



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

Text of emailed letter from Julian Sturdy MP to the Prime Minister, Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP

18 September 2021

Dear Prime Minister

The close relationship between the UK and the US will be of critical importance to securing a successful and sustainable outcome to the forthcoming COP26 climate summit in Glasgow.

Nowhere is this more critical than in relation to food and agriculture, and the future policies which will enable more sustainable approaches to feeding a hungry, warming planet.

The APPG on Science and Technology in Agriculture recently hosted a meeting with high-level experts in crop science, agricultural economics, rural policy and conservation science, which highlighted the urgent need to optimise productivity on existing farmland, using the latest scientific knowledge and technological innovation, so reducing pressure on unfarmed habitats and environments – here and elsewhere - and minimising agriculture’s external impacts and greenhouse gas emissions per unit of food produced.

The meeting also highlighted genuine concerns that the UK’s policy focus on ‘sustainable intensification’ in agriculture – securing the optimum balance between food production, resource use and environmental protection - has been shelved in favour of a transition to support for less productive farming systems.

With the UN FAO Food Prices Index currently nudging levels similar to the food price spikes of 2008 that prompted food riots in 30 countries, it is not a question of ‘if’ there will be another global food security crisis, but ‘when’.

Against this background I do hope you will agree that it makes no sense to encourage more extensive systems of agricultural production here and simply export our food system impacts when the UK is blessed with good soils, a temperate climate, a highly professional and well-equipped farming sector and world-leading research institutes.

Earlier this week, US Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack called on other nations to join the US in a global coalition for agricultural productivity growth, directly challenging the notion that more sustainable equals less productive by demonstrating that farmers can adopt environmentally friendly and climate-smart farming practices without sacrificing productivity.

Secretary Vilsack said: “We think it's possible and appropriate for science and innovation to play a significant role in helping farmers be more productive and being more sustainable,” and that “biotechnology, gene editing, research and development, new precision agriculture are all strategies and techniques and technologies that can be used.”

We warmly welcome Lord Frost's announcement earlier this week that the Environment Secretary will shortly announce plans to reform the regulations governing the use of precision breeding techniques, such as gene editing, in agriculture. Members of our Group were instrumental in calling on the Government to set-aside the EU's regressive and unscientific approach to regulation in this area, which has stifled innovation and driven investment elsewhere.

However, a more enabling approach to regulation will only realise the potential opportunities in terms of more sustainable agriculture and food production if it is matched by pro-innovation policies which encourage and support the adoption of such technologies at farm-level.

In your forthcoming discussions with President Biden, we would strongly urge you – on behalf of the UK Government – to include the global coalition for agricultural productivity growth in our collaborative work programmes with the United States.

With best wishes

Julian Sturdy MP
Chair
APPG Science & Technology in Agriculture