

Inter Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (IMG EFRA)

13 January 2020

The Inter Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs met on Monday 13 January at the Defra offices in 2 Marsham Street, London. The meeting was chaired by Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Theresa Villiers MP.

The attending Ministers were:

From the UK Government: Theresa Villiers MP Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice MP, Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Douglas Ross MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland, David TC Davies MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Wales and Lord Duncan, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

From the Scottish Government: Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy, Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (via VC from Edinburgh); and Mairi Gougeon MSP, Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (via VC from Edinburgh);

From the Welsh Government: Lesley Griffiths AM, Minister for Energy, Environment and Rural Affairs;

From the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Norman Fulton, Head of Food and Farming Group and Rosemary Agnew, Brexit Director, attended the meeting on behalf of Edwin Poots MLA, Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

All Ministers welcomed the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive and looked forward to welcoming the new Northern Ireland Agriculture Minister, Edwin Poots MLA to future meetings.

The Chair updated on political events following the General Election which took place at the end of 2019, noting that progress was being made in passing the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill in the UK Parliament in order to secure the UK's exit from the EU on 31 January 2020. Ministers from the Scottish and Welsh Governments welcomed that the immediate risk of a no deal exit had subsided but were concerned the self-imposed deadline to conclude trade deals by the end of 2020 put the UK at risk, once again, of an exit without an effective relationship with our biggest trading partner.

The group discussed preparations for trade negotiations with the EU and other countries around the world, focusing on the joint technical work that officials would

need to undertake in order to support negotiations including sharing relevant data and analysis per nation in order to understand opportunities and impacts. Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers raised concerns that there would be insufficient time available to negotiate a trade deal with the EU unless the implementation period was extended beyond the end of 2020. The Chair emphasised that the UK and EU have a shared intention to conclude a trade deal this year and that with determination, energy and pragmatism from both sides it will be possible to secure a successful deal that is mutually beneficial.

Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers raised concerns on the impact of new tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, particularly in terms of exports to the EU, and that the UK would concede on key EFRA issues in order to secure rapid trade deals with Third Countries, however the Chair reiterated the Government's commitment that it would not compromise on the UK's high environmental protection, animal welfare or food standards in any trade negotiations. Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers emphasised the importance of devolved administrations having clear and meaningful roles in the preparation and negotiation of trade deals in order to ensure that any trade deals work for the whole of the UK. The devolved administrations also sought assurances on the UK Government's future immigration policy, particularly on salary thresholds for visas, with a view to ensuring sustainable access to labour upon the ending of freedom of movement from the EU.

The group discussed Defra's primary legislation plans, noting the intention to introduce Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment Bills early in the current session, and the need to work collaboratively on any issues that touch on devolved matters. The group recognised the strong example of productive joint working demonstrated in the EU Exit secondary legislation programme, and agreed that officials should continue to work together to design the new programme of secondary legislation that will be required in 2020.

Defra and DAERA officials provided an update on the joint work taking place to assess the delivery requirements associated with the Northern Ireland Protocol provisions of the Withdrawal Agreement. The group agreed that technical work should take place with Scottish and Welsh Government officials as appropriate to ensure impacts and implications across the UK were being adequately considered.

The group noted that further work was taking place to review the EU Exit project portfolio to assess which key deliverables would still be required at the end of the implementation period once the future relationship with the EU has been negotiated and implemented.

Welsh and Scottish Government Ministers noted with disappointment the absence once again of a Treasury Minister or senior official, emphasising the need for greater certainty on future funding. The chair confirmed that a Treasury Minister would be invited to attend.

The meeting concluded with a commitment to continue working through matters of mutual interest in IMG meetings and the group noted that the next meeting was scheduled to take place in Belfast in February.