

Robert Courts MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP robert@robertcourts.co.uk
Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
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2 Marsham Street
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Re: The future of ELMs & SFI

I am writing to you following a recent meeting I held with farmers in my constituency in West Oxfordshire.

Local farmers have raised with me major concerns being felt throughout the industry that our food production levels are reducing, ultimately compromising our nation's food security. Defra's own data is now showing agricultural input price inflation at over 30% with the fertiliser categories showing 3-digit inflation.

Despite food inflation at record highs, growers are not achieving the returns needed to run sustainable, profitable businesses. In these unprecedented times, farmers are calling for stability and the confidence to invest, drive growth and increase productivity so that they can continue to contribute to domestic food production and, in turn, to the UK economy.

With UK supply chains under additional pressure, farmers in my constituency have been highlighting the unfair trading behaviours of some in the supply chains. It has been specifically expressed that this growing lack of transparency in communication is being received from retailers in particular leaving farmers in a more vulnerable position and forced to absorb additional risk. This combined, has impacted local farmer's ability to make important financial decisions during what is already a challenging period for them.

As well as the above, similarly, poultry producers have highlighted concerns around unprecedented input costs coinciding with high levels of contraction in the egg sector leaving them with concerns for the future of the poultry meat industry. Poultry producers have also made clear to me that they feel this situation pointed to a lack of fairness and transparency in some supply chains between what the consumer is paying versus what the farmer receives.

I would like to ask whether your department would consider an urgent investigation into whether an "exceptional market conditions" declaration should be made under the Agriculture Act 2020 given the severe disruption the UK consumers are currently experiencing.

Recognising that this period of agricultural inflation is coinciding with Defra's 'Agricultural Transition Plan', farmers across my constituency have raised considerable concerns with me that the new schemes under this plan are not ready for farmers to access and to make up the shortfall from the basic payment scheme. The announcements to introduce an additional 6 SFI

From the Member of Parliament for the constituency of Witney in West Oxfordshire
including Bampton, Burford, Carterton, Charlbury, Chipping Norton, Eynsham, Witney and Woodstock.



standards have been welcomed but concerns that your department needs to accelerate the SFI roll still exist.

Naturally, concerns were shared that payments are only reflecting income forgone, and for local farmers there didn't appear the incentive unless already applying the action. Specifically for grassland farmers across Witney and West Oxfordshire, there is a major worry that there is little support they would be able to access, if already in Countryside Stewardship.

Will your department consider double-stacking SFI and Countryside Stewardship payments as soon as possible? Equally, would Defra consider double-stacking payments for similar actions to attract private investment?

It is vital we give our farmers the full details of the scheme as soon as possible to better understand how the different schemes will work together and allow for future planning. I would be grateful if you could provide me with a timeline of when the full details of the scheme may be published.

Lastly, I have received calls to urge your department to conduct an immediate updated economic assessment to understand the impact of ATP measures by the farm sector over the remainder of the ATP programme, keeping in mind trade agreements and the macroeconomic context.

Farmers across my constituency have continuously expressed to me the need for certainty and equal reward for taking part in ELMs. These schemes must be inclusive and available to all farm businesses in the UK. I understand that your department has always maintained that future schemes will provide practical standards for all, but there do remain crucial concerns amongst farmers in my constituency that grassland farmers have less profitable options available and I urge you to consider the points I am making above as soon as possible so that farmers across the UK receive the support they need.

I very much look forward to hearing back from you.

Yours,
Robert Courts

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P.S. This is of the greatest importance to farmers in my constituency. Please can we need to discuss further - and I am