Wildlife Friendly Farming

I was delighted to support the RSPB and farmers today in Parliament to campaign for wildlife friendly farming. Balancing the demand for greater food production whilst preserving the environment is one of the greatest challenges we will face in modern times. Getting this right was set out as a goal in the government's Natural Environment White Paper. This is a crucial time to discuss this as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Owen Paterson will make a final decision later this year about how much of our farming budget will be put towards wildlife friendly and environmental farming measures.

There has been a great effort in recent years to raise awareness that biodiversity is declining; many of our of our species birds are in serious decline. This is due to a myriad of factors and changes in land use, different crops and alien species all take their toll on the local flora and fauna as well as pressure from development. Cirl buntings used to be resident across many parts of southern Britain and their decline is generally attributed to changes in agricultural practices. The projects to protect them through greener farming practices have been a great success.

I am proud to represent a rural constituency and glad to speak up for those who are the custodians of our countryside. Farmers often get a rough ride yet they are the ones who take much of the responsibility for protecting and enhancing the landscape, habitats and wildlife that we all enjoy. Farming is not like other businesses; the perception is often that the sector is unable to sustain itself and only held together by subsidies. I believe these subsidies benefit us all and will do so more in the future.

The RSPB in conjunction with the Telegraph have also created the Nature of Farming Award which highlights those landowners who are really working to benefit the natural environment. This year's winner expressed the view that farmers need to be given as much support as possible to put wildlife back in the land.

I agree with the government that it is better to reward farmers for the environmental good they provide rather than to give them income support. Therefore I would be happy to see more of our farming budget go towards wildlife friendly farming. It has already been shown that wildlife friendly farming can work, an increase in solitary bee species in Great Britain and hoverfly species in some parts of Europe have been partly attributed to EU agri-environment schemes that were initiated in 1992.

In fact a large amount of farmers have already signed up for schemes where they manage wildlife on their land, 70 per cent of agricultural land is now in such agreements. Some other good news is that pesticide usage has been going down in recent years and there has also been a revival of hedgeplanting, more than 170,000km of hedgerows are now under specific environment management. This is great progress as when managed correctly hedgerows are invaluable as both a foraging and nesting habitat, plus the tall hedgerow is one of Devon's scenic signatures!

Wildlife friendly farming makes sense as it simply means integrating wildlife friendly practices in to farming. Some feel the best way to preserve our wildlife is to designate areas solely for agriculture and separate ones solely to preserve wildlife, but there are issues with
this approach as the more fragmented wildlife is the harder it is for it to flourish is any meaningful way.

The renegotiations concerning the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have been a big issue in farming communities recently and rightly so. Subject to confirmation, in the next 7 years of the CAP we will receive £17.8 billion in Pillar 1 funding, which provides direct support to farmers and £1.84 billion in Pillar 2 funding, which is for the environment and rural development measures such as wildlife friendly farming initiatives. The next CAP programme will be crucial in delivering Defra's aims to improve the environment and safeguard animal and plant health.

I'm sure most will be glad that we pushed hard to ensure that it was accepted in principal that farmers in the EU should not be paid twice for carrying out the same environmental measures. However, I am glad that all EU countries will now have to spend at least 30% of their rural development budget on environmental measures, this is termed greening. The 30% of direct payments will be linked to three wildlife friendly practices, crop diversification, maintaining permanent grassland and maintaining an 'ecological focus area' of at least 5% of the arable area of a holding.

I know that some are disappointed with the disproportionate reduction in funding for Pillar 2 compared with Pillar 1 and a key issue in the CAP negotiations is the proportion of funds that each country will be allowed to switch between the two pillars, a process called modulation.

Debates over modulation rates have demonstrated that we have always been a step ahead with regard to environmental concerns as back in 2007 we secured an agreement enabling us to add an additional rate of modulation, which allowed us to fund UK Environmental Stewardship Schemes. Organisations such as the National Farmers Union are concerned that our farmers will be disadvantaged by any moves by the government to move more money in to Pillar 2 funding; however environmental organisations are keen to see the transfer.

Some remain indignant about farming subsidies and I do think some confusion remains about the purpose of direct aid for farmers. Is it simply income support or is it a payment to the agricultural community for environmental services rendered. I believe that more and more we will see that positive environmental management is the justification for such agricultural support.

I think that though many farmers are doing a terrific job safeguarding our beautiful countryside, we need to remember that we can all do our bit. I would encourage anyone with the space to at least let some grass grow and plant some wildflowers to encourage bees. You can find out more about such measures via the RSPB and their Give Nature a Home Campaign.