By Jonathan Reed, Political Editor
The Yorkshire Post

(29 August 2008) — MINISTERS are engaged in urgent talks to stop the European Union pressing ahead with "barmy" plans to ban more than three-quarters of pesticides used by farmers.

High food prices are expected to rise even further if the new controls are passed this autumn, even though the Government says the ban would have no significant health benefits.

Instead, officials say there would be a "significant adverse impact on crop protection", pushing up already rising prices and hitting families.

The proposals could prevent the use of certain fungicides and result in substantially lower wheat yields, possibly even 30 per cent below current levels.

Officials at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs believe the European Parliament may not have fully appreciated the impact of some of the proposals, and are lobbying to stop the fungicides ban until viable alternatives are approved.

Environment Secretary Hilary Benn has already raised his concerns about the proposals, and now Farming Minister Lord Rooker has told the Yorkshire Post that intense efforts are being made to persuade other European countries to block the "barmy" measures.

But Ministers know opposition has to come from across the continent to ensure that it is "not just Britain whingeing".

The controversy centres on the types of chemicals which Brussels wants to remove. They include banning substances which have "endocrine-disrupting properties".

However, the Government points out that the public is already exposed to such substances through prescribed drugs, meat, peas and beans and products such as soya milk.
Withdrawing the pesticides would have a significant negative impact on agriculture and the economy, but not have any major reduction in the public's overall exposure.

The proposals are expected to come before the European Parliament for the second reading in the autumn. Ministers hope pressure from Britain and other European governments can bring about a change in the plans.

Some scientists have also raised serious concerns about the directive, warning that there could be problems with harvests of certain crops in future years if the number of methods available for dealing with weeds, pests and diseases is reduced.

However anti-pesticide campaigners are adamant that a major crackdown on the use of pesticides is needed to protect public health.

Georgina Downs, from UK Pesticides Campaign, says the new measures "must not be watered down by industry lobbying".

But Paul Chambers, the plant health advisor at the National Farmers' Union, has warned: "Pesticide usage is already very strictly controlled in the UK and the industry has taken the lead in adopting voluntary measures like sprayer testing and training to further raise standards."

He said Europe "should focus its efforts on raising standards up to UK levels across Europe rather than setting unscientific targets for cuts which bear no relationship to risk and would harm the competitiveness of European agriculture".

Yorkshire MEP Godfrey Bloom, of the UK Independence Party, called the plans "lunacy" adding: "This is utter madness at a time when food prices are rocketing and people are struggling to meet their household bills each month.

"Inflation is over double the government's target and we need to be helping farmers increase production to ease the price rises. Yet the EU are doing everything they can to make hard working people suffer."

A Defra spokeswoman said: "There is much in the new pesticides Regulation that the UK supports. However, our impact assessment covering the Commission's proposals and the European Parliament's first reading amendments raised concerns that the proposals would remove important pesticides from the market."