

NATURAL ENGLAND BOARD



Meeting # 1
17 October 2006

Item [M3]

Title: CEO Update 11th October

Purpose.

This report replaces the weekly CEO updates that I had been providing and it will be a standing item for each Board meeting from now on. The CEO update will contain three elements. Key issues, a performance report and a financial report.

Key issues

A Healthy Natural Environment

- We wrote to 52,00 agri –environment Scheme holders last week to inform them of the change to Natural England and to provide them with key information regarding new contact details. Despite the scale of the task we are pleased to report that relatively few enquires were made following the letter. 200 telephone queries were received which is less than half of one percent of the total.
- The Board will receive papers next spring regarding the confirmation of the Dungeness SSSI. This is a complex case involving a large number of owner occupiers as well as a nuclear power station within the boundary. Staff within the Risk and Governance team, National Programme Delivery and the Regional Team will be working together to develop a process for dealing with this important piece of notification work.

Enjoyment of the Natural Environment

- We are expecting to launch the Health Campaign at the end of October with a call to partners to join us in delivering the campaign. MIND, a mental health charity is already on board and we hope to get agreement from the British Heart Foundation shortly.

Sustainable use of the Natural Environment

- Natural are opening negotiations with the 15 Local Authorities, DGLA and the National Federation of House Builders regarding proposed housing development around the Thames Basin Heaths SPA. We are working to agree a mechanism through which new recreational green space would be provided for new and existing residents, which would in turn help reduce pressure on the SPA.

A Distinctive Public Body

- We have agreed a budget for 2006/07, which will enable funding to be released immediately for a range of critical environmental projects. Following a review, priorities priority projects have

been agreed for implementation in this financial year on the basis of the settlement and planning assumptions for 2007/08 in line with our Strategic Direction. These include the programmes focused on delivering the Government's targets to increase the number of SSSIs in favourable condition to 95% by 2010 and to reverse the long term decline in farmland birds. The attached letter from the Chair to the Minister provides further details. See annex A.

- By the Board meeting we will have held the Natural England National Launch. There has been a great deal of media interest, both print and broadcast following the issue of 40 national press packs and 400 regional press packs. The packs contain a press release, regionally tailored where appropriate and information on the four Natural England campaigns. Preparations for the regional launches are well underway and will start on the 12th October in the North East region.
- We held the first phase of manager induction events in Doncaster, Sheffield and London. The sessions, lead by Executive Directors and ELG members, concentrated on outcomes, the Natural England leadership environment and how we will work. All the events have been positive and upbeat. Participants reported that they found it useful to meet each other and form new networks as well as to have the opportunity to meet members of the Executive team. Further phases are planned that will cover encouraging high performance and influencing outcomes.

Helen Phillips
11th October September 2006

Annex A

Barry Gardiner
Minister for Biodiversity, Landscape and Rural Affairs
Defra
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR

9th October 2006

Dear Barry

Thank you for your very timely letter providing your views on Natural England's Strategic Direction. I am writing to advise you how we plan to address the priorities you have outlined, on the assumption that the budget for Natural England will be finalised ahead of the launch of Natural England by the Secretary of State on Wednesday.

I know that you appreciate that Natural England can only lift the expenditure moratorium once we have received written assurances from the Department regarding the outstanding financial risks and liabilities we have inherited. However I understand our staff are working strenuously to bring these issues to a conclusion ahead of Wednesday's launch.

I have written to you separately regarding our delivery of the agri-environment budget, which along with delivering our statutory roles on natural conservation and access, we regard as central to our licence to operate. Funding has been prioritised to these functions which I am fully confident that we are able to deliver.

After completing an extensive review of our existing commitments and the impact of the in-year cuts, subject to final agreement on the budget we believe that we will be able to preserve all of the critical areas of delivery that you have identified:

- We will deliver in full the programmes which contribute to the SSSI, farmland birds and England Biodiversity Strategy PSA targets, which will involve committing a further £5m over the remainder of the financial year;
- Our receipt of separate funding of £1.85m over two years for the survey of the marine environment, will enable us to fund a range of other activities which will collectively progress efforts to establish a coherent network of marine protected areas;
- We will deliver the Catchment Sensitive Farming project in all priority catchments. In nine of the priority catchments, we will also be in a position to develop fully integrated catchment strategies, addressing priorities for land, water, flora and fauna conservation;

- Our work on climate change will be a key priority with a major focus on how we plan for adaptation, including working at the landscape scale and planning for connectivity and resilience of ecosystems. Our work on the role of land managers as carbon managers along with significant efforts to address greenhouse gas pollution from our own activities will also be a focus;
- We will be in a position to resource our active involvement in planning activities at a national, regional and local level, with a particular focus on Growth Areas and major public enquiries;

As you noted in your letter, connecting people with the natural environment will be a major thrust of our work. This will include:

- Providing you with timely advice on the options for improving coastal access drawing on the work of the Countryside Agency;
- Being in a position to commence our work to promote preventative health solutions, through raising awareness of the opportunities for access to the natural environment to play an important role in mental and physical health.

We appreciate the efforts that you have made to ensure that the budget to establish Natural England has not been cut. This will enable us to accelerate the integration of the organisation and capture the benefits that will come from joined up service delivery.

I look forward to seeing you at the launch on Wednesday.

Yours sincerely

Martin Doughty
Chair, Natural England