



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

The Rt Hon the Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park
Minister of State

Sir William Cash MP
Chairman
European Scrutiny Committee
14 Tothill Street
House of Commons
London
SW1H 9NB

30 September 2020

Dear Sir William,

EM: COM (2020) 340/341: Proposals for Council Decisions on the conclusion, and the signing, of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement between the EU and Honduras on forest law enforcement, governance and trade in timber products to the EU (41439, 41440)

Thank you for your letter of 16 September.

Your question about whether the UK or EU Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) should apply in Northern Ireland is highly pertinent. Defra and Cabinet Office's Transition Task Force officials met representatives from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Environment group on 25 September to discuss this issue. We will provide you with a further update once the outcome of follow up technical discussions take place. I can reassure you that no matter which VPA applies, checks will continue to take place away from the border.

The UK is committed to replicating VPAs with partner countries, such as Honduras, as and when they become operational. Minister Coffey wrote to partner countries last year confirming this commitment, and we are currently preparing the necessary legal steps to transition the agreement with Indonesia (currently the only operational agreement). The UK has been at the forefront of tackling illegal logging and we were instrumental in the EU adopting the 2003 FLEGT action plan. It is in the UK's interest to negotiate our own VPAs with partner countries, which will improve forest governance and encourage trade in legally sourced timber. As such, we do not see a need to grant a legally binding guarantee.

I am copying this letter to the Earl of Kinnoull, Chairman of the European Union Committee. I am also copying this letter to the Clerks of the Commons and Lords Committees, Jessica Mulley and Chris Johnson respectively; Les Saunders, Cabinet Office; and Steve Wigham, Defra Scrutiny Co-ordinator.

With best wishes,



THE RT HON THE LORD GOLDSMITH OF RICHMOND PARK