggestions for inquiries 2007

Scottish Environment LINK is the umbrella body for Scotland's environment movement. Many of our member bodies are landowners involved in the practical work of land management and conservation as well as outdoor recreation and sustaining our historic environment. We work together with the common goal of ensuring sustainable development is at the heart of government policy. Our 34 member bodies work primarily through our Task Forces – working groups on particular policy areas (agriculture, marine, landscape etc.) with representation from interested member bodies. It is LINK's Task Forces who have put together these suggestions for the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee's upcoming work programme.

Suggestions for inquiries

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

1. Examination of rural development & agricultural support budgets

Most rural development and agricultural policy does not require primary legislation. As the last committee recognised, it is therefore imperative that the budget process is transparent and properly understood. The inquiry would consider how the budget is drawn up against the various objectives, and what circumstances should allow redrawing of budgets. It would also consider what is being delivered in return for these budgets of over £600m per year. In particular, what have been the wider public benefits? When public funds are being used it is essential that the results provide tangible benefits for the public.

2. CAP reform since 2005: impact on the ground and future developments

How have the 2005 reforms (including introduction of the single farm payment and cross-compliance) impacted on Scottish agriculture? What has been the impact on agricultural business? What has the environmental impact been (for example, has cross-compliance delivered anything for the environment, and what have been the environmental effects of changes in livestock numbers/densities?)? The inquiry would also look forward to the changes likely to happen after the 2008/9 'health-check' which could include abolition of set-aside, and an increase in compulsory modulation across Europe.

3. Review of the environmental implications of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP)

The monitoring and reporting process for the SRDP is not geared towards recording environmental improvement – such as increases in species and improvement of habitats. The inquiry would look for evidence of environmental improvement on the ground because of the SRDP: what aspects of the programme have worked well? How could they be improved, for example by better targeting, planning or advice?

4. Comparison of regulations and incentives for agriculture and other rural land use sectors in Scotland and other EU countries

Concern has been expressed by the agricultural industry that Scottish farmers face a disproportionate regulatory burden. However, independent inquirers have suggested that Scotland does not over-regulate in comparison to other EU countries. The inquiry would consider the use of regulations and incentives in Scotland and whether they are achieving the desired environmental objectives and public good. How does Scotland compare to other EU countries in its regulation and support of agriculture? How does it compare to other industrial sectors in Scotland? The inquiry should not be limited to implementation of EU Directives, but should also include scrutiny imposed by the planning system and any other areas where there are agricultural exemptions.

BIODIVERSITY

Delivering protection of Scotland's wildlife takes place at local, national and UK levels. Action is focussed on meeting the target to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010. Current policy mechanisms in place to do this are the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS) and its five three year implementation plans and the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UKBAP) process, with its system of action plans, Lead Partners and Local Biodiversity Action Plan Officers and networks. These mechanisms are, however, uncoordinated and not evolving as quickly as political and environmental change. Scotland needs to take the lead in mapping out how biodiversity conservation for UK species and habitats can be delivered effectively in a devolved UK. The elements of biodiversity delivery that the committee should consider are:

Evaluation of the implementation of current legislation and strategies

1. Assessment of the delivery of the biodiversity duty of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act, considering where it has, and has not, been implemented properly by public bodies and identifying gaps in support that public bodies need to be able to comply.
2. Consideration of the implementation of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. Has it been implemented as it was intended? Can species and habitat conservation on the ground be delivered through the SBS, as part of the UKBAP, and building on the successful elements of the UKBAP in terms of species and habitat action plans, Lead Partners and Local Biodiversity Action Plan Officer and networks?

Mainstreaming biodiversity into all policy making

3. Biodiversity must become mainstreamed into all policy making at all levels of government, if it is to be the ecological basis of success in mitigating against and adapting to climate change, flooding, soil erosion and depletion and changing land use. The committee would identify how biodiversity could be mainstreamed into all new policy making at all levels of government, as a standard consideration.

Public enthusiasm for Scotland's wildlife

4. The Scottish public have a huge, and underestimated, emotional and cultural attachment to Scotland's wildlife and although currently taken for granted, this should instead be used to support protection of Scotland's biodiversity publicly and politically. The committee would identify ways to build on the Scottish public's enthusiasm for Scotland's wildlife so that the conservation of Scotland's wildlife becomes a public good, that everyone strives to protect and maintain.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Scottish Environment LINK welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to a Scottish Climate Change Bill. Whilst the lead committee for the bill is likely to be the Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee, LINK believes it is crucial that actions to mitigate climate change do not impact negatively on Scotland's natural

heritage – something of direct concern for the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee. We therefore propose:

An inquiry into land use and climate change

Safeguarding biodiversity in Scotland is an essential part of climate mitigation. Repairing peat bogs, sustainable flood management, protecting our soils and maintaining forests are all essential aspects of tackling climate change. The inquiry should consider the impact climate change will have upon landscapes in Scotland including:

- The current contribution of Scotland's rural land use sectors to greenhouse gas emissions: how can we lessen this impact (for example through integration of climate change policy into agricultural and biodiversity strategies)
- How land use might change in order to deal with climate change (for e.g. bioenergy and alternative crops). How do we ensure these are developed sustainably?
- How do we limit the damage done by climate change to our landscapes and biodiversity?

FLOODING

An inquiry into the sustainability of the current flooding policies

Flooding is a major issue in Scotland and likely to get worse as a result of climate change. It is therefore essential that we adapt to the changing climate in a sustainable way. The Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Act 2003 (WEWS) introduces a new duty on Scottish Ministers, SEPA and responsible authorities to 'promote sustainable flood management'. However, to this date, no further changes have been made as a result of this new policy. The current flooding policies, including the Flood Prevention (Scotland) Act 1961, the Coast Protection (Scotland) Act 1949 are seen as major obstacles in achieving a more sustainable approach to flooding. The design of flood schemes is still dominated by the traditional approach and hard engineering. Land managers, farmers and local authorities alike do not understand what sustainable flood management means in practice and the Scottish Executive has been slow in adopting recommendations to take this issue forward. For a briefing on this, go to:

<http://www.scotlink.org/pdf/LINKBriefingonFlooding2007MD.pdf>

This inquiry would consider how we achieve sustainable flood management and whether it is possible using current legislation. It will look at:

- how successfully the duty contained in the WEWS Act to promote sustainable flood management is being implemented
- co-ordination of sustainable flood management: to what extent are local authorities, landowners, Scottish Water and others working together?
- Current funding provision for sustainable flood management
- Examples of good practice in sustainable flood management
- What opportunities can the EU Flood Risks Directive provide to make sure sustainable flood management is implemented successfully across Scotland?

LANDSCAPE

The Scottish Landscape Forum and Implementation of the European Landscape Convention in Scotland

The UK signed up to the Council of Europe's European Landscape Convention (ELC) in 2006. It is the first international treaty dealing exclusively with landscape, and its aim is to promote the protection, management and planning of all landscape, and cooperation

in Europe to achieve this. Last summer, the Executive with SNH set up the Scottish Landscape Forum, representing stakeholders involved with landscape management including COSLA, Royal Town Planning Institute, National Farmers Union Scotland and LINK. Their final report makes a series of recommendations for how Scottish government might take forward the ELC when managing landscape change.

'Landscape' is the combined effects of natural and human interaction on an area. As a concept, it links both natural and cultural heritage. The ELC considers both urban and rural landscapes; and both outstanding and despoiled landscapes as needing protection. The inquiry should consider:

- the recommendations of the Scottish Landscape Forum for actions on the European Landscape Convention
- Examples of best practise in managing landscape change in Scotland
- What actions the Committee, Scottish Government, and public bodies might take forward including possible legislation.

For more information on the Scottish Landscape Forum and European Landscape Convention go to: <http://www.snh.org.uk/strategy/landscapes/default.asp> (see particularly the recommendations on p. 31 of the final report)

MARINE

LINK welcomed the recommendations of AGMACS' final report on a marine bill for Scotland at the end of the last parliamentary term and similarly, the findings of the marine inquiry held by the previous ERD committee. We are aware that the environment and rural development committee report is still awaiting a response from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment.

Although no time scale has yet been established, the SNP government has announced commitment to a Scottish marine bill. Meanwhile, a white paper on the UK marine bill has been consulted on with draft legislation expected at Westminster soon. In view of this, it would seem timely for the committee to hold a short inquiry looking at where we are now with regard to the Scottish bill and updating the committee on the legacy work of the last parliament. As well as considering the final recommendations of AGMACS and the ERD committee report on the marine inquiry, the inquiry might also look at the current progress of the UK bill (its implications for Scotland, timescales for both bills, and how the two bills should complement each other); and what stakeholders in Scotland are hoping might be included in the Scottish bill. Finally, the committee could take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary on his response to the first marine inquiry, and the AGMACS recommendations.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Wellbeing/measuring progress

For decades GDP has been used as an overall measure of progress and method of comparison between nations. However there is now wide spread recognition of the limitations to GDP as a measure of progress and of the divergence between GDP and well being. The Office of National Statistics says that "GDP should not be interpreted as a measure of human welfare".

Our understanding of the limits of GDP as a progress measure is accompanied by a much increased awareness that unconstrained economic growth without environmental and social safeguards risks undermining efforts to deliver sustainable development.

The establishment of a Cabinet position on Finance and Sustainable Growth within the Scottish Executive may demonstrate an implicit understanding of the need to reconcile these agendas.

Scotland's Sustainable Development strategy 'Choosing our Future' made a commitment to investigate additional (and improved) measures of progress - to date progress on this initiative has been limited. With growing divergence between GDP and MDP (composite Measure of Domestic Progress), measures of life satisfaction remain static despite continuing economic growth.

An inquiry could review progress on the commitment to review measures of progress as set out in sustainable development strategy 'Choosing our Future'. It could explore and consider a range of measures of progress/wellbeing which could complement GDP and what could be done to develop/implement/embed these in national and local government.

Consumption and production

The SNP government have already identified 'consumption and production' as one of the 5 Greener Scotland 'themes'. Scotland's Sustainable Development strategy 'Choosing our Future' made a commitment to reducing Scotland's Global Ecological Footprint. This means cutting both resource use and pollution.

Much of the recent debate about resource use in Scotland has been focused around waste issues, in particular household recycling. Whilst Scotland has made considerable progress in improving its recycling performance there is little action to accompany this to tackle the amount of waste produced in Scotland in the first place.

There are a wide range of consumption issues which extend beyond waste. In terms of water and energy, for example, there is considerable scope to improve efficiency and reduce our usage which would help reduce Scotland's footprint. The Sustainable Development Commission published a report for the UK which identified some mechanisms which would help us move towards more sustainable lifestyles and highlights the importance of Government providing the supportive space that favours sustainable consumption, but little work has been undertaken in Scotland to date which explores this issue specifically as it relates to consumption and production. In a wider context, the European Commission plan to produce a Green Paper on an Action Plan for sustainable consumption and production this year.

An inquiry could consider opportunities available in Scotland to adopt policy and implement practical measures which would deliver sustainable production and consumption. It could identify policies that encourage unsustainable consumption and recommend priorities for action by Government to create conditions to encourage sustainable consumption.

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