



Mr Allan Wilson MSP  
Deputy Minister for the Environment and Rural Affairs  
Pentland House  
47 Robb's Loan  
Edinburgh  
29<sup>th</sup> August 2003

Dear Mr Wilson

**Support Entitlement for Cattle Keepers in the North West and Similar Areas**

As a voluntary group of small scale producers we are most concerned to ensure that the needs of crofters and small scale family farmers like ourselves are considered.

NWCPA was created two years ago by local crofters whose aim is to halt and reverse the decline in cattle numbers in the north west parishes of Assynt, Eddrachilles, Durness Tongue and Farr in north west Sutherland. Cattle are indigenous to this environment – one of the most prized in both Scotland and Europe.

The decline in cattle numbers has depleted the characteristic variety of flowers, plants, birds and animals so central to the crofting landscape. Once cattle numbers drop below a certain level it is extremely difficult to reintroduce them as the infrastructure and skills vanish and cannot easily or economically be replaced. Regional market disadvantages due to geology, soils, weather and distance from markets make cattle keeping in these areas precarious at the best of times – a critical mass of cattle keepers is key to the health of the local communities, economies and environment.

In view of this we would like to suggest some ideas for consideration particularly in implementation of CAP reform. We suggest that you might seriously consider the implications of regional disadvantage for the core crofting areas of North Sutherland, West Sutherland, Wester Ross, Skye and Lochalsh, Lochaber, Argyllshire, Western Isles and Shetland. In our view it would be both appropriate and effective to channel extra or 'top-up' support to cattle keepers in these areas. Since Article 14-1 of *Council Regulation (EC) No 1254/199 of 17<sup>th</sup> May 1999 on the common organisation of the market in beef and veal* states that Member States can make additional payments to ensure equal treatment of producers and to avoid market disadvantage and competition

distortions, it must be noted that **lack** of meaningful extra support for cattle keepers in these fragile areas **increases** market disadvantage and further distorts the Scottish market by exacerbating the kinds of market disadvantages described above.

Under the same Council Regulation (EC) Article 3 c) makes clear that a 'region' can mean the Member State or a region **within** a Member State. This paves the way for special support for cattle keepers facing **regional** disadvantage while Article 9-3 allows Member States to decide for themselves who should be defined as a 'priority producer' in addition to newcomers and young farmers.

We ask that you consider making cattle keepers in the north west and similar areas 'priority producers'. In addition – and very much in tune with The Scottish Executive's own *Forward Strategy for Agriculture* – we ask that you consider the status of producers groups focused on cattle in the same areas. One very practical way to increase cattle numbers economically is through cattle stock clubs whereby stock and equipment is owned in common. Where cattle numbers have declined this can help to reduce start up costs and labour requirements. It also encourages co-operation between households and communities.

It is very important to note that the impact of Pillar 1 support in crofting communities is very different from the impacts via mainstream, large-scale farming. This kind of agricultural support for crofting areas involves relatively small amounts of money but has strong, positive social, economic and environmental benefits since crofting agriculture is low intensity and pivotal to the local communities and all associated activities.

There is a great danger that total decoupling will lead to further and finally irreversible decline in cattle numbers in the north west and other fragile areas after 2005. This would in turn damage fragile rural communities like our own currently investing a great deal of effort to return cattle to the ground for social, economic and environmental reasons. This voluntary effort needs to be backed up by appropriate support. Reversing the historic decline in cattle numbers will take many years and recent small gains could be totally undermined by lack of meaningful support under the new CAP system. For the decline to be stemmed cattle keeping must be economic in these areas – all we seek is a level playing field in that sense, which means financial support to off-set existing regional disadvantage. The National Envelope could be used in this respect.

We are particularly concerned that local producers who are just building up cattle numbers and producers in the north west who lack Suckler Cow Premium quota do not find themselves once again equally and perhaps doubly disadvantaged when decoupling arrives. Studies last year indicate a current shortfall of some 300 SCP units in the north west.

As it is we must consider the options under imminent CAP Reform. Since the National Envelope is aimed at specifically encouraging social, peripheral, environmentally friendly farming practises, quality products and marketing it provides an opportunity for government to fund north west cattle keepers.

If this mechanism could be used to support our work and that of our members and those in similar areas significant gains in terms of cattle numbers might be possible. Should further adjustments be made to the Rural Stewardship Scheme to make it genuinely accessible to the ordinary crofter significant gains in cattle numbers in the remote areas might be achieved. The RSS Small Unit prescription currently discriminates against the majority of crofters since the average croft size is several hectares more than the prescribed maximum.

We therefore ask that you include NWCPA in the forthcoming consultation process on CAP Reform, including the proposed Stakeholders Conference in October. So that the interests of our producers like ourselves in the north west crofting parishes are represented. If we can be of help in providing information or relevant examples we would be more than happy to assist.

Yours sincerely

Allan MacRae, NWCPA Chair

Cc: Jim Wildgoose; Jenny Hamilton; Andy Roberts; Jack MacConell

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