

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS****Food Security****Date: 10 December 2008**

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn)

In July of this year, I published a discussion paper entitled *Ensuring UK Food Security in a Changing World*. I wanted to start a debate on the long-term challenges to our food security such as climate change, increased demand (particularly for some foods) and the energy dependence of our food supply. I also wanted to assess the impact of shorter term issues including export bans and rises in commodity prices, that are in part a consequence of these same challenges.

Annual food price inflation has now decreased from a peak of 14.5% in August 2008 to 11.2% in November. We expect it to continue to decline over the coming months, reflecting the falls we have seen in oil and commodity prices. The UK feed wheat price currently stands at £88 per tonne, less than half the peak of £185 back in March. Pig prices have edged down over recent weeks (where the change in the value of sterling continues to offset the impact of declining wider EU market prices), whilst cattle and sheep prices have remained relatively level. The average farmgate milk price in September (the latest month for which figures are available) was 27 p/litre, 17% higher than a year earlier, but we have seen price falls in many dairy commodity markets over recent months. The proportion of income spent on food by the UK's poorest twenty percent went up from 15.5% to 16.5% at the peak of food price inflation and is not likely to have changed substantially since July. We are doing further work to see what this has meant for food purchasing decisions.

We received over 100 written responses to July's paper and held three workshops. It was clear that many people, from producers to retailers and consumers, feel strongly about agriculture and food. A wide range of views were expressed ranging from support for intensive farming to calls for a radical rethinking about the relationship between traditional agricultural inputs and the food we produce. Issues raised included landscapes, water, food distribution, agricultural research, nutrition, and skills in farming and food sciences.

Many of those responding agreed that we should not base our food security policy on the pursuit of self-sufficiency, and the debate has shifted to a broader discussion of the complex factors that contribute to our food security. Twenty-six countries (including our own) provide 90% of our food consumption, with the majority coming from other EU countries. In addition, inputs to food production such as oil, fertiliser and feed, are globally traded commodities. Trade with developing countries is also important, and

respondents agreed that the Government needed to continue to pursue both radical CAP reform, and an agreement from the current Doha trade round. Nonetheless, UK production does - and will in the future - provide an important contribution to our food supply, which varies widely across sectors, from 10% in fruit, to over 100% in cereals.

As a result of all the comments we have had on our discussion paper, it seems clear that food security is most usefully looked at in terms of the resilience of our food supply chains, access to safe, nutritious, affordable and diverse foods, and ensuring the long-term environmental sustainability of the food and farming sector. Our agri-food sector, from farm gate to retail is hugely important. It is worth £79bn and employs 3.7 million people.

I am today announcing that the membership of The Council of Food Policy Advisers, which I have established to support our work on food security, affordability and sustainability, under the Chairmanship of Dame Suzi Leather, will be:

- Sir Don Curry
- Sue Davies, MBE
- Professor Elizabeth Dowler
- Professor Gareth Edwards-Jones
- Iain Ferguson, CBE
- Paul Kelly
- Professor Tim Lang
- Guy McCracken
- Claire Pritchard
- Dame Fiona Reynolds
- Geetie Singh
- Tim Smith
- Stefan Tangermann

Additional members will be announced later.

I will ask the Council to advise on what may be necessary in future to ensure that we have a secure and sustainable food system in the UK. I will also invite the Council to examine the draft indicators for food security that Defra has been developing in light of the responses we have had. We will continue to work with stakeholders as we develop these and consider broader risks to our food security.

The UK's food security is strongly linked to global food security. The Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor John Beddington's, Foresight project on the Future of Food and Farming is looking to 2050 and examining how we will feed a global population of 9 billion healthily, equitably, and sustainably, and what implications this has for UK policy.

Part of the answer lies in promoting environmentally sustainable agriculture throughout the world. The Government will continue to support this, drawing on domestic and international research and expertise including this year's International Agricultural Assessment headed by Professor Bob Watson, Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser.

In addition, the Government will continue to press for the establishment of a Global Partnership for Agriculture and Food Security (GPAFS). GPAFS will bring together governments, international institutions and civil society to help develop national and international plans for agriculture, food security and nutrition and support increased sustainable agricultural production.

I also welcome the EFRA Select Committee's announcement that they will be holding an inquiry into the strengths and weaknesses of the UK food system, and the opportunities and challenges the country faces in responding to the global demand for increased food production. Defra looks forward to submitting evidence.

The Government is committed to ensuring sustainable food security in the face of climate change and a rapidly increasing global population. To do so will require leadership in the UK, co-operation with other countries and a transformation in our international institutions. I will update the House as this work develops.