



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Victoria Prentis MP
Minister of State for Farming, Fisheries and Food

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Our ref: PO2021/21289/FA

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29 October 2021

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your email of 20 August to the Secretary of State, enclosing a joint letter from the Organic Farmer's and Growers and the Scottish Organic Producer's Association, about the use of non-organic seed. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

Defra is aware of the claims made in the media on 17 and 21 August and acknowledged that these referenced to an inaccurate response to a Parliamentary Question. I wanted to make you aware that Defra has responded privately to the MP and arable farmer who highlighted their concern in the media over the use of non-organic seed.

In our response, Defra explained that the organic seed sector is not sufficiently developed to provide 100% organic seeds, therefore farmers are occasionally permitted to use a mixture of organic and non-organic seeds for grasslands, or completely non-organic seeds in very specific circumstances.

Defra emphasised that under retained Regulation 889/2008, the Secretary of State is required to set up a computerised database, listing organic seed and seed potatoes. This will enable seed producers or merchants to state the quantities of organic seed available for a particular plant species or variety. Organic operators wishing to purchase organic seed are required to check this database for availability of the seed they require.

Where there is no suitable organic seed available, the operator must contact their Control Body to obtain an authorisation. The conditions for using non-organic seed are set out in Article 45(5) of retained Commission Regulation (EC) 889/2008. An authorisation is only issued where thorough checks confirm that no organic seed is available for the species or plant variety and that they are necessary to maintain organic production. Defra has explained to the MP and the arable farmer that there is appropriate legislation in place to allow, when necessary, non-organic seed to be used legitimately and as part of the organic regulations for our country.

As a long-term goal, Defra would like to work with the organics sector to improve the availability of organic seeds and thus reduce the need for authorisations.

Defra accepts that Lord Gardiner made an error when answering the Parliamentary Question, as his answer did not reflect the full picture of organic farmers using non-organic seed under specific permissible conditions. The Parliamentary Question answer has now been rectified through a Written Ministerial Statement, which was published on 19 October.

This statement is available to view here:

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-10-19/hlws312>

I apologise for any negative impacts which this inaccuracy may have had on organic stakeholders. Defra remains fully committed to supporting the UK organics sector and we hope this letter has gone some way towards alleviating your concerns.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you need further information.

Yours sincerely,



VICTORIA PRENTIS MP