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Environment
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Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands &
Minister for Environment and Land Reform
St Andrew's House
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Dear Cabinet Secretary and Minister,

Thank you for your time last week to meet with members of Scottish Environment LINK and for the discussion on a range of issues including agriculture, deer management and nature networks. We were very pleased that you agreed that you would soon be able to provide the general direction of travel towards sustainable agricultural support and the work of ARIOB. We see this as critical for progress towards policies able to meet the challenges of the climate and nature emergencies. We indicated our support for a streamlined integrated pilot that would test how new conditions or activities could be applied to future support. We also support further developing advisory support, whole farm planning and NatureScot's NCAPP work. We expressed some reservations about the practicalities of enhancing greening now and urged you not to launch livestock payment schemes now that would constrain policy development in due course. You were not able to give us more detail at this time on what the Programme for Government statement to move half of farm payments from being unconditional to conditional by 2025 means in practice and we therefore await a future update on this.

Vicki stressed the importance of AECS funding for supporting farmers and land managers to improve habitat conditions on their land and maintain or adopt environmentally beneficial practices. We urged you to commit to continuing AECS in full in 2022-2024 or until new farming policy is in place and to secure the necessary funding for that in the budget. You assured us this is under consideration and we hope to be able to welcome a positive decision soon.

Our discussion then turned to issues of upland management, particularly the forthcoming legislation on grouse moor reform and the implementation of deer management recommendations. Duncan asked about the timing of these pieces of legislation and welcome your confirmation that the government intends these issues to be debated in Year 2 of the parliament, following consultation. We underlined our view that in practice the recommendations of both the Werrity Review and the Independent Deer Working Group report should be enacted as early as possible and welcomed the significant progress that Forestry and Land Scotland were making through their Deer Dashboard, which LINK land owning members also intend to roll out. We noted that a similar approach from NatureScot in providing leadership on implementing the recommendations would also be very welcome.

On nature networks, Bruce welcomed the commitment in your party's manifesto to introduce nature networks and we are pleased by your assurance that the draft National Planning Framework 4 will include detail on how nature networks will fit into Scotland's approach to national planning. We touched on Regional Land Use Partnerships, which we support, and welcoming the work on the five pilot RLUPs. We raised concerns that time is tight for the work of these pilots to inform a coherent national Regional Land Use Framework which the government is due to produce in 2023, which provides local democratic decision making as you stressed, and contributes to an ecologically coherent nature network at regional and national levels.

I apologise that we were unable to cover all the items on our agenda and I will summarise the key points we were not able to raise. On the Nature Restoration Fund, we very much welcome the commitment to provide funding this financial year, roll out of which we recognise was restricted by time scales. We are very pleased to see the commitment to multi-year funding in the Programme for Government, however we believe the scale of the biodiversity crisis is not yet matched with the level of funding from across society, not just government, needed to deliver lasting change. We ask you to consider how the Nature Restoration Fund could be harnessed to leverage private investment in green projects as well as philanthropic funding. We also wished to ask if the government has considered what mechanisms can be used to fill the gap left by the EU's Natura Fund, which has left a considerable lack of funding options for the landscape scale, multi-year conservation projects that are badly needed to restore Scotland's nature and mitigate the effects of climate change.

Finally, we wished to pass on positive feedback from our members managing sites and reserves. There was a significant improvement in Scotland's ability to manage visitor pressures this summer compared with 2020. We wish to pass on members' views that the government's education campaigns on accessing the outdoors during Covid have been very helpful, along with much needed increase in investment in countryside rangers which has been instrumental in addressing some longstanding access issues particularly in the Cairngorms region. We recognise that this increase in investment and communications has been in response to Covid, however we wish to stress that Covid has exacerbated what was already a growing problem for Scotland's rural areas in being able to cope with high visitor numbers. Clearly, we all wish for more people to access the outdoors for their health and wellbeing and to benefit rural communities and we urge for this increased investment to continue to support visitor management and rural infrastructure in the outdoors.

You indicated that it would be helpful if our next meeting included issues in the marine environment and we would be delighted to bring members of LINK's Marine Group to the next meeting. Could I ask your officials to please get in touch with Vhairi Tollan, LINK's Advocacy Manager on vhairi@scotlink.org to find a mutually convenient time.

Kind regards,



Deborah Long
Chief Officer



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