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Dear Anne Dacey

### **Challenges and Choices consultation**

Following several meetings of the Agriculture & Land-Based Working Group during the third cycle of river basin management plans (RBMPs), the industry has come together to write this letter as a joint response to the Challenges & Choices consultation. Of course, the consultation is extremely broad, covering many different issues relevant to farmers and land managers, but here we focus our thoughts on questions 19 and 20 in the 'pollution from agriculture and rural areas' section. For our views on the remaining questions, please see the separate responses from each organisation.

Agriculture has made great strides in reducing its impact on the environment over recent decades while, at the same time, increasing the total volume of agricultural output. For example, nitrogen fertiliser usage has fallen by more than a third in England and Wales since the mid-1980s, which has helped to reduce the UK nutrient balance for nitrogen to a similar degree. The figures for phosphorus are even more marked, showing usage and the nutrient balance sheet for phosphorus have more than halved. Such achievements are significant and recognising the past successes of farmers and land managers will be key to motivating and driving forward further progress. The task ahead is to support those regions, sectors, and farms where the nitrogen and phosphorus balances still need improvement – reducing surplus and also correcting pH and soil fertility where levels are limiting to overall efficient nutrient use of nitrogen and phosphorus.

It is true, however, that some of the environmental gains made over recent decades have lost momentum in the last few years. These positive trends need to be reenergised, but farmers and land managers cannot do this alone. All stakeholders must work together to further reduce the pressure of food production on the environment. With their emphasis on bringing organisations, stakeholders, and communities together, RBMPs provides an opportunity to facilitate this kind of partnership working to back a common direction of travel.

The planned Environmental Land Management scheme provides an opportunity to increase funding for protecting the water environment alongside innovation to maintain farm productivity. In the meantime, the Government could increase uptake of Countryside Stewardship by removing the well-documented barriers to entry; expand the scope of the Catchment Sensitive Farming project beyond priority catchments to cover the whole of England; and provide more support for proven, industry-led initiatives such as Championing the Farmed Environment, Tried & Tested, and the Voluntary Initiative.

There are also opportunities to support farmers and land managers to safeguard the environment through the private sector. For instance, water companies are increasingly

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providing advice to farmers on reducing nutrients and pesticides in water and offering rewards for adopting new practices. We broadly welcome this approach and see it as a strong example of partnership working for the next RBMPs. In the longer-term, we would like to see Payments for Ecosystem Services initiatives developed further, so more farmers have the encouragement to protect the water environment in this way.

Specifically, more financial support is needed for infrastructure projects like slurry stores; new technologies like low emission spreading equipment; and innovative ways to upgrade nutrient management planning software/decision-making tools. This would help farmers achieve the link between improved optimisation of nutrients for economic productivity, lower carbon emissions and losses to water and air by providing the best possible techniques, tools and skills in nutrient management, which lie at the heart of jointly delivering for the environment and productivity. All support for new software/tools should cater for livestock farmers as well as arable and be free and simple to use, help map progress at a glance, flag latest legislative requirements, and be easily incorporated into day-to-day decision-making.

The industry is keen to collaborate with the Government and the private sector to find innovative and practical solutions that benefit both productivity and the environment. We believe the key to driving innovation in farming will be sufficient investment in research, development, and knowledge transfer.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter; we hope you find our views useful for drawing up the new RBMPs. We remain committed to working with the Government to find solutions for the water environment and look forward to further engagement through the Agriculture & Land-Based Working Group as the third cycle continues.

Yours sincerely



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