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Thank you for your letter of 23 April to Jeane Freeman, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, regarding the proposed changes to the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002. I am replying as this falls within my portfolio.

In your letter, you mention the practice of relocating urban foxes. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that suggests that people do trap urban foxes and release them in the countryside, and I wholeheartedly agree that this practice is cruel and a detriment to the welfare of the fox. It is unlikely that the landowners' permission will have been granted and the practice may increase pressure on farming stock. The Scottish SPCA has authority to investigate cases of crimes against animal welfare, and I would encourage incidents such as this to be reported to them in the future.

On 9 January, I announced my intention to explore whether to introduce a licensing scheme that would allow the use of more than two dogs where fox control is necessary to protect important interests and where there is no satisfactory alternative approach. Any licensed operations would of course be carefully monitored to ensure compliance with the law and with licence conditions.

The limit of two dogs to flush to a gun has been proposed with animal welfare in mind. It is not my intention to curb pest control in any manner.

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I would add that these proposals are still at an early stage of development and will be subject to further consultation and parliamentary scrutiny as they progress.

I hope this information is useful to you.

MAIRI GOUGEON

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