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Rural Affairs and Islands Committee policy remit

Thank you for your letter of 26 August regarding the above.

As you know, yesterday marked the publication of the Programme for Government. This Programme for Government (PfG) is laser focussed on actions to progress our four priorities – eradicating child poverty, growing our economy, tackling the climate emergency and ensuring high quality and sustainable public services.

You will also be aware that this year the Scottish Government faces some of the most significant financial challenges since devolution. In these circumstances, all parts of the Scottish Government must be clearer than ever that the money we spend is having the desired impact and demonstrating tangible progress in meeting our priorities.

Therefore, the PfG identifies and sets out in a non-exhaustive fashion, a number of the key activities my colleagues and I will take forward this year which we believe will have the greatest impact. We know that Scotland's rural and island economy is a major source of growth for Scotland, delivering an economic contribution worth £39.075 billion (26% of the Scottish total) in GVA in 2021.

From the production of food and drink to green energy potential, from marine industries to the space sector, our islands and rural areas are at the forefront of innovation while remaining true to a rich heritage and traditions.

Yet, we know that communities in these areas face a number of unique challenges including higher costs of living, and so we are determined to make sure these challenges are addressed in all our policies.

Against this background, my priorities for the forthcoming year that fall within the RAI Committee's remit are summarised below.

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I will undertake a number of actions which aim to grow the rural economy and, through this, help eradicate child poverty. This will include my continuing support for growth in the food and drink sector in Scotland as we maintain our commitment to becoming a Good Food Nation.

I will support our land-based and aquaculture industries by continuing work in response to the 22 recommendations of the Land Based Learning Review, all of which the Scottish Government either accepted or accepted in principle, and we will aim to publish the associated implementation plan by the end of 2024.

As the Programme for Government sets out, to progress the realisation of our Vision for Sustainable Aquaculture, we will improve the consenting process for fish farming in Scotland by taking learning from pilot projects in the Highlands and Shetland Islands local authority areas and applying these to deliver improvements across Scotland to give businesses confidence, ensure environmental limits are respected and protect and improve the ability for communities to contribute.

In terms of wider priorities for our marine space, we will focus on securing quota and providing regulatory frameworks to enable fisheries businesses to operate, alongside ensuring the long-term sustainability of fish stocks. Our licencing and enforcement functions will also ensure the continued functioning and sustainable management of our fishing industry, delivering consumer confidence and a positive brand for our vital Scottish seafood. All of these commitments will be supported by continued investment in the underpinning science and analysis required to deliver on our priorities.

I will shortly announce up to £14m MFS funding for 2024-25 to 67 projects, delivering on the scheme's agreed criteria which includes helping to achieve Scotland's Blue Economy Vision outcomes.

To specifically support our island communities, I will provide a further £1 million through our Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund. This will help those who are facing some of the worst cost of living pressures.

I will look to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises through our Agriculture Reform Programme, which will support farmers and crofters to reduce emissions and deliver biodiversity improvements, through greater uptake of key baselining activities such as carbon and biodiversity audits and soil analysis.

The Scottish Government will also continue to support the six Carbon Neutral Islands, placing island communities front and centre of the journey to net zero. This year we will enable them to take further climate action whilst focusing on the longer term and beginning to exchange knowledge with other islands.

As part of our commitment to restore 250,000 hectares of degraded peatlands by 2030, this year we will restore 10,000 hectares of degraded Scottish peatlands to reduce harmful emissions and accelerate progress to net zero. We will also create 10,000 hectares of woodland which will support net zero, biodiversity and economic outcomes.

The Natural Environment Bill will also be introduced this parliamentary year, to address biodiversity loss and to protect and restore the natural environment, including elements relating to national parks and deer management that sit within the Rural Affairs, Land Reform

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and Islands portfolio. These elements of the Bill will strengthen the leadership role of National Parks in tackling the interlinked crises of climate change and biodiversity loss, and the Deer Working Group recommendations.

Scotland's public sector has a significant role to play in supporting rural Scotland. In this year I will aim to enhance that through reviewing Crown Estate Scotland's governance and operating model to ensure it maintains and optimises its unique role in supporting the delivery of Ministerial priorities, particularly in terms of helping us to realise the many opportunities that exist for the growth of a fairer, greener, wellbeing economy and in how we respond to, mitigate and adapt to climate change.

I will also deliver the forthcoming Rural Delivery Plan which will outline the actions we are taking to improve the lives of rural communities. It will put a renewed emphasis on delivery in a number of areas such as land reform, housing, repopulation, digital connectivity and economic development. The publication of a new National Islands Plan will also ensure that the Scottish Government keep delivering on our vision for thriving, sustainable, and successful island communities.

There are several cross-portfolio priorities that, while not being formally within areas of RAI Committee remit, will nonetheless be of interest to members. This includes the public consultation on fisheries management measures for Offshore Marine Protected Areas, which have been developed closely with stakeholders over many years, which is currently live. We will also be consulting on a Planning Position Statement for the National Marine Plan 2 this autumn. I will be working closely with Ms Martin on these policies, recognising their significance and benefit to the RALRI portfolio.

Finally, as I mentioned at the start of my letter, both the PfG and this letter are not intended to be an exhaustive list of everything I, or the Scottish Government, will achieve this year. As you would expect, within my portfolio, I will continue to engage with and support a number of other issues, activities and processes, all of which benefit rural Scotland.

I hope this information is helpful and look forward to appearing before the Committee on 11 September.



MAIRI GOUGEON

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