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*From the Foreign Secretary and Vice-President Sir Brian Heap CBE FRS*

27 September 2001

Our ref: rq/defra

Dear Mr Dixon,

### **Response to the consultation on DEFRA's aims and objectives**

The Royal Society welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft aims and objectives of the new Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have prepared our response in consultation with members of the Royal Society's Environmental Advisory Group.

#### **Importance of science in underpinning DEFRA's work**

We are particularly concerned to see no explicit reference to science in the entire document. The guidelines on scientific advice and policy making issued by the Chief Scientific Advisor in July 2000 highlights the need to obtain the best possible scientific advice from a wide variety of sources. Even in such a short document we would therefore expect to see a commitment obtaining and using such scientific advice and to the funding of high quality research programmes to support policy development. We note that in Section 6 on Partnership, the scientific research community is not listed as one of the groups that DEFRA would value a contribution from. We would welcome an assurance from DEFRA that they will work in partnership with the scientific community and will ensure adequate independent scientific representation on the various advisory bodies and stakeholder groups that they oversee. The ability to identify organisms of all types in the field and to understand their natural history is necessary to achieve DEFRA's objective of conserving and enhancing biodiversity. However there is concern that the number of people with this ability is declining and collaboration with the scientific community and research funders will be necessary to ensure that it is possible to meet DEFRA's objective. We understand that DEFRA is in the process of recruiting a Chief Scientific Advisor. The Chief Scientific Advisor should have a major role in shaping departmental policy and we would therefore expect their input to be reflected in the final version of the DEFRA Aims and Objectives.

#### **Aiming for sustainable development**

We welcome DEFRA's overall aim to achieve sustainable development, however this cannot be achieved without addressing the issue of sustainable consumption. DEFRA is in a unique position to take the lead across government in asking what level of consumption is sustainable in respect of UK agricultural production, fishing and forests, what new science is relevant to improve the efficiency of production, and what new fiscal measures are needed. The UK should encourage other members of the European Union to do the same. The absence of economics

from a programme aimed at achieving sustainable development will prevent DEFRA from achieving its overall aim.

### **Taking the lead on the environment**

It is vital that the objective of protecting and improving the environment is a central part of Government discussions and decisions. We therefore believe that Objective 1 should state that DEFRA intends to lead on environmental issues across Government, not merely to integrate them. It is not clear how DEFRA will be able to meet its objectives on issues such as air pollution, climate change, energy and transport if they do not have a clear lead role with respect to the other government departments concerned. A clear commitment by DEFRA to take a lead role could allay the concern expressed by many that the environment has been downgraded in the departmental restructuring. Finally, it would be useful if the document could incorporate a definition of the term environment that makes it clear that DEFRA's responsibilities include the urban, rural and aquatic environments.

### **Food and farming**

The government has recently launched three major inquiries on British farming and livestock disease. In particular, the Policy Commission on the future of farming and food has been established to advise the Government on how to create a sustainable, competitive and diverse farming and food sector. We would strongly advise DEFRA to wait until the conclusions of all three inquiries are available before finalising its objectives. We are pleased that the Policy Commission on the future of farming is addressing the issue of competition. We believe that a much stronger commitment is required by DEFRA to considering how UK food production could be turned into a major UK export industry (such as has developed in the Netherlands) and that steps should be put in place to ensure that farmers tackle the opportunities to compete in the European and international markets. The recent Royal Society report on the sites of special scientific interest<sup>1</sup> has highlighted the fact that agricultural damage is the largest single cause of damage to such sites in the UK. We would welcome a specific commitment to address the conflict between agriculture and wildlife conservation.

We hope that these comments will contribute to subsequent drafts of DEFRA's aims and objectives. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further clarification on any of the points outlined above.

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Society (2001) The Future of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) ISBN 0 85403 552 4. Available from the Royal Society or at <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/policy>.