

2017.11.14

**2.3 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier of the Minister for the Environment regarding the use of artificial fertiliser, herbicide and pesticide on Jersey fields: [1(608)]**

What steps, if any, is the Minister currently taking to limit the amounts of artificial fertiliser, herbicide and pesticide being applied to fields in Jersey?

**Deputy S.G. Luce of St. Martin (The Minister for the Environment):**

While there is still very much more to do there are a number of steps I am taking with my department, and indeed all parts of the industry, to minimise the amount of fertiliser and pesticides applied to land. Many of these measures and actions are contained within the agreed Rural Economy Strategy and the Water Management Plan. Some of these include providing best practice advice on the control of pest disease and weeds, promoting non-chemical solutions and recommending an appropriate least harmful approach, encouraging growers to meet Red Tractor and L.E.A.F. (Leading, Environmentally Friendly) best practice standards through the rural support scheme, working with the Action for Cleaner Water group to implement further measures to reduce all inputs on agricultural land, continuing to provide best guidance under the Water Pollution Law, promoting the uptake of controlled release and precision placement of fertilisers, regulating the use of pesticides and banning the use of some pesticides based on sound scientific evidence. I will continue to work with the industry and farmers and land managers to implement further measures to minimise the use of pesticides, fertilisers and herbicides on our land.

**2.3.1 The Connétable of St. Helier:**

I do not know whether the Minister saw last week's *Inside Out* documentary about the seaweed problem at St. Aubin's Bay. It went on to look at a successful trial of organic alternatives to artificial fertiliser for Jersey Royals. Is he aware of that work and does he believe that the Island should be moving towards organic farming rather than the farming that is dependent on the application of artificial substances?

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

I did not see the programme but I was aware that it was going on. I am aware also of the trial at St. Ouen that the Constable refers to. I would say to the Constable, he has heard one side of the story but there are other sides to hear as well. While some aspects of that trial may have been highly successful there are others that have not been so. But as regards sea lettuce and organic farming in the Island, we do have an organic action plan. It has been my desire for some time to bring organic farmers together. I have encouraged them to do so but they are a different group of people, not always easy to herd. Trying to get them to work together has been difficult. On one end of the scale we have very small organic farmers who have a lifestyle that they wish to enjoy. On the other hand, we have large commercial operators who run organic farms, supplying large multiples in the U.K.

[10:00]

Trying to come up with a plan for one-size-fits-all is a challenge but I will continue to work with them and help to support them where possible. Finally, I have to say to the Constable, while organic farming may be the desire of some, moving forward the industry certainly could not survive as it currently is if we were to move entirely to organic.

**2.3.2 Senator S.C. Ferguson:**

There are also calls for banning various weed killers for private use. Will the Minister also look into suitable weed killers for our ageing population in their gardens because not all of them are going to be able to crawl round on their hands and knees weeding? We are going to have an awful lot of older people and we do not really want all their gardens getting overgrown with weeds, I think.

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

The encouragement of people to use vegetable plots and grow their own fruits and vegetables has to be encouraged. It is a great way to live. It certainly gives people an occupation in retirement and I know a lot of people enjoy it. I can say to the Senator that chemicals these days are very much more strictly controlled than they ever have been before. The amounts we use are reduced on an annual basis and chemicals are much safer than they were, and I can assure the Senator the chemicals we use are safe to do so and, where possible, we will not be banning them.

**2.3.3 Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:**

The Minister responded with the word “herding”. Would he agree that the farming conference that was held on Friday was a particularly good example of constructive herding? Would he further agree that the opportunities for Jersey to use digital, which is a word that he has not used yet in his answers to the Constable’s questions, and it is the advance of digital technology and the application of fertilisers, whether they be drones in Senator Ferguson’s garden or whether they be driverless tractors that can apply exactly the right of amount of fertiliser and limit it in the right places that is probably going to have the best environmental advantage in the longer term? Would he agree?

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

Absolutely. I would like to concur with the Senator on that. We had a very successful farming conference last Friday attended by many more people than we expected. In the morning we concentrated on agriculture, the afternoon more so the dairy farmers, but I can say to the Senator, technology is the way forward and precision application of fertiliser will be a way - along with pesticides - technology will help us to do that. I can further tell the Assembly that our Jersey Royal Potato Company next year, following their very successful trials, will be applying precision fertiliser applications on 90 per cent of their land and looking forward to reducing their fertiliser inputs by something around 25 to 30 per cent next year. Given that they are by far the largest potato company in Jersey that is to be applauded and I encourage all other farmers to take that and move forward on the same vein.

**2.3.4 Connétable J.E. Le Maistre of Grouville:**

I also attended the conference last Friday and it was excellent and very informative. Most of the commentators within the industry and outside the industry agree that great improvements have been made in reducing agricultural inputs. Would the Minister agree with that assessment?

**The Deputy of St. Martin:**

I will. Our streams are better than they have been for very many years and we continue to make great strides. I just take the opportunity to reiterate yet again that I take my hat off to the farming industry for coming to the table. We have the Action for Cleaner Water Group, which I mentioned earlier, which comprises myself and members of my department, Jersey Water and representatives from the farming community, Farmers Union and the R.J.A. (Royal Jersey Agricultural [and Horticultural Society]). We have been working really hard on this in the last 2 years. We are seeing some significant improvements and the quality of our water, while still we have improvements to make, is better than it ever has been.

### **2.3.5 Deputy K.C. Lewis of St. Saviour:**

Is the Minister aware of the growing arguments against both domestic and commercial uses of the weed killer glyphosate? I think the arguments are growing all over the world at the moment. Regarding nitrates in the land, which have been used excessively in the past, can the Minister give an indication of how long this would take to flush out of the land?

#### **The Deputy of St. Martin:**

As Members may well know, fertilisers, pesticides, chemicals move through soil at different rates, which is why in St. Ouen and the Val de Mare area, in particular, we have the greatest problems because that is predominantly pure sand soil. Those chemicals move through the soil in that part of the Island much quicker and give us more issues. As regards chemicals like glyphosate, for example, yes, there is a lot of discussion around Europe and around the globe about chemicals at the moment, but I can assure the Assembly that the chemicals that we approved in Jersey come directly from the list approved by the U.K., and if the U.K. scientists and authorities decide to ban chemicals we will do so immediately as well. We are a small island, we do not have the capacity scientifically to analyse and do a lot of work but we do follow very carefully the U.K. and E.U. (European Union) guidelines when it comes to using chemicals.

### **2.3.6 Deputy M. Tadier:**

A couple of years ago there was a story that was raised about the amount of potatoes that get dumped every year. Can the Minister give us an update about how many potatoes each year get wasted or dumped for whatever reason? Can he also say whether we need to be thinking about, as an Island, producing quality rather than quantity and what steps could we take to end this spiral, which ultimately ends in wastage and environmental destruction?

#### **The Deputy of St. Martin:**

I cannot give the Deputy precise numbers but I can tell the Assembly that the amount of potatoes that leave the field but do not find themselves exported or on the supermarket shelf is several thousands of tonnes. In particularly bad years this could potentially run to 5 figures. But what I can tell the Deputy is this: that great strides are being made to make sure that every potato that comes out of the ground is sold. There is no benefit to the farmer growing crops which they cannot sell, which is why things like precision fertiliser application and selection of seed goes ahead. The farmers want to grow the crops they can sell. There is no benefit to them for using chemicals and fertiliser and then not selling those products. While there is always some that do not leave the Island that number, I hope, continues to reduce. But it is a subject that I have spoken to the industry about over the years. They are in a difficult situation but certainly I am aware that they do offer some of the potatoes that do not leave the Island to charities for their benefit.

### **2.3.7 Deputy M. Tadier:**

I am glad to hear that there is a policy of no potato being left behind in the Minister's department. But does he accept the point that if we adopted a quality control system ... I am always asked the question and I ask it as well: what is wrong with a good old fashioned bit of vraic, which was used in the fields in the past? If we concentrated on a very high quality premium product to be sold rather than competing desperately with market forces that the industry cannot ever hope to compete with, with the big 4 in the U.K. supermarkets, is that not the direction that Jersey should be going? Whatever happened to getting Jersey towards the aspiration of 100 per cent organic? Is that still on the table?

#### **The Deputy of St. Martin:**

I do not know that we have ever had an aspiration to be 100 per cent organic, and it certainly is not on the table to turn the Island into 100 per cent organic. I would further say to the Deputy, the Jersey Royal potato is a premium quality potato. It is a niche product. It is desired all over the world. I know we cannot get it there but certainly in the U.K. it is a quality product and it will continue to be a quality product. The work that we do to improve that quality goes on year by year. It is far better than it ever was before. I finish by saying: yes, I wish more farmers would use vraic but certainly it is not a practice which has been stopped. A number of farmers in the St. Ouen area make use of the free seaweed in that corner of the Island is quite prolific. Also in Grouville Bay. But the problem with vraic, and everybody would want to use it, but it is the cost of applying it to the soil. We are yet to devise a machine which can spread vraic off the beach evenly across our fields. It still is a very manual operation. It is not so expensive to load because it can be there in vast quantities but when it comes to spreading it in the fields it is still quite manual. It is an expensive thing to do and unfortunately that is the case because I could only encourage more and more farmers to use it.

### **2.3.8 Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:**

Senator Ferguson's question was not answered in respect of her old age pensioners and their gardens and their weeds. Would the Minister also suggest perhaps that a conference could be held on a digital solution to that where you can get a robot to go round and deal with your weeds rather than applying fertilisers and herbicides? There is a solution for even O.A.P.s (old age pensioners) to be environmentally friendly rather than lashing out and putting lots of harmful chemicals in gardens.

### **The Deputy of St. Martin:**

When it comes to lashing out, I can assure Members I will not be lashing out on the cost of a conference to encourage old age pensioners to buy robots to weed their gardens. **[Laughter]**

### **The Connétable of St. Helier:**

My supplementary questions have all been very ably answered and I would like to thank the Minister for his comprehensive set of answers this morning.