

Parliamentary Question:

Is soil understood as a public good within Environmental Land Management?

Submitted June 2019 by Rebecca Pow MP

Oral Question:

As the Secretary of State will know, soil health is a topic that is extremely close to my heart and so I was delighted to hear him confirm at last year's Real Oxford Farming Conference that under the post-CAP Environmental Land Management scheme public money will reward people who look after their soil and in particular farmers whose practices build soil carbon.

Since then the messages from officials regarding soil's place in our future policy have been mixed, with healthy soil being described variously as the golden thread that runs through all Environmental Land Management and as a natural asset from which public goods can flow – but not necessarily a public good in itself, and therefore not a beneficiary – or an environmental outcome - that is eligible for direct investment.

Would the Secretary of State be willing to clarify his vision and his understanding in this regard – **whether he sees soil health as a public good on its own terms, or merely a proxy or gateway for other benefits** – biodiversity, flood risk management and food productivity.

I would also welcome greater clarity from him regarding the relationship between public monies and the existing regulatory framework for soil, including the eight farming rules for water. Can he confirm that any breach of these rules – which are there to prevent some (but not all) practices that cause most damage to our soil and downstream water quality - will disqualify applicants from receipt of taxpayers' money?

Given that recent estimates put the costs of soil degradation in England and Wales at £1.4 billion, does he agree that any investment in our soil that would capitalise on a growing groundswell of interest amongst our farmers and kickstart an era of widespread soil appreciation represents not just wise environmental stewardship but also excellent value for money?

Minister of State for Agriculture, Rt Hon Robert Goodwill:

Soil is one of our greatest assets, and indeed the numerous environmental benefits and services that can be derived from activities that enhance soil health will be eligible for public money.