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NORTH EAST SCOTLAND AGRICULTURE ADVISORY GROUP

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Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel
European Commission
DG Agriculture
B-1049 Brussels
Belgium

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Dear Commissioner Fischer-Boel

**DRAFT EUROPEAN REGULATION ON PLACING PLANT PROTECTION
PRODUCTS (PPP) ON THE MARKET (2006/0136/COD)**

I write as Chair of North East Scotland Agriculture Advisory Group (NESAAG), a cross-sectoral partnership drawn from the public and private sectors comprising three local authorities, Scottish Enterprise and HIE Moray, agriculture, forestry, food safety and environment agencies, private and industry bodies including academic and research institutions and industry and farming sector representatives.

I refer to the above Draft Regulation and to the assessment published by the UK Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD) on 12 December which incorporates an agronomic impact assessment for agricultural and horticultural production in the UK. If the Draft Regulation is adopted in line with the compromise text agreed between European Parliament negotiators and Council representatives on 18 December 2008, there are likely to be serious implications for the sustainability of the European agricultural sector and for food production in Europe.

It is a matter of profound concern that proposals with such far-reaching consequences are being pushed through when so many of the criteria definitions lack clarity (e.g. what constitutes an 'endocrine disruptor' or ED) especially when there is, to date, a complete lack of demonstrable public benefit— and all at a time of extreme economic turbulence, concern over food security and continuity of supply within the context of climate change which seems likely to pose unknown challenges for farmers.

Members of the public and consumers within the EU have been protected for many years by regular and rigorous reviews of PPP under EC 91/414. Such a fundamental, costly and unnecessary change of policy is at odds with the sentiment expressed in the recent EU Green Paper (COM(2008) 641) on agricultural product quality in the EU, which seeks to promote and enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of food producers in Europe.

Consumers in Europe have also benefited from major investment by the agricultural industry in modern crop-spraying technology and training of skilled, professional operators to ensure that expensive PPPs are used only when necessary, and are targeted precisely and carefully to optimise crop yields, resulting in significantly lower residues than those found on food produced outside Europe.

The case for opposing the proposals has been strengthened considerably by the very recent publication of a paper by the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development which states:

'The current Commission proposal concerning "The placing on the market of plant protection products", updating Directive 91/414, and the E. Parliament first reading decision contain the 'cut-off' or exclusion criteria which, if adopted **would have a devastating effect on farmers' ability to grow a significant number of products. They do not recognise the critical importance of pesticides in controlling and eliminating crop diseases and pests and in increasing crop yields across the EU.**'

'European farmers managed until now to attain world record yields that contributed to the food self sufficiency of the continent. In case the worst scenarios are confirmed, regarding the impact of 'cut-off' criteria, **European agricultural economy and related upstream and downstream industries will wither and Europe will become a net importer of agricultural products, while consumers will not have secured access to reasonable 'price, choice and quality of food'. No conclusive report has as yet challenged these arguments.**'

Although the proposals in the compromise text are an improvement upon those in the first reading, there are serious concerns over the list of substances which may no longer be approved, even when the most favourable interpretation of potential EDs is considered (Annex 2C in the PSD report which incorporates the Swedish study findings).

A summary of the effects of the most favourable PSD interpretation follows:

Fungicides

Triazole compounds are the cornerstone of Septoria control in cereal crops and many are almost certain to be lost under ED criteria along with other important fungicides such as epoxiconazole. A new product, prothioconazole, *if approved*, would appear to be a satisfactory replacement for triazoles with no adverse effect upon productivity but further products would need to be developed urgently to avoid development of resistance to this substance.

Mancozeb also seems likely to be withdrawn under ED criteria. It is used in potato production and in a wide range of 'minor' crops (e.g. it is a component in all preparations for control of onion downy mildew). Thiram is a long-established cost-effective product and would be an adequate substitute in many applications, but PSD report that it may be lost due to concerns over developmental neurotoxicity and/or immunotoxicity criteria. New alternatives are likely to be more expensive and will take some time to be developed.

This is but one example where the loss of significant products under separate criteria can decimate control options for producers.

Herbicides

'Minor' crops such as carrots, parsnips, peas and onions would be particularly badly affected by the withdrawal of pendimethalin, a product which is also the primary means of blackgrass control in cereal production in UK. Yield and quality of all these crops could be significantly reduced.

Insecticides

There are serious concerns for the continued availability of many insecticides due to developmental neurotoxicity and immunotoxicity criteria. In particular, nematicides used in production of potatoes, carrots and onions could be lost.

There are also fears that fast-acting pyrethroid insecticides which are used to control aphids which spread viral crop diseases in seed potatoes (a major sector in NE Scotland) and other crops could be lost. It is essential to achieve rapid knockdown of fast-breeding insect pests such as aphids to contain outbreaks. Alternative insecticides (such as nicotinoids) may require a greater number of crop-spraying applications (adding cost) and thereby increase the likelihood of resistance arising in pest populations. PSD advises that approval for the important nicotinoid group cannot yet be guaranteed.

Conclusion

The foregoing examples illustrate many potentially adverse consequences for food production within the EU. No details of demonstrable public health benefits have been offered in return.

It seems absurd that the European Parliament plenary session vote will proceed in mid-January with many of the key issues so poorly defined and understood. MEPs are being asked to vote without a proper appreciation of consequences of their actions on food producers and consumers.

The world is in the grip of an economic recession. The proposed Regulation risks undermining food production in the EU which is high quality, market-orientated and competitively priced. Even a small decrease in yield arising from the proposals may result in significant price increases and make the EU unpopular with consumers and food producers alike for no clear benefit.

The paper by the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development notes that 'An impact analysis is expected to provide a reliable account of real impacts both positive and negative. Unfortunately no such comprehensive attempt has been made so far'.

The paper also notes that a higher dependency upon imported fruits, vegetables and cereals would expose European consumers to higher residue levels than those found on food produced within the EU.

I write to ask you to use your considerable influence to help ensure the final text of the Regulation is delayed until all the criteria for assessment are absolutely clear, and until a full impact assessment has been carried out of the effects upon food production in the EU.

In the event that the plenary session discussions proceed next week as planned, please help to mitigate the damaging restrictions upon the range of PPPs available to food producers in Europe by

- a) adopting a favourable interpretation of what constitutes an potential 'endocrine disruptor' (e.g. according to the Swedish study)
- b) relaxing the rules in Article 4(7) under which derogations may be granted
- c) extending the time frames for utilising currently approved products pending the development of replacements.

It is vital that European agricultural interests are protected as it is a sector which has significant direct and indirect impacts on many regional and national economies. Provoking avoidable economic stress to a sector within the economy at this time is an action which cannot be justified based on the evidence available.

NESAAG therefore urges you to take every opportunity to influence the outcome to help maintain the integrity of the rural economy of Scotland and other countries with strong agricultural interests.

Yours sincerely



Cllr William Howatson
Chair, NESAAG