



Department
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Food & Rural Affairs

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Rebecca Pow MP
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Dr Rebecca

Thank you very much for your recent visit to Defra surgery. It was a pleasure to see you and I very much appreciated hearing your views about the importance of soil health and the reasons that it should be considered as a public good.

I appreciate your concern that the Agriculture Bill does not explicitly reference soil health, which could give the impression that measures to improve soil will not be eligible for financial assistance. However, I hope I can set your mind at ease.

We will incentivise improvements to soil health in the new Environmental Land Management system. As you know, soil is one of our most precious natural assets and a means by which public goods outcomes such as good water quality, flood mitigation and habitats for wildlife, can be achieved. Delivery of the majority of the purposes listed in Clause 1 of the Bill will require improvements in soil health. A number of opportunities for earning financial assistance by improving the quality of soil will be included under several of the purposes listed in Clause 1 and my officials are already developing the options that will be available to land managers. This does not require an amendment to the Bill.

Furthermore, where the purposes in Clause 1(1) explicitly reference "managing land", the natural definition of this includes top-soil and sub-soil, so the power to pay for managing soils to deliver the purposes listed is already available in the letter of the law. Good soil management is central to the success of our future environmental land management scheme.

I would like to thank you and the Sustainable Soils Alliance for your support in the development of the indicator framework for the 25 Year Environment Plan over the last year. With their help we now have a much firmer idea of areas where there is scientific consensus around aspects of soils that can give us a good guide to their health. I hope you will be pleased to see these reflected in the updated indicator on healthy soils that we will be publishing shortly alongside the progress report on the 25 Year Environment Plan.

I agree that communicating the state and value of our soils is important and merits further consideration; this may require future alteration of or an addition to the current set of indicator headlines. We will develop the healthy soils indicator with continued input from stakeholders and experts, such as the Sustainable Soils Alliance, when research results are available later this year. In the meantime, the indicator framework will still allow us to consider properly the central role soils can play in a range of public goods and policies currently under development and the report on the indicator framework for the 25 Year

Environment Plan will contain a section specifically on soils to demonstrate how this can be done.

You asked about our latest thinking on biofuels and the impact on soil health. The Government believes that whilst biofuels play a role in our efforts to tackle climate change, they must lead to a worthwhile reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and be sustainable. The two crops that are used to provide one third of UK biofuel (wheat and oilseed rape) impose no particular soil health risks and the rest of UK biofuels come from waste feedstocks. However, crops such as maize used in anaerobic digestion do pose risks to soils and we are trying to improve the sustainability of crop production through actions set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan.

Thank you again for raising these important matters with me.

With every good wish,

Michael Gove

Yours,
Michael