From the Secretary of State
The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP

Thank you very much for your letter of 11 April enclosing a copy of your Group’s Interim Report on set-aside, and detailed appendices. Please pass on my thanks to all the members of your Group for their valuable contributions.

I am impressed by the progress and scope of the work to date, which you are helpfully setting in the real world context of increasing demand for food, fuel and environmental services. I welcome the fact that your Group recognises that while the removal of set-aside has been the catalyst for this exercise, there are wider pressures from farming on the natural environment which we need to address.

I particularly appreciate your continuing efforts to bridge the differences of perception between the various stakeholders on this and related topics. This engagement process, together with the additional monitoring evidence that will soon be available, and the initial assessment of policy options which we are undertaking, will form an important foundation for the decisions I will need to take. I hope to be in a position to do so before the summer break, so that I can announce to farmers then the framework within which they will have to operate for the next planting season.

I was interested to read your conclusions and recommendations, which make a great deal of sense to me. In particular, I am pleased with the steps taken to expand the evidence base, in order to increase our understanding of the environmental value of set-aside. I agree that this is essential work so that we have a firmer basis for action. I note that whilst the current reduction of uncropped land has been substantial, the impacts of this on biodiversity and the rest of the natural environment are not irreversible, although you have clearly identified an increasing risk to achieving our overall environmental goals.
I note in particular your conclusion that further measures will be needed to compensate adequately for the loss of set-aside, as well as to mitigate the full impact of the loss of other uncropped land. It is important therefore that we press ahead with exploring the full range of domestic policy options, which I agree should include regulatory and incentive approaches, and market measures, as well as possible voluntary schemes promoted by the farming industry. I also agree with you that the Commission’s Health Check will be key in setting the framework which shapes the way forward, and I am continuing to urge the Agriculture Commissioner to ensure that the need for EU-wide action to integrate the environmental impacts of set-aside removal is properly reflected in her forthcoming CAP Health Check proposals.

I look forward to this further work, and to receiving your final report in July.

HILARY BENN