

9 November 2015



## **NITRATE VULNERABLE ZONE DESIGNATIONS – PILTANTON BURN**

I write with regard to the SSI 2015 no. 376 (The Designation of Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (Scotland) Regulations 2015), to raise serious concerns about the impact this instrument could have on farmers within the Piltanton Burn area in the Stranraer Lowlands.

NFU Scotland (NFUS) welcomed the removal of more than 2,000 Scottish farms from Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs) in the latest review. Whilst it encourages all of Scottish agriculture to reduce, and if possible eliminate, diffuse pollution, NFUS generally advocates a voluntary rather than mandatory approach towards delivering environmental outcomes. NFUS therefore considers that the NVZ designation, one of the most bureaucratic and prescriptive types of regulation, will place significant red tape and costs on farmers and land managers without achieving genuine behavioural and attitudinal change.

In recent years, farmers and land managers in the Piltanton Burn area have voluntarily instigated a programme of capital investment and management changes which has led to a significant downward trend in nitrate levels in the Piltanton groundwater body. The Piltanton Burn Catchment Initiative has facilitated SRDP funding applications that have led to the construction of 43 new slurry stores – 60 percent of which will have been privately financed. Local farmers have fenced off 30 miles of watercourse as well as providing extra housing for wintering nearly 2,000 cattle. As a heavily stocked, early grass-growing livestock and dairy area, much of this activity and investment was undertaken in the hope of staving off NVZ designation.

This investment and change in practice has led to improvements in groundwater nitrate levels, and as such NFUS believes that it should justify a programme of self-regulation and monitoring, rather than forcing all producers in these areas to comply with complex and costly NVZ requirements.

Instead, NFUS agrees with Brian Pack MBE in his 'Doing Better' report that a self-regulation pilot should be established in the area. As outlined in our response to the Scottish Government's original consultation in spring 2014, SRUC's local staff based in Stranraer have already indicated a willingness to take a co-ordinating role in any such pilot, which could encourage further activities by local farmers to reduce groundwater and surface water diffuse pollution, perhaps by adoption of near NVZ-level practice.

NFUS has significant concerns that any move by the Scottish Government to implement the additional administrative burden of designating Piltanton Burn an NVZ at the current time of fragile farm economics would critically damage local faith in Scottish Government, SEPA and partnership working for environmental outcomes. With a vast number of farmers in the region in a particularly vulnerable position due to the sustained low prices for their products and move to an area-based CAP payment, NFUS suggests that the imposition of further regulations could leave many farmers in the area questioning the future viability of their businesses.

NFUS urges MSPs to vote for a motion to annul the SSI until alternative options for the area are given due consideration by Scottish Government. Should you wish, I would be pleased to discuss these issues in more detail.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. Allan Bowie'.

Allan Bowie

**President, NFU Scotland**