



NEWS RELEASE

Use: Immediate

Date: 01/04/2024

MSPs demand better support for crofters, but new agriculture policy proposals leave little hope

While SCF welcomes the statements made by MSP's across the board in support of crofters and other small businesses in the Stage 1 debate on the Agriculture and Rural Communities Bill, the recently updated route map by the Scottish government does not live up to these aspirations.

Thanks to SCF's efforts in recent months, the urgent need to better support crofters and other small producers, including those under 3 hectares currently excluded from the system, has resonated with MSPs of all parties. In the stage 1 debate on the Agriculture and Rural Communities Bill held on Wednesday 27th March, SCF's asks for better support for smaller businesses and for the redistribution of direct payments from larger towards smaller producers (also known as 'frontloading') have featured prominently.

Rhoda Grant (Scottish Labour, Highlands and Islands) said 'At the moment, 50 per cent of the entire agricultural budget goes to the top 7 percent of recipients and that cannot be right', and highlighted that 'we need to make sure that this legislation is in keeping with other legislation such as the land reform bill, seeking to make our pattern of land ownership more diverse, yet the payments we are giving out at the moment encourage larger holdings and that simply isn't right'. Beatrice Wishart (Liberal Democrats, Shetland) said: 'Small producers and crofters play an important part in rural and island communities. The bill must work for farmers of all size and must be sensitive to the needs of crofters and small producers'.

Emma Harper (SNP, South Scotland) pointed to the importance of 'supporting our local producers, whether small-scale enterprises, or small-scale market gardeners, who can produce and provide food to local communities and short supply chains', and that capping and frontloading of area-based payments 'is certainly something I will be engaging in hearing the feedback from everybody'. Ariane Burgess (Scottish Green Party, Highlands and Islands) said: 'There have been strong calls to redistribute the budget away from the largest, wealthiest farms towards smaller producers and I wholeheartedly support this'. Tim Eagle (Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, Highlands and Islands) noted: 'It is hard for crofters and small farmers to get funding through the current area-based system' and that 'the Scottish government's proposal for a whole farm plan will pose real difficulties for medium and small-size units and crofters'.

Other MSPs, too, reiterated the calls for redistribution and better support for crofters and small producers. Mairi Gougeon, cabinet secretary for rural affairs, land reform and islands, conceded in her concluding remarks that 'I absolutely agree with the points raised on how important our smaller producers are'. However, as encouraging these statements are, we need to ensure that rhetoric is followed by action. Unfortunately, the recent updates on the agricultural reform route map do not look very promising in this respect.

Requirements in the whole farm plan, which sets the baseline for being eligible for support at all, include soil testing, carbon audits and biodiversity audits. Those do not only place a disproportionate financial burden upon small businesses and potentially eat up most of the funding many crofters are getting, but are also likely to come with additional administrative hurdles. Furthermore, in remote locations, the experts required for the auditing procedures are often not available in time, leaving crofters unable to comply with the entry requirements in the first place. As of now, there is no indication how the future framework will deal with the complexities surrounding common grazings when it comes to whole farm plan requirements,

including: who is responsible, who pays for the measures required and what happens if shareholders are refusing to participate.

Further, despite SCF insisting on a derogation for smaller herds, the Scottish government has decided to apply a calving interval conditionality to the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS) from 2025 which means that calves will only be eligible for funding if their dam has a calving interval threshold for 410 days or less. This disadvantages crofters who very often do not have their own bull, but rely on hired bulls from fellow crofters and farmers or the Scottish government's bull hire scheme. If those bulls have fertility issues, the calving interval conditionality cannot be complied with - without any fault on the respective crofter's part. We strongly urge the Scottish government to explain without delay how they will address the unjust outcomes likely to be faced by crofters in this respect.

As the bill is moving towards stage 2, SCF will keep pressing for a firm commitment to support crofters and small producers in the bill's objectives in order to hold the government accountable. We will keep on campaigning for the mandatory redistribution of area-based payments by setting a cap on the funding the largest farm estates get and allocating a larger share of direct payments to crofters and smaller producers. Beyond the framework bill, SCF keeps pressing on ensuring that any new policy will work for common grazings, especially with regard to enhanced conditionality requirements, and for capital grants being improved and made more accessible to crofters.

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