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My Lords,

Committee (Day 1) Agriculture Bill

I am grateful to noble Lords for contributions on the first day of Committee for the Agriculture Bill on 7 July. I said that I would write on several matters raised.

Development of the Green Belt

Lady Meacher asked if climate-friendly development of the Green Belt would be a priority for the Government under its Clause 1 financial assistance schemes. The Government is committed to providing support for the delivery of environmental public goods across a wide range of land types as part of the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme. Given that almost 70% of land in England is agricultural, it is anticipated that financial assistance will be primarily focused on managing agricultural land, including the agricultural land within our Green Belts.

The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts, as set out in its National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Indeed, it has a manifesto commitment not just to preserve the Green Belt, but to secure its enhancement. Our Green Belts often provide natural capital and ecosystem benefits, including trees and woodland, together with visual and physical amenity opportunities. Consequently, land in Green Belts may benefit from the ELM scheme, which will reward farmers, foresters and other land managers for the public goods they provide, such as clean air, clean and plentiful water, adaptation to and mitigation of climate change and thriving plants and wildlife.

Around urban areas, the Government is considering the potential to plant more trees and woodland on Green Belt and other Greenfield land. This, in turn, will provide opportunities for wider public access to woodlands closer to where people live in urban areas, increased biodiversity and climate change mitigation through carbon sequestration. Local communities will be empowered under the NPPF through this process, and the Government hopes there will be much local support for, and where possible participation in, afforestation projects at a new scale under the Bill.

Under Clause 1(2) of the Bill, the Secretary of State will also have powers to give financial assistance for, or in connection with, starting new agricultural and horticultural activities, including those occurring in peri-urban and Green Belt areas. The Government's productivity schemes will run throughout the agricultural transition period, providing farmers with grants to invest in technology and equipment to increase their resource efficiency and reduce their carbon footprint.

I must note that the NPPF maintains strong protections for the Green Belt, and the Framework states that elements of renewable energy projects, such as solar and wind developments, will comprise inappropriate development in the Green Belt. In these situations, a developer will need to demonstrate 'very special circumstances' for the project. However, the NPPF acknowledges that 'very special circumstances' may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources

Soil and environmental outcomes

Lord Devon raised a point on regulations for England on environmental outcomes that land managers must take action to avoid. England's soils are currently protected under a number of domestic regulations which are in place to maintain standards. This includes the Farming Rules for Water and the Crop Residues (Burning) Regulations (1993).

The Farming Rules for Water allows farmers to use their expert knowledge to protect the environment using methods best for their local circumstances. This includes protecting the environment from soil run-off and erosion. Additionally, the Crop Residues (Burning) Regulations (1993) puts restrictions on the burning of specific crop residues to maintain the organic matter content of soils.

Lord Devon specifically asked how the Government will avoid dilution of standards due to the EU's Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) standards not being replicated in the Agriculture Bill. We are undertaking a number of actions to ensure the standards of soils are protected and enhanced. This includes the development of a soil health indicator and the consideration of a soil monitoring scheme informed by natural capital approaches. The financial assistance to be given for the protection and improvement of soil, as set out within this Bill, will further aid in meeting the 25YEP ambition for sustainably managed soils. Domestic legislation, in the form of the rules and regulations mentioned above protect against soil run-off and erosion and loss of soil organic matter.

I hope noble Lords find this information helpful. I am copying this letter to all noble Lords who took part in the debate and I shall be placing copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

Yours ever,
John