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Convener Rural Economy and Connectivity
Committee
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Edinburgh
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As you are aware in my Statement to Parliament on 10 September regarding crofting, I addressed the fact that a Crofting Bill was not scheduled to be introduced in Year 4 but reaffirmed my commitment to continuing with the process of legislative reform.

My officials have been working with stakeholder organisations to develop a Bill that would address a number of known problems. Around 25 issues were being considered, which were mostly, although not exclusively, identified from the Crofting Law SUMP. Given the complex nature of crofting legislation, only those proposals where the outcome had agreement across the Group were to be pursued and, in the majority of cases, draft policy instructions have been prepared. Officials had been continuing to work on a small number of more complicated matters where stakeholders had expressed a desire to pursue change.

In the last few weeks, it has become clear that staff resources will need to be diverted to new areas of work being generated by the possible effects and the uncertainties related to Brexit. It is with a great deal of personal regret that I have decided that work on the Crofting Bill and on potential future legislative change will now be suspended for the foreseeable future and the staff involved re-allocated to other areas. This decision will be reviewed once the position relating to Brexit becomes clearer. I met, therefore, with members of the Crofting Bill Group today to convey my decision to them personally.

Whilst I can understand the disappointment there will be in relation to my decision, I feel that this chapter in the process of crofting law reform has provided a positive contribution to the crofting legislative reform process with a greater understanding of a number of aspects of crofting law such as joint tenancies, deemed crofts and standard securities on croft tenancies. I believe there to be a general consensus that there should be reform of crofting legislation, as amply demonstrated by the Committee's 2017 Review of Priorities for Crofting Law Reform. I am sure, therefore, it is a matter of when rather than if legislative reform will occur in the years to come.

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My discussion with the Bill Group also considered how best to continue with the legislative reform process when work restarts and that discussion was very useful. The views expressed by the Bill Group today will form part of the substantial record of information and work that can be drawn upon for progressing crofting legislative reform at the appropriate point in the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and members of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee for the diligence, support given and interest taken in the crofting legislative reform process. The Committee's work has greatly helped in garnering consensus for the legislative reform process I have pursued.

Whilst I am disappointed in the circumstances that have arisen and that have resulted in my having to take this decision, I feel that it is the appropriate one given the demands that will be placed on not only the Scottish Government but also Parliament and stakeholders as we address uncertainties generated by Brexit.

Fergus Ewing
FERGUS EWING