Amendment to the Agriculture Bill: Part 1, New Assistance Powers

We are seeking support for an amendment to the Agriculture Bill that explicitly denotes soil management as a public good for which the Secretary of State can give financial assistance. A suggested wording to this effect is as follows:

1. Secretary of State’s powers to give financial assistance

(1) The Secretary of State may give financial assistance for or in connection with any of the following purposes—

(a) managing land, soil, or water in a way that protects or improves the environment;


Background

- An amendment along similar lines as this, inserting “and enhances soil health” to the end of Clause 1, page 1, line 6, was tabled by Kerry McCarthy MP, and debated in Public Bill Committee (October 30), but rejected by the government. This, despite the fact that during the debate, the importance of soil health was echoed by members from around the House, including the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee and the Chairs of relevant agriculture APPGs.
- This debate addressed the numerous environmental benefits, including flood protection, recycling of nutrients, water purification and climate regulation provided by soil, and referenced the worrying conclusions of the parliamentary soil health inquiry in 2016.
- In explaining his rationale for rejecting the amendment, The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, George Eustice, listed specific concerns about the amendment, while clarifying the government’s commitment to soil health: The very first purpose of managing land and water in a way that protects and improves the environment is intended to cover soil. I can also tell him that the policy statement we published alongside the Bill explicitly states that soil health is one of our key objectives.
- Whilst we are heartened by the Minister’s words of commitment to soil health, which echo those made by the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, since his appointment, we remain concerned about the failure to mention soil specifically in the Agriculture Bill. Soil is similarly not included among the Headline Indicator in the government’s 25 Year Plan for the Environment.
- Both of these keystone policies are key to demonstrating government intent, and to unlocking the political attention and investment needed to measure, monitor and mitigate this vital indicator of environmental change. To this end, we echo the remarks of former Defra Minister, Owen Paterson: “it (soil) is such an important issue that it should be specifically mentioned, rather than it just being assumed that it comes under public goods. It is generations of ‘assumptions’ about soil that have led to its ongoing decline. Indeed, if soil fails to get the headline attention it needs now and build on the genuine renewed interest in soil health by farmers and the agri-businesses, this decline will continue for the foreseeable future.
- The amendment proposed looks to address the Minister’s concern about the original (Kerry McCarthy MP) amendment, which he felt narrowed the scope of the purposes. It also addresses the concerns of Robert Goodwill MP by avoiding the unnecessary complexity of defining specifically soil ‘health’.
- The Minister argues that soil is already covered in the purposes in paragraphs (c), (d) and (e), as well as (a) of subsection (1) – i.e. addressing soil’s role in addressing both climate change and environmental hazards. This spreading (or dilution) of soil’s impact demonstrates the inherent challenge in understanding soil health – that it is seen as a diffuse contributing factor, and not an end in itself.
- Finally, the Secretary of State announced the Agriculture Bill as an opportunity to deliver cleaner and healthier environment for future generations after nearly half a century under EU rules. What better way to showcase this ambition, than the inclusion in the new Bill of the one critical environmental indicator where the EU has consistently struggled to find the Member State consensus needed for concerted action?
- The specific ‘calling out’ of soil will act as a powerful demonstrator of government ambition and the potential to deliver change through flexible, targeted action that reflect national circumstances, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach. This is particularly important given that the government has signed up to a target to sequester more carbon into our soil by four parts per 1,000 every year as part of our Paris Climate Change commitments.