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 FAO Geoff Brown

Your ref: MA/09/1061
 Our ref: RLH/AA/MA/09/72
 Date: 18 August 2009

Dear Mr Brown

MARSHALLS FARM, HUNT STREET, WEST FARLEIGH

I refer to your letter of 31 July 2009 requesting agricultural advice regarding the retrospective planning application submitted by Clock House Farm Ltd. for the erection of temporary rotational "Spanish" polytunnels for strawberry and cane fruit production at the above site. The submitted plans indicate that up to about 15 ha of covered area could be involved, located south of Hunt Street.

Clock House Farm Ltd. is a well-established and relatively large orchard and soft fruit holding, producing apples pears, strawberries, raspberries and plums, and with arable land used for a rotational break.

The operational buildings are in two groups at the end of the farm access road off Heath Road, Coxheath, where there is storage for the field and orchard equipment, machinery and general farm items, as well as cold storage, packing/packaging, fruit handling and despatch area, farm offices, and seasonal workers' accommodation.

The enterprise has expanded its farmed area by taking on various offlying rented land locally, and in this in this case the land is owned by Ferns Property Development. Under MA/06/1037 and MA/07/1312 Clock House Farm Ltd. was granted planning consent (subject to conditions) for a total of some 9 ha of polytunnels, permanently sited for strawberries grown in above-ground media, on other rented land (owned by J A Worley Ltd). This is about a mile to the south-west of the current site: a further 18 ha there has also been utilised for rotational tunnels for growing strawberries and raspberries.

Tunnels have also been utilised extensively on land north of Hunt Street.

Thus the use of such polytunnels is already a feature of the general landscape near Yalding and West Farleigh, where the farmland is of good quality and where there are facilities for irrigation fed from the nearby River Medway.

As previously advised, the use of such tunnels is now a common feature of soft fruit production in the Borough and elsewhere in Kent: the tunnels comprise units of production in themselves, and in effect are inherently required and appropriate for the purpose of modern UK strawberry production.

The system has a number of advantages over conventional unprotected growing including the ability to protect the crop from the wind and rain, reduce pesticide/fungicide use, extend the growing season, provide better yields and continuity of supply, and greater ease of managing the plants and picking the fruits. The use of tunnels assists UK growers to meet customer demand as opposed to what might be regarded as the less sustainable alternative of foreign imports.

To conclude I consider the polytunnels to be necessary to agriculture, and they should provide further support for this established and productive local farm enterprise. As with previous cases, conditions may be attached relating to matters such as landscaping, removal of the polythene covers from the framework out of the growing season, and removal of the tunnels completely on the permanent cessation of soft fruit production.

I hope this is of assistance but please let me know if you require any further advice.

Yours sincerely

R J Lloyd-Hughes

**Richard Lloyd-Hughes MRICS
Rural Planning Limited**