



House of Commons
Environmental Audit
Committee

**Government Response
to the Committee's
Sixth Report, Session
2002–03**

**Fifth Special Report of Session
2002-03**

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The Environmental Audit Committee

The Environmental Audit Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider to what extent the policies and programmes of government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development; to audit their performance against such targets as may be set for them by Her Majesty's Ministers; and to report thereon to the House.

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The constitution and powers are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally Standing Order No. 152A. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at:

www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/environmental_audit_committee.cfm. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Parliament is at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Jessica Mulley (Clerk); Emma Downing (Committee Specialist); Eric Lewis (Committee Specialist); Anna O'Rourke (Committee Assistant); and Caroline McElwee (Secretary to the Clerk of the Committee).

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Fifth Special Report

Timber – Government Response

1. The Environmental Audit Committee published its Report on *Buying Time for Forests: Timber Trade and Public Procurement* on 24 July 2002. The Government's response to the Committee's Report was received on 1 July 2003 and published, as the Committee's Sixth Report of 2002-03, on 8 July 2003. We commented at that time on the inordinate length of time taken for the Government to provide its response and requested an explanation for the delay.

2. The Government's response to our Sixth report, providing the requested explanation, was received on 9 September 2003 in the form of a memorandum to the Committee. It is reproduced as an Appendix to this Special Report.

Appendix

Letter to the Chairman from the Minister of State for Environment & Agri-Environment

I enclose a copy of the Government's response to the Environmental Audit Committee's request for an explanation of the time it took for the Government to respond to your Sixth Report of Session 2001-02 "Buying Time for Forests: Timber Trade and Public Procurement."

I am extremely sorry that the Government's response took an inordinate time to be made. The issues raised by the Committee necessitated detailed consultation between various departments involved and we decided that it would be advantageous for all concerned to complete related work that we thought was close to fruition. The process became much more protracted than we imagined and to make matters worse an administrative error within Defra led to the draft response being buried for three months.

Please be assured that we will do our utmost to ensure such a regrettable chain of events is not repeated.

GOVERNMENT'S EXPLANATION FOR THE TIME TAKEN TO RESPOND TO ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE REPORT: "BUYING TIME FOR FORESTS: TIMBER TRADE AND PUBLIC PROCUREMENT"

(Sixth Report of Session 2001-02)

1. In publishing the Government's response to the Environmental Audit Committee's Sixth Report the Committee drew attention to the length of time taken by the Government to make its response. The Committee asked the Government to explain the delay and give an assurance that future Government responses will be delivered in a more timely manner.
2. Paradoxically it was because the Government accords such importance to tackling illegal logging and deforestation that it put a lot of time and effort into providing a full and accurate response. That this took so long is regrettable and the Government apologises to the Committee.
3. The Government is conscious of the need to improve on and co-ordinate its policies for stamping out illegal logging and promoting responsible forest management. That is why we commissioned independent work by ERM on our timber procurement policy and why

we worked hard to ensure that all stakeholders participated in the development of their recommendations. We intend to maintain that collaborative spirit as we move forward to turn these recommendations into practical solutions.

4. Our commitment and progress has provoked considerable interest in other European Member States some of whom have indicated that they may follow our example. Some countries outside the EU are watching us closely too. With that level of interest and such high stakes it behoved the UK Government to take care that the improvements we proposed making were entirely appropriate. The Committee's Report made a number of useful observations and recommendations that required careful consideration. It was important that our response recognised our failings, the difficulties encountered and did not raise expectations beyond what is practicable for the public sector to deliver.

5. The Government wrote to the Committee on 28 October 2002 to explain that its response would be delayed. That was because there was a need to consider the work being done on timber procurement in the context of other work being done on pursuing sustainable development through procurement. That wider procurement work was close to fruition and it was considered beneficial for the response to the EAC to be delayed to incorporate outcomes from both strands of work. The criteria being developed by consultants for identifying timber from sustainable and legal sources and the recommendation that a central point of expertise on timber procurement be created were important outputs that we wanted to highlight in the response. Ministers in all central departments had to consider and approve of those proposals before we could include them in the draft response to the Committee. The recommendations of the Sustainable Procurement Group, which were initially intended as internal advice to Ministers, were due to be submitted to Ministers by mid October 2002 and we wanted those approved so that we could incorporate a strengthened commitment to sustainable procurement in the response. The Sustainable Procurement Group report will now be made public this Autumn and includes a headline recommendation to develop a sustainable procurement section for the *Framework for Sustainable Development on the Government Estate*. This will include a commitment on sustainable timber procurement for all 15 central Government Departments and their Executive Agencies and should be in place in early 2004

6. Getting approval to proceed to implement the various recommendations took longer than anticipated. Widespread consultation across government was required and it was not until the end of November that officials were ready to put together an integrated response. Producing the final draft for clearance by Ministers involved considerable effort and it wasn't until February 2003 that this stage of the process was completed. The final draft of the response and letter seeking clearance by Ministers should have been submitted to the Secretary of State Defra mid February 2003 but a regrettable misunderstanding caused the submission to be overlooked for three months. The Secretary of State Defra wrote to Ministers on 20 May 2003 and the consultation process wasn't completed until the end of June 2003.

7. The Government assures the Committee that it will endeavour to avoid such an unconscionable delay when responding to future EAC reports. The sixty days response period remains the target in all cases. When the issues are complex and involve numerous stakeholders across Government, as was the case here, the sixty days target may not always be achievable but in such cases the Government would look to keep the Committee better informed when progress is slower than planned.

Past reports from the Environmental Audit Committee since 1997

2002-03 Session

First	Pesticides: The Voluntary Initiative, HC100 (<i>Reply, HC 443</i>)
Second	Johannesburg and Back: The World Summit on Sustainable Development–Committee delegation report on proceedings, HC 169
Third	Annual Report, HC 262
Fourth	Pre-Budget 2002, HC 167 (<i>Reply, HC 688</i>)
Fifth	Waste – An Audit, HC 99
Sixth	Buying Time for Forests: Timber Trade and Public Procurement - The Government Response, HC 909
Seventh	Export Credits Guarantee Department and Sustainable Development, HC 689
Eighth	Energy White Paper – Empowering Change?, HC 618
Ninth	Budget 2003 and Aviation, HC 672
Tenth	Learning the Sustainability Lesson, HC 472
Eleventh	Sustainable Development Headline Indicators, HC 1080

2001-02 Session

First	Departmental Responsibilities for Sustainable Development, HC 326 (<i>Reply, Cm 5519</i>)
Second	Pre-Budget Report 2001: <i>A New Agenda?</i> , HC 363 (<i>HC 1000</i>)
Third	UK Preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, HC 616 (<i>Reply, Cm 5558</i>)
Fourth	Measuring the Quality of Life: The Sustainable Development Headline Indicators, HC 824 (<i>Reply, Cm 5650</i>)
Fifth	A Sustainable Energy Strategy? Renewables and the PIU Review, HC 582 (<i>Reply, HC 471</i>)
Sixth	Buying Time for Forests: <i>Timber Trade and Public Procurement</i> , HC 792-I, (<i>Reply, HC 909, Session 2002-03</i>)

2000-01 Session

First	Environmental Audit: <i>the first Parliament</i> , HC 67 (<i>Reply, Cm 5098</i>)
Second	The Pre-Budget Report 2000: <i>fuelling the debate</i> , HC 71 (<i>Reply HC 216, Session 2001-02</i>)

1999-2000 Session

First	EU Policy and the Environment: An Agenda for the Helsinki Summit, HC 44 (<i>Reply, HC 68</i>)
Second	World Trade and Sustainable Development: An Agenda for the Seattle Summit, HC 45 (Including the Government response to the First Report 1998-99: Multilateral Agreement on Investment, HC 58) (<i>Reply, HC 69</i>)
Third	Comprehensive Spending Review: Government response and follow-up, HC 233 (<i>Reply, HC 70, Session 2000-01</i>)
Fourth	The Pre-Budget Report 1999: pesticides, aggregates and the Climate Change Levy, HC 76
Fifth	The Greening Government Initiative: first annual report from the Green Ministers Committee 1998/99, HC 341

Sixth	Budget 2000 and the Environment etc., HC 404
Seventh	Water Prices and the Environment, HC 597 (<i>Reply, HC 290, Session 2000-01</i>)

1998-99 Session

First	The Multilateral Agreement on Investment, HC 58 (<i>Reply, HC 45, Session 1999-2000</i>)
Second	Climate Change: Government response and follow-up, HC 88
Third	The Comprehensive Spending Review and Public Service Agreements, HC 92 (<i>Reply, HC 233, Session 1999-2000</i>)
Fourth	The Pre-Budget Report 1998, HC 93
Fifth	GMOs and the Environment: Coordination of Government Policy, HC 384 (<i>Reply Cm 4528</i>)
Sixth	The Greening Government Initiative 1999, HC 426
Seventh	Energy Efficiency, HC 159 (<i>Reply, HC 571, Session 2000-01</i>)
Eighth	The Budget 1999: Environmental Implications, HC 326

1997-98 Session

First	The Pre-Budget Report, HC 547 (<i>Reply, HC 985</i>)
Second	The Greening Government Initiative, HC 517 (<i>Reply, HC 426, Session 1998-99</i>)
Third	The Pre-Budget Report: Government response and follow-up, HC 985
Fourth	Climate Change: UK Emission Reduction Targets and Audit Arrangements, HC 899 (<i>Reply, HC 88, Session 1998-99</i>)