



All Party Parliamentary Water Group

Co-Chairs: Angela Smith MP and Baroness McIntosh of Pickering
Vice-Chairs: Neil Parish MP, Lord Bird and the Earl of Selborne GBE FRS
Treasurer: Luke Pollard MP

Wednesday 17 October, Wilson Room, Portcullis House
6.00pm – 7.00pm

Water and the Agriculture Bill (Non-Verbatim Minutes)

The All Party Parliamentary Group's October meeting was on the topic of Water and the Agriculture Bill.

Guest Speakers:

- Angela Smith MP, Member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
- Catherine Moncrieff, Freshwater Policy and Programme Manager, WWF
- Jake Rigg, Senior Public Affairs Manager, Affinity Water
- Rebecca Hesketh, EU Exit Adviser, National Farmers Union

Baroness McIntosh chaired the session, welcomed attendees and introduced the panellists.

In her opening remarks, she described the Agriculture Bill as enabling legislation for future environmental protection. **Angela Smith MP** agreed with Baroness McIntosh and broadly welcomed the Bill. However, she said that it lacks any baseline assessment on environmental standards and how to measure improvements.

Moving on to talk about the farming sector, Angela said that it is important to distinguish between what farmers are legally obliged to do with what and what the public would like them to do. Farmers do sometimes pollute the water environment, and she argued that measures in the Agriculture Bill should help alleviate this situation. She suggested implementing an advice system for farmers regarding reducing water use and improve soil quality.

Angela said that she wanted to see co-investment added to the Bill. She closed by discussing would happen to the Bill following Brexit, and said it was important to use provisions in the Bill to provide more investment.

Catherine Moncrieff spoke about WWF's vision for the Bill. WWF broadly welcome the Bill but are concerned that, as an enabling piece of legislation, its impact may be reduced.

WWF would like to see a mechanism in the Bill to secure long-term funding for the farming sector. Catherine then spoke about the link between agriculture, soil and water and noted that 2.9 billion tonnes of soil are lost each year, which could have a detrimental impact on food security.



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Moving on to talk about the regulatory baseline of the Bill, she said that she would be keen to see sufficient resources to implement rules fairly and effectively. She agreed with Angela Smith that the Bill should include advice to farmers about water and the environment.

Jake Rigg generally spoke positively about the Bill, but cautioned that it should include more provisions to support farmers.

Jake then moved on to speak about how water companies have a responsibility to improve the environment. He talked about the benefits of co-investment in farming and the environment and argued that it should be included in the Bill. He added that soil health and water are important for Affinity Water, noting that good soil management is critical to improving the quality of water.

Finally, he said that the Bill's links to the Environmental Bill would be of pivotal importance and agreed with Angela that it is important to get the regulatory baseline right.

Rebecca Hesketh spoke next and gave a farmer's perspective on the Bill. She agreed with other panellists that it is only an enabling bill but welcomed that it covers so many different areas.

She added that the success of the Bill will come down to how it is used, arguing that it needs more detail on how money will be spent and how it will benefit farmers. She said that agriculture must be at the heart of the Bill and it must acknowledge that farmers need to be profitable and sustainable.

Rebecca welcomed the talk of co-investment and said that the National Farmers Union would be happy to work with private companies. She added that farmers would need clear information on the details of co-investment schemes and it would have to make business sense. Rebecca concluded by saying that one size does not fit all, and the Agriculture Bill must account for that.

Baroness McIntosh thanked the speakers for their contributions and then opened the floor to questions from the audience.

Julian Sturdy MP agreed with Rebecca Hesketh that one size does not fit all and asked how best to implement the regulatory baseline?

Responding, **Catherine Moncrieff** said that there should be basic rules in the Bill as well as more bespoke rules for protected areas. She said that the bespoke rules should be consulted on with farmers.

Jake Rigg said that river basin management plans are very important and help improve the water environment. **Rebecca Hesketh** said that co-investment and catchment groups will be important.



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Angela Smith MP said that Natural England should have a responsibility for some baseline settlement but probably does not have the proper resources to implement it. **Jake Rigg** agreed that more funding was needed for Natural England.

Concluding the session, **Baroness McIntosh** said that the Agriculture Bill needs more meat on the bones. She thanked all speakers and guests for attending and closed the meeting.

END OF NOTE