

Rt Hon Emma Reynolds MP  
Department for Environment Food and  
Rural Affairs  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF

11<sup>th</sup> March 2026

Dear Secretary of State Reynolds,

### **Its time to Back British Biofertiliser**

As conflict and instability continue to affect global energy markets, the UK once again faces the prospect of significant volatility in natural gas prices. This matters not only for energy security but also for food security. British farmers remain heavily exposed to the cost of imported synthetic fertilisers, whose production relies on natural gas.

While our thoughts remain with those caught up in the conflict, we must now do our best to insulate British farmers from the shocks that these conflicts create.

Recent events have shown how quickly markets can destabilise. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, fertiliser prices rose dramatically in a matter of months. There is a real risk that similar pressures could return. A significant share of global LNG trade passes through strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, meaning that disruption could quickly translate into higher costs for UK agriculture.

For farmers, this could mean fertiliser prices rising again to well above £700 per tonne, potentially approaching £900 per tonne during the fertiliser spreading season. Such price spikes place direct pressure on farm margins, increase food production costs, and ultimately risk feeding through into higher prices for UK agriculture.

The UK does not currently manufacture significant volumes of synthetic fertiliser. However, we do have a large and underutilised domestic source of nutrients: biofertiliser produced by the anaerobic digestion sector.

Across the UK, more than 750 anaerobic digestion plants process around 36 million tonnes of organic material every year. Through this process, microorganisms break down food waste, manures, crop residues and other organic matter in an oxygen-free environment to produce biogas. Once the biogas is captured for renewable energy, the remaining material, known as digestate, is a nutrient-rich fertiliser containing nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and organic matter that improves soil health.

Digestate can replace a significant share of gas-derived synthetic fertiliser while returning nutrients to UK soils. Estimates suggest that existing production could replace around 25 to 30 per cent of synthetic nitrogen fertiliser use. In the event of a fertiliser price shock this could offset around £170 million of economic risk in the first year alone, while ensuring that this value remains within the UK economy rather than being spent on imports.

Yet despite these advantages, policy and regulatory barriers are preventing farmers and producers from using digestate to its full potential.

First, current Nitrate Vulnerable Zone rules impose strict spreading periods for digestate, often limiting applications to between September and December. In practice, these rules can be more restrictive than those applied to untreated manures, despite digestate being pasteurised, processed and precisely applied using modern spreading technology. This forces producers to store digestate for long periods and prevents farmers from using it when crops most need nutrients.

A more pragmatic approach would align digestate with other fertilisers and base application decisions on agronomic conditions rather than fixed calendar dates. This would maintain environmental protection while allowing farmers to use nutrients efficiently.

Second, guidance within the RB209 nutrient management framework is sometimes interpreted by regulators as a fixed ceiling rather than agronomic guidance. In practice, this can limit digestate applications even where crops would benefit from additional nitrogen. Clear direction from Defra to the Environment Agency and other regulators would ensure that RB209 is applied pragmatically and as intended. Industry stands ready to support training for permitting officers so that digestate can be used appropriately within the existing regulatory framework.

Third, the UK currently lacks a statutory biofertiliser standard comparable to EU Regulation 2019/1009. Establishing a clear UK standard would provide certainty to farmers, regulators and markets, supporting wider uptake of digestate and helping build confidence in this domestic fertiliser supply.

Finally, awareness among farmers remains limited. Many farmers continue to feel locked into volatile global fertiliser markets without realising that digestate may already be available locally. A coordinated engagement programme led by Defra, working with industry bodies such as ADBA, could help connect farmers with local anaerobic digestion plants and digestate suppliers.

Taken together, these actions would strengthen the resilience of UK agriculture at a time of growing geopolitical uncertainty. They would also support the wider transition to a circular economy, reduce reliance on imported fertilisers, and help agriculture move towards net zero.

The UK anaerobic digestion sector is ready to work with government, regulators and farmers to deliver these benefits. With pragmatic policy changes, biofertiliser can play a meaningful role in cushioning the impact of global gas crises on UK farming and protecting the country's food security.

I would urgently request a meeting with you and your team to further discuss what our industry can do to support you, the government, and our farmers to survive the potential upcoming shocks.

I look forward to discussing this with you further shortly.

Best wishes,



Chris Huhne

Chair

Anaerobic Digestion and Bioresources Association