

3.18 The Connétable of St. John of the Minister for Planning and Environment regarding the supervision of slurry spreading:

Could the Minister advise when the closed season is for spreading slurry on land and what action if any is taken by the Department of Planning and Environment at the start of the closed season to inspect slurry pits and tanks to ensure that they are empty of fluid or solid silt?

[11:30]

3.18.1 Deputy R.C. Duhamel (The Minister for Planning and Environment):

The Water Pollution (Jersey) Law 2000 allows for approved codes of practice to be approved by the Minister. The Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Protection of Water is one such code - the Water Code - and it sets out voluntary measures that farmers can take to prevent water pollution. As part of these water pollution prevention measures the Code specifies a closed period for the application of slurry to agricultural land. The most recent closed period was from 14th October 2013 to 13th January 2014, coinciding with high rainfall. The department takes a risk-based approach to regulation and enforcement to prevent officer time being spent on low-risk inspections. It also applies a light touch to regulation where possible to enable businesses to decide how they wish to operate within the laws, policies and voluntary codes. In relation to the last closed period a letter was sent out to all farmers in May 2013 reminding them of the closed period dates and their responsibilities. In addition, the 7 farmers who applied for a derogation to apply slurry during the previous closed period were visited individually in the summer of 2013. They were asked to detail what measures they had put in place to minimise the chances that a derogation would be needed the following year.

3.18.2 The Connétable of St. John:

Are some slurry tanks underground subject to an examination of those units to ensure that no caking or silting-up is happening within the sumps and are the sumps fitted with paddles? Others are above-ground slurry tanks. A number are covered. How are these inspected to make sure the paddle wheel is being effective in keeping the liquid from caking?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I do not have that information with me at the moment and I will ask the department for it and give the Constable a fuller report.

3.18.3 Connétable J.E. Le Maistre of Grouville:

I wonder if the Minister would agree to review the dates of the closed period with a view to making them more flexible. As an example of the winter we have just had, October and November were very mild. The grass and cover crops were still growing and could take use of the nutrients that farmers could not spread so they are storing-up slurry from that time right up until 14th January and that was incredibly wet, as was February. We have a case where farmers are storing slurry when they could be spreading in good conditions and end up spreading in conditions that are not so good.

3.18.4 Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

As I mentioned in a previous question, it is my intention to come forward under the Water Pollution Law with water catchment management orders and define water catchment management areas. Within those areas and those orders there will be an opportunity for more fine-tuning as is required in order to minimise the potential pollution problems.

3.18.5 Deputy S.G. Luce of St. Martin:

I would like to back-up what the Constable of Grouville has just said. This closed period stops farmers using slurry when it can be taken up by crops and when the ground conditions are favourable. It also forces farmers to spread slurry when the ground is waterlogged on many occasions. Can I ask the Minister... I would say to him this policy is causing more problems than it solves and can I ask him if he would consider abolishing it all together?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

Before moving towards an abolition I would have to take advice to see whether or not that was the best way of solving the problem. Indeed, the States have invested some £1.5 million of taxpayers' monies and an additional £750,000 of farm business investment has taken place since 2005 to ensure that farms have had the ability to store at least 4 months of slurry and dirty water. That is principally for dairy farmers. Potentially the storage problem has been solved. There is an opportunity afforded by weather windows and the ground conditions to spread slurry. Everybody is saying that there should not be an abolition of spreading slurry on the ground but mainly that when such an action takes place it should be done with due regard and respect to other people's bore holes, and indeed the wider catchment facilities for providing the Island with drinking water. I will look at it, I am looking at it but I think the extreme measure that the Deputy has suggested will not be the final outcome.

3.18.6 The Deputy of St. Martin:

The Minister says that the 4-month closed period and the storage facilities have cured the problem but the problem arises when the Island finds itself, after 4 months of not being able to spread slurry and all its capacity is full and ground conditions are unfavourable, in a completely uncomfortable position of having to spread slurry when the soil is incapable of taking it. This regime needs to be looked at in great detail and I think the department does not take into account that Jersey is a very special climate, a very special farming regime.

The Bailiff:

Ask a concise question if you would, Deputy.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I would urge and ask the Minister to reconsider this.

The Bailiff:

A concise answer if you would, Minister.

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

The Island is some 45 square miles and half or thereabouts is used for agricultural purposes. The number of dairy farmers has come down to 27 or thereabouts and the number of cattle has substantially reduced from previous times. The problem is not as big as the Deputy is suggesting and I think the appropriate measures will be taken.

3.18.7 The Connétable of St. John:

I am surprised at the last answer we have just been given, given that the Minister says there is something like 4 months' supply or capacity for slurry to be held on farms. When caking occurs within a slurry pit or tank, this reduces the volume of liquid that the tank can hold. Now, unless the officers from his department are inspecting these tanks on a regular basis prior to the closed season to make sure they are not holding 50 per cent or 40 per cent or caking or silt, then the capacity that that farm or any farm will have will be greatly reduced.

Will the Minister make sure if he sets up an inspection regime that these tanks are inspected and the caking is removed so the tanks can hold the correct volume?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

Yes, I will but, equally, I will also pay attention to perhaps encouraging Island farmers to move to different systems for fertilising their land, in particular based on crop rotation.