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for Environment,
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Dear Nicola,

Thank you for your joint letter of 25 February with over 40 signatories, to the Secretary of State, about grasslands. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and I apologise for the considerable delay in responding. Unfortunately, we have no record of your original correspondence. I would be grateful if you would share this response with the other signatories.

We appreciate your interest in our grasslands ecosystems and recognise their importance as a species-rich habitat.

There is no single group responsible for grassland policy, as policies affecting grasslands cut across several Defra policy areas. These include Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs), National Biodiversity, Protected Sites, the Land Use Framework and Protected Landscapes. There are also a range of habitat and species specialists in Natural England, including for grasslands.

This government is committed to delivering our legally binding biodiversity targets which includes our habitat target to restore or create 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat outside of protected sites by 2042. We are delivering this target over a wide range of habitats, including wildlife-rich grasslands.

The paper 'Environment Act Habitat Target – Definitions and Descriptions', developed jointly by Defra and Natural England, provides detail about what counts towards the statutory habitat target for those involved in on-the-ground activities to restore or create wildlife-rich habitats. It includes the list of wildlife-rich habitats, of which several are grasslands, such as lowland dry acid grassland, upland hay meadows, and upland calcareous grassland.

We are working with key partner organisations on grasslands-related projects, for example to protect and restore nature-rich chalk grasslands in Protected Landscapes (National Landscapes, National Trails and National Parks) through the Big Chalk partnership.

For our urban green spaces, we have the strengthened biodiversity duty on public authorities that came into force on 1 January 2023 and requires all public authorities to consider the action they can take. This is consistent with the exercise of their functions, to conserve and enhance biodiversity and then take that action. The Government consulted on land use earlier this year and the responses, including Plantlife's briefing, are informing the preparation of a Land Use Framework. While the scope of the consultation limited its ability to consider specific habitats in detail, it did consider and seek views on a broad range of habitats and land uses, including grasslands and urban green spaces, and how they might need to change in the future. Defra is also participating in the Transforming Land Use for Net Zero, Nature and People programme, which will deliver a grasslands project, addressing the transformation of UK grasslands for net zero whilst improving soil health, biodiversity, and the economy through five interdisciplinary work packages.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact the Secretary of State about this important issue.

Sincerely,


MARY CREAGH CBE MP