**REPORT ON THE Q & A SESSION**

**WITH THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

**AND RURAL AFFAIRS.**

**OGLE HILL HEAD, 10TH MAY**

**ARRANGED BY GUY OPPERMAN MP**

**INTRODUCTION**

There were about 30 people in attendance, with a mixture of farmers, public sector, businesses and NGOs. As normal, the Minister was running late and had a later appointment, so we only had his company for about an hour.

He began by giving a brief over view of the current Defra position, which was then followed by a Q&A session. There was no shortage of questions and we were limited to one each. He demonstrated a very clear understanding of his brief and was forth right in his opinions.

Below, I have laid out some of the key points.

**Defra OBJECTIVES**

The SoS has reviewed Defra’s policy objectives and has focused the Department on 4 key objectives:

* Creating growth in the rural economy
* Protecting the environment
* Safe guarding against animal diseases
* Safe guarding against plant diseases

He did not see the first two as mutually exclusive.

**Q & A**

**EU ban on Neonicotinoids**

He was very cross about the two year ban in order to protect bees. He said that there was simply no scientific evidence to support the ban and the UK had been joined in its opposition to the proposed ban by some of the largest honey producers in the EU. The alternatives were more expensive, worse for the environment and not as effective on crops.

The proposed ban was only supported by 15 members states, and the UK was joined by six in opposing the ban. Therefore, a qualifying majority was not achieved. However, the Commission decided to ignore the vote and ban the chemicals anyway. So much for the democratic process!

The Regulation does allow for the continued use of these chemicals on a field trial basis, but does not put a limit on the size of such trials. The SoS is now in discussion with the Defra lawyers to see if the whole of the UK can be considered a field trial area.

**TB**

He was adamant that the only way that TB could be controlled was through a combination of testing, culling, movement controls and eradicating the disease reservoir in wildlife. The badger cull would go ahead. He reeled off a list of counties where such an approach had been successful. He felt that it was a disgrace that TB had virtually been eradicated in the UK in the 1970s and had now been allowed to reach epidemic proportions in large parts of the country.

He was very strong on the need to manage wildlife populations for the required outcomes, be they badgers or grey squirrels.

**CAP Reform**

He could not tell us a great deal new but he was adamant that direct subsidies (ie Pillar 1) should be phased out with the farming industry relying on the markets for its returns. He did appreciate that this was not realistic for those in LFAs and believed that support via agri-environment schemes should continue.

This was a recurring theme in the afternoon, and did not generate much response from the farmers present, which I felt to be rather strange given the current, weather induced, situation. The markets are not much help if you have nothing to sell. The plea from the farmers was that they should have a level playing field with the rest of the EU ie no voluntary movement of Pillar 1 funds to Pillar 2. The SoS acknowledged that this was important, but made no promises other than to voice his opposition to any coupling of payments.

**Agri-environment transition**

He was well aware of the potential looming funding gap and the possible affects on the environment. He was currently lobbying in Europe to allow existing agreements to simply roll on through the transition period, although they would be funded at the reduced budget rate. He had another meeting shortly on this subject. The difficulty is that the agri-environment situation is unique to the UK. There are concerns within the EU of potential double funding between “greening” and agri-environment schemes.

**Broadband**

It was pointed out that the BDUK funded roll out was now in the planning stage in the North East, but there was a concern over the confusion between the schemes being offered by two different departments, and that they needed to be properly co-ordinated if the best value was to be achieved.

**Environmental Regulation**

He was aware of the problems being caused by such regulation, particularly in relation to bats. He did go on about the reduction in regulation that this Government had achieved in implementing the recommendations of the MacDonald Report. He did not seem to have an answer to the problems being caused by the EU Habitat Directive but seemed very keen on off setting as a future approach. Defra had recently hosted a summit on this subject. While this may offer a solution to protecting the environment from loss to development, I cant see how it addresses the regulation issue.

**Biomass**

Egger raised the subject of subsidies distorting the market for small roundwood and sawmill co-products as it was now being used for power generation ie it did not like losing its monopoly position. The SoS supported small scale generation from wood fuel but was less supportive of larger scale operations, particularly where imports were involved, but did state that it was not his department.

**Local Economic Growth**

Stressed the importance of LEPs and the local approach, particularly in light of the Heseltine Report and the Adonis report in the North East. Reminded everybody of the Rural Growth Network.