



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## **RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE**

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Dear Richard

### **The Common Agricultural Policy online application system**

On 3 June 2015 the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee took evidence from farmers, crofters, land managers, and agents, on their experiences of applying for pillar 1 basic payment Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds and Scottish Rural Development Payment (SRDP) schemes via the Scottish Government's online system and Single Application Form (SAF).

All of the witnesses who appeared before us gave detailed first-hand accounts of the many difficulties they are encountering in using, or even trying to use, the new system. We would encourage you to take the time to read the Official Report<sup>1</sup> of the meeting in full once it is available, so that you and your officials can understand and respond to all of the detailed concerns raised with the Committee.

The Committee was extremely concerned to hear so many negative accounts of the problems being encountered with the online system and the fears of many farmers about the potential dire consequences of making mistakes as a result of the complexities and problems with the online system, and the possibility of being penalised as a result. We heard reports that some have chosen not to apply for funding at all due to the complexity of the system and the wide reported difficulties being experienced with it. This is obviously alarming.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. Official Report, 3 June 2015. Will be available soon at:  
<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/29876.aspx>.

Given that the deadlines for applications are 12 June (for SRDP applications) and 15 June (for pillar 1 basic payment applications), there is obviously a great urgency in clearly identifying what can be done in the short-term and acting on this to ensure that forms can be submitted; properly checked and verified; and, most importantly, that payments are made on time.

After listening to the views of those who gave evidence to us, the Committee recommends that the following actions are taken as a matter of urgency—

- add an easy online guide to the website which responds to the issues that have been encountered so far;
- encourage paper submissions where difficulties are being encountered with the online system;
- if pre-completed packs of paper forms have been prepared, but not issued, publicise this and make the forms available on request. If letters advising that pre-completed packs are available these should be sent to individual farmers immediately;
- ensure that local area offices have consistent and up-to-date guidance and information when responding to applicants questions and concerns;
- ensure that the online verification system is working properly and applicants are not unfairly penalised for any errors which are made due to problems with the online system;
- make it possible, and straight-forward, for amendments to be made to online applications;
- ensure that the system allows those who let land on a seasonal basis but who are not able to claim, due to their landlord claiming on the land, to notify that on the SAF;
- that there is a halt on any re-mapping at the current time, and that re-mapping in future stops no later than one month before the deadline for applications;
- give urgent priority to ensuring that the system is running as quickly, and is as stable as possible, in order to cope with the anticipated number of applications;
- immediately establish and publicise a 24 hour telephone helpline for applicants to obtain quick, consistent and practically useful guidance; and
- extend the deadline for SRDP applications, currently set for 12 June 2015, until an appropriate period after the deadline for basic payments has passed to ensure that the problems being experienced by those applying for pillar one payments does not have an adverse effect on SRDP applications.

Once the application process has been completed, and there is confidence that payments will be made on time, it will obviously be important that a lessons learned exercise be conducted to ensure that there is no repeat of this situation in future years. There are also, perhaps, questions to be asked at that stage about the overall complexity of the current CAP and what measures could be taken in Scotland, the UK and ultimately at an EU level to address that. The RACCE Committee will no doubt return to some of those issues in the future.

However, the immediate priority is to deal with the current situation and provide as many solutions as possible to the problems so many applicants are facing. The Committee would therefore ask that you respond to us as a matter of urgency on the action plan we have outlined above, to confirm that you will be taking each of these issues forward.

We are also aware of the work that has been carried out on this issue by our colleagues in the Public Audit Committee, and that they plan further work on this issue in the autumn, and we are therefore copying this letter to that committee for information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Gibson', with a stylized underline.

Rob Gibson MSP  
Convener

Cc. Paul Martin, Convener, Public Audit Committee.