

17th July '08

John Scott MSP
Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs
and the Environment
Scottish Conservative Central Office
83 Princes Street
Edinburgh, EH2 2ER

Dear John

FOOD SECURITY TASKFORCE - CONSULTATION

As the Scottish Parliamentary debate in May highlighted, the issue of food security has come to the fore in recent months and now sits alongside those of security of energy supply and climate change at the top of the political agenda in Scotland and beyond. SEBG welcomes the focus which the Scottish Conservatives are bringing to this issue through its Food Security Taskforce, and is keen to work in partnership with the Party and others to seek out solutions aimed at more closely matching supply with demand in the marketplace.

In representing estate owners and promoting their philosophy of land management which balances often conflicting land use requirements, SEBG firmly believes that food security, energy security and measures to tackle climate change are inextricably linked and that integrated land management approaches will help identify solutions. There is increasing competition for land for uses which, it can be argued, have conflicting but equal priority claims. The recent inexorable rise in oil prices has increased the economic viability and attraction, for security of fuel supply reasons, of the production of crops for biofuels instead of for food. At the same time, the consequent reduction in land used for food production has coincided with increasing demand from a rising world population. A growing world demand for meat derived protein is placing pressures on land for livestock grazing. Natural deposits of minerals for fertilizers are being exploited at an increasing pace. Changes to growing seasons and conditions attributed to the impact of climate change have exacerbated the problem, and all have combined to destabilise global markets and fuel inflationary pressures on both food and fuel/ energy prices.

Numerous solutions have been put forward to underpin security of food supply including:

- increased efficiency of production – requiring increased investment, R & D, and enhanced food techniques;
- a reduction in waste;
- better use of water through storage and irrigation systems;
- energy and transport fuel efficiency allied to local production and sourcing.

SCOTTISH ESTATES BUSINESS GROUP

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Chairman: Sir Alastair Gordon Cumming

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None of these work in isolation. Solutions need to be integrated with a holistic approach to the combined issues of food and energy security and climate change.

Post war farming has evolved and now delivers on a range of public benefits including biodiversity and access as well as primary food production. SEBG believes that it will be increasingly important to consider land in terms of multi uses and to manage the limited land resources on a landscape type or whole water catchment basis. SEBG believes that this will demand new approaches from land managers, for example:

Food Security:

- Extremely efficient food production systems will be needed, requiring significant investment and the adoption of best scientific and technological advances, including bio-technology.
- Farm businesses will need to be viable and well equipped and will need to be operated by skilled and experienced businessmen.
- It is likely that rather than delivering the whole food production cycle on single units, there may be a need to increase specialisation whether for breeding or for finishing or for producing crops.

Environmental security:

- Natural resources of soil and water will have to be managed sustainably in terms of balancing food production and maintaining a healthy environment. Already, many parts of the world are suffering from a shortage of water as a result of intensive farming techniques which are bringing about changes in water supply as aquifers are drained, and rivers and water courses are badly polluted as a result of intensification of farming.
- Stricter regulation and restrictions are to be expected from the EU and Government, which will require substantial investment in new equipment and facilities and ultimately changes in farming techniques.

Climate Change:

- Climate change is already having an impact on management and use of the land resource. Scotland can expect its weather to become more volatile and wetter.
- Steps can be expected to be required to utilise land in a way which better manages its water resource, protects urban settlements from flood risk and reduces the impact of its carbon emissions on the climate.
- Whole catchment water management, flood plain forestry, an increase in forest cover generally, new varieties of trees and crops are all likely to become the focus of the attention of land managers in the next 10 to 20 years.
- Such approaches conflict with the need to increase the amount of land available for food production.

Energy:

- There is an opportunity to use land to produce alternative forms of energy – with novel sources such as transport fuel from cellulose (timber) having to compete against the demand for land for food production.

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Effects of economic globalisation:

- Demand for meat and protein is likely to rise,
- The cost of raw materials is also likely to rise.
- Demand and value of grazing ground is likely to rise.
- It will be necessary for the land resource to be able to respond to and accommodate these external demands.

Society's changing aspirations:

Society's view on food security, support for food production, their concerns over the environment and its management, and their demand for access to land for recreation are important issues to which land managers are already paying attention and responding. Greater appreciation of the countryside as a leisure and recreational resource risk conflict with the more interventionist form of land management which is likely to be required if the other drivers for change listed above are to be tackled effectively.

SEBG believes it to be important that all these factors are taken into consideration in the development of a long term strategy to address food security concerns. The Group believes that:

- integrated land management at a large scale will be a prerequisite for an effective response to the challenges faced by society.
- a wide debate needs to begin about how the land resource might best be utilised in tackling the challenges faced by Scotland in the generations to come. This is something which Scotland's Estates and landowners are well-placed to facilitate and lead on.

Nevertheless, there are a few key issues which need to be addressed promptly if Scotland is to be able to take best advantage of its resources in tackling these key challenges.

1. SEBG urges that Europe must be left in no doubt about the potential impact on current and future food production, should cuts in support – whether through changes to support mechanisms or as part of trade-offs in WTO talks – be forced through by Brussels.

The LFA Support Scheme has historically offered support for the large part of Scottish farming which is disadvantaged, and in many cases marginal, because of factors including climate, slopes, poor soils, and distance from markets. Without this support, the production capacity of much of Scotland's upland areas could be put at risk, with inevitable consequences for beef and sheep production.

At a time when the need to maintain and increase food production is recognised, the EU is consulting on changes to the support scheme which would see funds to producers redirected away from Scotland. Yet it is important that, at a time of rising food prices and a need to increase production, capacity is retained against the prospect of rising demand, rising returns and improved economic viability.

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2. Some mechanism needs to be put in place which is able to draw together the relative merits of competing applications of land and assess where the balance of advantage might lie.

Policies to address increased food production for food security need to be developed alongside rather than divorced from policies which promote the expansion of forestry for carbon sequestration and production of alternative fuel sources, such as biomass for heat and cellulose for transport fuel. As demand for timber and timber products has developed and diversified in recent years, so market conditions have improved, leading to increased forestry cover for business reasons. Government policy has also highlighted the benefits to carbon management of increased forestry cover. Yet increasing Scotland's forest cover is often at the expense of land formerly used to produce food crops. A balance needs to be struck. Land management needs to be much more strategic in assessing where land might best be devoted to food crops, and where it might be used more beneficially for forestry or for flood plain management.

3. It is already well-recognised that biotechnology has an important role to play in answering global food shortage concerns. Greater investment in R and D and enhanced food production techniques is required.

Although the subject of GM crops is an emotive one, it may well be that such applications hold the key to future adequate global food supply. Not enough is known, the Group suggests, about the strides that have been taken by science in plant development and application, and whether such hybrids hold the key to adequate food production.

4. Perhaps the Food Security Taskforce might include among its recommendations the need for a wider and better informed debate to be begun about the use of GM crops and other agri-biotechnological advances so that the science might be better understood and articulated, and properly informed choices might then be made.

The Group would be very happy to explore further its ideas with you and the Food Security Taskforce.

With kinds regards

Yours sincerely

Polly McPherson
SEBG
Director of Research and Communications

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