



From: R T J Wilson
26 May 1988

P 03130

cc Mr Wells

MR GRAY

THIRD REPORT OF THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

1. I agree with Mr Wells's comments on this draft, attached.
2. Our main concern relates to paragraph 1.10 which concludes that the Government does not propose at this stage to seek a review of the EC standard on nitrates as the Select Committee recommends. One of the options which we may want to put to Ministers in the Cabinet Office study on nitrates is that the Government should seek some modification of the EC directive. We do not know yet whether this is a realistic option: a certain amount depends on Sir Donald Acheson's advice about the medical risks, which we hope to get in mid-June, and on the attitude of other EC countries towards the directive on which we are also obtaining a report. But it would be better not to pre-empt the option at this stage if we can avoid it.
3. The point could be met by deleting the last sentence of paragraph 1.10 and simply saying that the Government will keep the health aspects of nitrates in water under review.
4. We plan to submit the Cabinet Office study to Ministers in early July.

R T J WILSON

F 0298

MR WILSON
(through Mr Monger)

2675
C.D.

THIRD REPORT OF THE ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE: POLLUTION OF RIVERS AND ESTUARIES

You asked for comments on the draft response to the Environment Committee's report, attached to Mr Ridley's letter of 23 May to Mr MacGregor. WITH PG?

Background

2. E(A) discussed water quality and the water environment on 16 February (E(A)(88)2nd Meeting). The Sub-Committee did not accept Mr Ridley's proposal for an early White Paper containing significant new policy commitments, particularly on nitrates in drinking water. Instead, they agreed that he should produce an early response to the Environment Committee, based on existing policy. The Cabinet Office were instructed to co-ordinate a review of all the options on nitrates and to produce a report for Ministers.

General

3. The draft response attached to Mr Ridley's letter appears to fulfil the remit from E(A). I have no comments except in relation to nitrates, the subject of the current Cabinet Office study.

Nitrates

4. Nitrates are discussed in paragraphs 1.9-10 and again in paragraphs 3.19-23. I have the following comments:

i. paragraph 1.10 considers a recommendation from the Committee that the Government should seek a review of the EC standard on nitrates in drinking water. The draft says "the Government will re-examine the health aspects of nitrate, but does not propose at this stage to seek a review of the EC standard...". This might be thought to be premature, given that E(A) concluded that the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) should be asked to comment on the implications of present nitrate levels for health, and the relevance of the EC standard. On the other hand, DOE point out that both Parliament and the EC Commission have been assured that the UK will take steps to comply with the present standard. They therefore take the view that any suggestion that the UK might want to renegotiate the limit would be a counter-productive irritant in discussions with the Commission. You may nevertheless feel that the response should leave this issue open pending receipt of the CMO's up-to-date advice;

Agree

C.D.

ii. paragraph 3.22 says that the Government is studying the various options for dealing with the problem of nitrates in different circumstances. This is a reference to the so-called desk studies and not to the Cabinet Office study. Since the existence of the desk studies is public knowledge, this reference seems unobjectionable;

iii. paragraph 3.23 says that the Government will consult various interested parties about the outcome of the desk studies, and then decide what further action is necessary. Given the commitments to comply with the EC standard, this too seems unobjectionable.

Conclusion

5. You will want to consider whether to suggest a redraft of paragraph 1.10 of the response to leave open the question of a review of the present EC standard on nitrates.

P. A. Demontague

P.P. ANDREW WELLS

26 May 1988