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Gillian Martin MSP and Jim Fairlie MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs
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Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
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Sent by email: cabsecforcara@gov.scot and ministerforami@gov.scot

30 October 2026

Dear Cabinet Secretary and Minister,

Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme – Proposed Changes to Calving Interval Requirements and Lack of Industry Engagement

I am writing to express NFU Scotland's significant concern and disappointment following your announcement at our Autumn Conference on 29 October that the calving interval requirement under the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme (SSBSS) will be reduced from 410 to 400 days for the 2028 and 2029 scheme years, subject to legislation.

While we recognise the Scottish Government's ambition to improve the efficiency and environmental performance of Scotland's suckler beef sector, the manner in which this decision was reached and announced raises serious questions about the Scottish Government's commitment to meaningful engagement with NFU Scotland and the wider agricultural industry.

We are particularly disappointed that such a significant change, with potentially far-reaching implications for suckler beef producers across Scotland, was announced without any prior meaningful discussion or consultation with NFU Scotland.

This is despite repeated representations from the Union that the established SSBSS Stakeholder Group should be reconvened before any further changes to the Scheme's eligibility requirements were considered. The group was established specifically to provide a forum for the Scottish Government, industry and technical stakeholders to consider the operation, objectives and future development of the Scheme. It is therefore difficult to understand why this established mechanism for engagement was not used.

The decision to announce a further tightening of requirements without first discussing the proposal, its supporting evidence or its practical implications with industry is deeply frustrating. It undermines confidence in the purpose and value of the Stakeholder Group and, more broadly, in the Scottish Government's stated commitment to partnership working with organisations representing Scotland's farmers and crofters.

NFU Scotland is not seeking to obstruct change or prevent improvements in agricultural efficiency. Indeed, we have consistently engaged constructively with the Scottish Government on the development and implementation of agricultural support policy. However, engagement must mean more than informing industry of decisions already taken. It must involve genuine discussion, consideration of alternative approaches and an opportunity for those directly affected to influence decisions before they are made.

We also have concerns about whether the evidence currently available provides a sufficiently robust basis for further tightening the calving interval requirement.

The emissions savings referenced in the announcement are drawn from an SRUC report examining the 2025 scheme year, representing just one year of data following the introduction of the 410-day requirement. Importantly, the report itself cautions against attributing the reported emissions reductions solely to the calving interval requirement, recognising that changes in herd structure and market conditions have also contributed to improvements in efficiency.

Furthermore, national averages do not adequately reflect the considerable differences between production systems, herd types, breeds and geographical circumstances across Scotland.

A 400-day calving interval may be achievable for some producers, but it will present very different challenges for others, particularly those operating in more challenging climatic, geographical and land-use conditions, and especially smaller herds. There is a real risk that a uniform requirement will disproportionately disadvantage producers in some of Scotland's most disadvantaged and fragile farming areas.

The analysis report shows small producers have been significantly impacted, and while the small producer derogation will apply in the next scheme year, the evidence in the report needs to be considered to determine whether the 10-cow threshold is sufficient to ensure small producers aren’t disproportionately affected.

These considerations are particularly relevant at a time when livestock producers are already dealing with the impacts of extreme weather and the threat of Bluetongue, both of which can affect fertility and reproductive performance.

We should also remind ourselves of the original purpose of the SSBSS. It was established to support the viability of Scotland's suckler beef sector, maintain domestic beef production and sustain farming businesses, particularly in more disadvantaged areas. Improving efficiency and reducing emissions are important objectives, but they must not come at the expense of the Scheme's fundamental purpose or the resilience and sustainability of the sector it is intended to support.

We remain willing to work constructively with the Scottish Government to improve the effectiveness of agricultural support and deliver better outcomes for Scotland's farming industry, climate and natural environment. However, that requires mutual respect, transparency and, above all, meaningful engagement before decisions are taken, rather than explanations after they have been announced.

I look forward to receiving your response and confirmation that the Scottish Government will pause progression of the proposed changes, reconvene the SSBSS Stakeholder Group and engage meaningfully with industry on the evidence and practical implications before determining the way forward.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Connon
NFU Scotland President