



Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

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Dear all,

I want to thank you and all those who supported my visit to Kingston Maurward College on 29 February to discuss the Poole Harbour Nutrient Management Scheme (PHNMS) and Nutrient Leaching Tool (NLT). I am grateful especially to all the farmers who took the time to attend and provide such detailed and constructive feedback to me and my officials.

I was encouraged to hear so many farmers' commitment to playing their part in supporting the recovery of Poole Harbour, which is a unique and special habitat of both local and international importance. I noted farmers' general support for effective tools which can help them make the right nutrient management decisions on the ground, with significant benefits for farm productivity as well as the environment. However, I also heard loud and clear the significant concerns of all those in the room about the development and governance of the NLT in practice in recent months.

These concerns related primarily to the instability of the scientific methodology underpinning the tool, the lack of a fit for purpose user interface, examples of unclear and inconsistent communications from the Environment Agency (EA), and an overall impression that Defra oversight was insufficient. These issues have caused understandable frustration and reduced confidence in the PHNMS as a shared endeavour, with action needed to restore trust.

I committed to rapidly pursue tangible improvements and am now able to confirm the following actions.

Firstly, I am pleased that both national and local EA officers have talked with farmers and their representatives in the Poole catchment in recent weeks to ensure greater shared understanding of the issues and their future management. I note that the Area Director met local farmer groups on 20 March, and again more recently, and is committed to continue regular engagement with the Poole Harbour Agricultural Group.

Secondly, the EA has paused their use of the latest version of the NLT while work is undertaken to assure its methodology is practically workable and takes on board the concerns raised. I understand this has now been communicated to local representatives. Further, in line with the request made by several attendees and recognising the potential wider benefits of this pilot if we get it right, a Defra official will join the PHNMS Technical Nutrients Group (TNG). The TNG will seek consensus on the methodology and evidence underpinning the scheme and agree all future changes. The EA will begin engagement with the TNG and experts on necessary revisions to the tool straight away, including to ensure it properly recognises modern farming practices, with the intention of impact testing a new version with farmers over the summer. Assuming clear support from participating farmers they expect to reintroduce a fit for purpose tool into the PHNMS in the autumn of this year.

Thirdly, the Environment Agency have confirmed they will firmly reestablish the principle that the PHNMS is a voluntary pilot scheme, developed in partnership between farmers, academics, and regulators. Its success depends on a high level of voluntary participation based on mutual trust and shared interests. The EA have discontinued any role for the NLT in the targeting of advice visits or other compliance activity. I have expressed my extreme disappointment to senior EA officials about the previous lack of clarity and my expectation that communication should be significantly improved.

Fourthly, I am commissioning Defra to work with the EA to explore options to improve the NLT's user experience and interoperability with other tools that farmers use. I fully agree with farmers that Excel is not a suitable permanent platform for a tool of this kind. Farmers in Dorset will be engaged on their specific asks for tool functionality through the Technical Group. I am clear that the tool must be simple and easy to use, and ideally have the ability to be interoperable with other DEFRA platforms.

Fifthly, the EA will ensure that their officers and Catchment Sensitive Farming advisers provide the right support to farmers in Dorset to manage nutrients efficiently. This is in the interests of both farm productivity gain and environmental improvement.

Finally, to ensure progress against the above, I am tasking EA national and area directors to provide me with a quarterly update on the PHNMS and the longer-term strategy for the catchment. The first report will be due by the end of April. This greater level of national oversight is important both for the success of the pilot in Dorset, and to ensure that lessons can be learned and applied elsewhere in future.

I hope that you and all those participating in the PHNMS will welcome these steps and continue to work closely with Defra Group to secure the future of Poole Harbour and a thriving agricultural sector in Dorset.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robbie Moore', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

ROBBIE MOORE MP

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs