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Y Gweinidog Materion Gwledig a Gogledd Cymru, a'r Trefnydd
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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref LG/00682/23

R Medwyn Hughes
Chair
Cyngor Gwynedd
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29 November 2023

Dear R Medwyn Hughes,

Thank you for your letter of 17 October, regarding tree planting proposals and the proposal adopted by Cyngor Gwynedd.

Your commitment to supporting the Welsh family farm reflects the Sustainable Land Management objectives established in the Agriculture (Wales) Act. The objectives must be considered together and are not hierarchical. The four objectives are:

- Sustainable Production of Food and Other Goods
- Slowing climate change, and adapting to it
- Maintaining and improving ecosystem resilience and the benefits they offer
- Conserving and enhancing the countryside and cultural resources and promoting public access to and engagement with them, and maintaining the Welsh language and promoting and facilitating its use.

These objectives will form the basis of the Sustainable Farming Plan (SFS) and other government support for farmers in Wales. The SFS is being designed so that it continues to support sustainable food production at the same time as addressing the climate and nature crises.

Climate change is the greatest risk to local and global food production due to anomalous weather, soil degradation and ecosystem decay. It is already having a significant impact on farmers in Wales in terms of having to change planting and harvesting periods. We will fail our farmers, wider communities, and future generations if we do not take action now to avoid the worst impacts of future climate change.

We must reduce carbon emissions and increase the size of carbon sink in Wales. We have proposed a series of SFS steps, including benchmarking, soil testing and more proactive steps around animal health and biosecurity. Each action is designed to help improve farm business performance, while also reducing carbon emissions. The task of increasing tree cover should not be considered without weighing the other considerations, but rather as part of a complementary set of actions.

Existing woodlands and individual trees in fields and hedgerows will count towards the proposed tree cover requirement. We are not proposing an additional 10% to the existing tree cover. Based on farmer feedback as part of last year's extensive co-planning exercise, we are refining the 10% tree planting operation to take into account the situations when tree planting is not possible. For example, it is not appropriate to plant trees on priority or high quality habitats, or on deep peat, and it may not be possible for some tenant farmers to plant trees. As a result, we are considering modifying the tree cover proposal, so that it is not 10% of the total farm, but 10% of the remaining land once non-plantable areas have been removed from the calculation.

When more trees are required to be planted on farms, some farmers will choose to plant on a field scale and invest in a future timber crop as part of long-term plans to diversify the farm business. Farmers are best placed to deliver this planting, and by focusing our support on active farmers, and spreading planting across all farms, we hope to keep farmers on the land and reduce the risk of commercial businesses planting trees across whole farms. We are developing a plan to support a robust farm business, so the SFS is not a mechanism for planting whole farms.

There are different planting models to consider and increasing tree cover does not have to lead to a choice between food production and woodland planting. We continue to explore agroforestry models with the industry, to see how best to integrate trees so that they become an asset to food production, such as shelter belts carefully designed to provide biosecurity benefits at farm boundaries, or used to protect against general bad weather. Shelter belts can raise temperatures in the field during cold weather reducing the requirement for extra food or shelter. We are seeing increasing cases of livestock suffering from heat stress during hot summers and additional trees in the landscape can provide valuable shade for them. As a result, trees can provide direct benefits to food production and to farm businesses.

The cumulative effects of increasing tree cover along with other SFS actions such as habitat management and improved soil management will also benefit wider society by slowing water flow and reducing the risk of flooding to downstream communities.

I will shortly publish the next version of the SFS proposals as part of a public consultation. No final decisions will be made on the design of the scheme until the end of this consultation.



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