Comments on the Discussion Document “Becoming a Good Food Nation” from the Board of Falkland Rural Enterprises Ltd.

The publication of Recipe for Success some years ago was an important step in setting out Food as a priority for Scotland. Since that time the focus on food seemed to have diminished and its priority in defining Scotland as a great place to be has reduced. It is good to see this debate and discussion reopened.

Falkland Rural Enterprises Ltd. (FREL), formerly Falkland Farms Ltd, is the company that runs the home farm on Falkland Estate in Fife. We are involved in farming beef and cereals and top fruit production but also in forestry. We are a registered organic producer. We operate a new Farmer Scheme on the estate. We link with other bodies and especially the charity Falkland Stewardship Trust in promoting access to the Falkland Estate and learning events and programmes linked to Food, Farming and wider land use. FREL welcomes the production of the discussion document.

Recipe for Success set out the aim of Food Policy becoming a priority for Government and the aims of making food secure, affordable and accessible to all. It saw the clear links between diet, food and health and thus the importance of improving diet as a means of improving health. All of these it was recognised at the time would be hard to deliver. In the period since “Recipe for Success” many of the economic and business goals identified have been achieved but the wider aspirational, social and health goals have not. It is important that the hopes for change awakened at the time of “Recipe for Success” should be revisited. It matters that ways are found to not go for business as usual. Food security will be based in part on making better uses of our own resources for food production especially people. They will also depend on well-based trading relationships. Making better use of our resources will depend on inclusion and understanding elements which need to link to access and affordability. Things, which are done with people in mind, need to involve them in the decisions and in recent years food has been distanced from general understanding. Getting more of our population interested in food related issues must be one of the key aims of becoming a good food nation.
As a farming and food production company we were disappointed that the document seemed not to recognise the importance of strengthening the link between Food and Farming. It is possible to read what has been published and assume that farming has nothing to do with food. The two are linked both in terms of where food comes from but also because of the links between the sorts of food we eat and how that food needs to be produced. This is a key element in re-engaging public interest in food.

The food-farming link is also important in relation to links with climate change policy. Farming is a significant producer of greenhouse gases. Changes to our food system have the potential to reduce the environmental impact of farming. There are similar considerations linked to forestry. Food must not be seen in isolation. It must be linked at every level and especially in relation to how government works, to health, environment, and land use and to social policy. This is an issue, which is not highlighted in the document. We realise that with the range of cabinet responsibilities and civil service briefs that this is difficult but it must be done. It began with “Recipe for Success” but was not sustained.

As an Organic Farming company FREL is disappointed not to see the contribution which the adoption of Organic standards within significant parts of our food production industries could have to health, food quality and environmental care. The contribution, which organic methods can have, has been documented elsewhere but organic production involves people and sees food as more than just a commodity. Becoming a good food nation requires both of these and so it is disappointing that this potential contribution has been omitted from the document.

The document rightly places a major focus on health and the paucity of the diet experiences by many in our country. This is a particular issue for those who might be identified as food poor. We are all aware that food banks are not the solution to meeting the needs of those with insufficient finance to provide for an appropriate diet. However as it seems likely that difficult financial times and the food poor are likely to be with us for some time there is a clear need to identify paths by which those in this type
of situation might be provided with healthy food. Getting this right will help to address some of the areas identified in the section of the Document on Unfinished Business. Using a greater variety of means of production will help market diversity and reconfigure supply chains. If part of this diversity includes more people involved in community food production schemes then this will both improve diet and reconnect people to their food. By encouraging local Scottish production and a more diverse range of production this will help our food security. At Falkland work with our local community in providing information both through events such as Big Tent but also by encouraging people to see how food is produced and by joining in production where appropriate such through helping with our Apple production. Our New farmer scheme, which makes land available to those looking for a start in Horticulture, is also aimed at market diversity and modified food chains. Achieving true diversity in market supply chains will require braided approach with encouragement given to a range of routes beyond the current supermarket dominated pathway.

The document identifies 5 priority areas for action. All of these are commendable but could end up being a recipe for doing what we are currently doing but a little better. The opportunity is for a mixed economy involving both a strong commodity sector and encouragement to those who would wish to adopt different approaches. The latter may not have significant impact on measured economic growth but recent improvements in economic growth have not delivered major advances in children's food, local food or good food choices. How the Scottish Rural Development Policy is reformulated will have significant impact upon much of this sector particularly if the broad Government approach we suggest is needed is engages with these objectives.

The envisaged new Food Commission is seen as being important to providing Scottish Government with information and advice on the 5 Priority areas and on the unfinished business. If the commission is to do this it matters that the commission should be broadly drawn. It will need breadth of representation from sectors as diverse as health, social policy, and production, Processing and supply chains. It will also need to represent: large organisations such as super markets, small individual producers, those who currently have a good diet, and the food poor. In addition to being
broadly representative it will need to work out just how it should engage with the full range of providers and consumers. Recent groups have not been good at engaging with communities and with those who make up organisations such as the Poverty Truth Commission and who have means of making contact with groups in society often missed by conventional consultations.

The final question in the consultation asks what we are to do in the next month and year to help give life to the Good Food Nation concept. We intend to continue to produce quality beef, cereals and fruit. We aim to continue to run a range of events to help people from our local communities in Fife but also from further away to understand how food is produced and what affects quality. We will encourage diversity in production by extending the number of participants in our new farmer scheme. We intend to develop approaches to organic production based on trial and observation. We will continue our approaches to linking food, farming and forestry and of linking them to people. By doing this we hope to add to the diversity of ways in which Scotland can become a Good Food Nation.

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