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The Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP
From the Secretary of State



Thank you for your letter of 8 April regarding the closure of the National Equine Database (NED) and the petition you have received from The Society for the Welfare of Horses and Ponies.

Following the completion of a competitive tender exercise last summer, Defra decided not to award a new contract for the provision of a central equine database service beyond 30 September 2012. In reaching its decision, Defra considered the views of the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England. They concluded that the costs of continuing to fund a database were not justified by the benefits, especially at a time of significant budgetary pressure. In particular, the Board noted that the purpose of passports was to identify horses and to record medicines which rendered them unfit to enter the food chain. Therefore the existence of the central database had not supported this aim. The Board also noted that the National Equine Database (NED) contained primary horse identification data supplied by the 75 Passport Issuing Organisations, that it was not a movement tracing database and was therefore of little value in a disease outbreak. Moreover the Board also noted that whilst there was growing concern about the increase in numbers of abandoned horses, the database had provided little help with this and was of no value in tracing owners of unidentified horses. However in cases where it is possible to identify horses, arrangements have been put in place to support enforcement action.

More recently however the European Commission has written to Member States with its 5 Point Action Plan in response to the recent horse meat fraud. It contains a number of



measures in relation to food fraud, country of origin labelling and actions in respect of horse passports. On horse passports, the Commission have said that they plan to bring forward proposals to make mandatory the recording of horse passports in a national database. The proposals will also transfer the responsibility for issuing horse passports entirely to the competent authority thereby reducing the number of passport issuing organisations in the forthcoming proposal on zootechnics.

Timescales and details are unclear and we have yet to see a formal proposal, but we have said that in principle we are in favour of the Commission's plans. We will need to look closely at the detail when a formal proposal is received. However our current preference is to move to a single passport issuing authority ahead of or at the same time as the requirement for a national database. We believe that this work will in itself deliver the database. We are also in favour of separating the zootechnics and passport regimes in view of the very different functions served by each.



THE RT HON OWEN PATERSON MP