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Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Ynni, Cynllunio a Materion Gwledig  
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Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref  
Ein cyf/Our ref

Russell George AM  
Chair, Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee

19 June 2018

Dear Russell

Thank you for your letter of 25 May regarding the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's work on precision agriculture.

The industry must embrace precision agriculture as a means to becoming more profitable and resilient, particularly as we transition from the EU. It is important to view precision agriculture as wider than simply machinery. Particularly for livestock farming, the gathering and use of data along with advanced breeding technologies are equally, if not more important than the machinery which you heard about in your evidence session.

In terms of machinery, Professor Blackmore's examples of targeted weed control were linked to high value crops such as horticulture and cereals. I fully support these advances in technology for those sectors, however, it is currently out of the reach of many grassland farmers in terms of the cost, but also in terms of the returns it would bring to grassland systems.

On the other hand, the examples given by Mr Llewelin in terms of targeted application of nutrients is being adopted on many Welsh farms. The Farm Business Grant, part funded by the Rural Development Programme, has many of these technologies available and I have supported a number of farms to purchase GPS technology for the targeted application of fertiliser and pesticides.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

The dairy industry has been quick to adopt new innovation and technology through superior genetics, greater use of data as well as robotic milking. The Sustainable Production Grant, also part funded by the Rural Development Programme, has many examples of support given to farmers to adopt new precision agriculture technologies to increase productivity.

### **Barriers**

The examples above demonstrate the Welsh Government's support to farmers to adopt precision agriculture technologies and many farmers have already benefited from this support. I will review the support we offer on an ongoing basis to ensure it continues to be relevant to the industry, however, given the EU regulations which we are currently adhering to – we are still in the EU - farmers must provide 60% of their own funding towards any capital investment.

The Welsh Government is working to improve both broadband and mobile phone coverage across Wales and this will help support precision agriculture. The Superfast Cymru project has provided over 684,000 homes and businesses across Wales with access to superfast broadband, including agricultural businesses. Alongside the commercial offer, this represents around 94 per cent of premises have access to superfast broadband. A tender is currently underway on a contract to extend superfast broadband still further.

In addition, the Welsh Government has developed a mobile action plan with the mobile phone industry and other partners including the farming unions and CLA Cymru. The plan addresses nine key levers at the disposal of the Welsh Government to improve mobile coverage particularly in rural areas. The plan aims to create an environment that encourages investment in mobile infrastructure in Wales such as changes to the planning regime for mobile phone masts. Currently, data services (3G and 4G) are available from all operators across 70 per cent of the Welsh landmass with five per cent not covered by any operator.

### **Opportunities**

The Welsh Government recognises the skills and expertise within Welsh academic institutions and businesses which has relevance to precision agriculture. A recently funded project, Geographical Data and Earth Observation Monitoring (GEOM) is a partnership between Qinetiq and Aberystwyth University which has the farming sector as one of its key target markets. It will support the use of geographical data from satellites or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for such activities as environmental monitoring or crop trials.

During the project development process, feedback was given to the project sponsors to broaden their proposal to include greater support for precision agriculture and the project has now committed to work with the Welsh Government's programme, Farming Connect to access existing mechanisms to directly assist the farming community. The GEOM project will not be able to cover every aspect of precision agriculture but will provide fresh resource and expertise as a basis on which to develop new activity.

In parallel with the GEOM project, the Welsh Crucible (led by Swansea University but covering all of Wales) is currently undertaking a Science and Innovation Audit, funded by the Department of Business Enterprise and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and using the external consultants Technopolis. The audit will examine four main themes, one of which is agri food and will look for evidence of capability and opportunity within Wales. The audit covers all major Welsh Universities and will provide a reliable and comparable baseline on the status of agri food capability in Wales. Once completed, it will allow us to identify opportunities and any gaps within Wales and to be able to recommend any further action to develop the sector.

### **Calls for support**

The Welsh Government, through its Farming Connect programme offers farmers with a wide range of support related to precision agriculture. The service offers support for benchmarking allowing farmers greater access to data in relation to their financial and technical performance. Farmers can also access subsidised training and technical advice on topics related to precision agriculture. As part of the Farming Connect demonstration farm network, we showcase a number of technologies, processes and practices which demonstrate the benefits of precision agriculture in real-farm situations. I have asked Farming Connect to review its demonstration, innovation and focus sites to ensure they are at the cutting edge of farming practices to inspire other farmers to adopt these techniques.

I have not received any representation from the industry to notify me of legislative barriers to adopting some of these technologies, however, I will continue to work closely with the industry to ensure I support them where I can.

I continue to make available the Farm Business Grant for farmers to access up to £12,000 of grant to make relatively small investments in their farm. There are a number of items relating to precision agriculture on the list which have been pre-identified as being relevant to modern agriculture, a number of which relate to precision agriculture. The items have been specified and costed to simplify the grant application process whilst offering the maximum flexibility to the farmer. My officials continue to work closely with the industry to ensure these items offer a step change to our agriculture sector in order to increase productivity.

The development and delivery of the technology for precision agriculture is the responsibility of Ken Skates AM, Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Infrastructure and Science and I am aware he discussed some of these matters with the Committee on 7 June. During his evidence, he also discussed the Digital Innovation review currently being carried out by Professor Phil Brown. As this work progresses I will be keen to ensure the needs of the agriculture industry are addressed.

### **Welsh Government preparedness**

With regard to calls for the development of a precision agriculture strategy, I am clear that in respect of my portfolio responsibilities, it is better to consider precision agriculture within the context of a much broader modernisation agenda. I am working closely with the industry to ensure our policies, our regulatory framework and our support mechanisms all work together to ensure a prosperous and resilient agriculture sector for Wales.

Precision agriculture offers farmers the opportunity to use technology and innovation to increase productivity and build resilience into their businesses. We all need to work together across the industry to ensure these businesses capitalise on the opportunities available to them.

Regards  
Lesley

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