Appendix 5:

Policy on Polytunnels, Greenhouses and Shade Houses

1. Increasing the agricultural output of the island and doing so in a sustainable way are key objectives of the Government. The need to protect crops from damage by pests and birds and to provide more precise control of environmental conditions than can be achieved outdoors, mean that it is widely accepted that polytunnels offer significant advantages.

2. With the likely opportunities to supply both an increasing tourism demand on the island and specialist crop exports as a result of air access, agricultural and horticultural production needs to be assisted rather than impeded in its development. There should therefore be the aim of facilitating agricultural development, including polytunnels, and a presumption in favour of granting development permission, with environmental safeguards, and only exceptional need to refuse permission.

3. It is the case, and is the experience of countries worldwide, that small-scale polytunnel development is advantageous and innocuous. Moreover people have become accustomed to seeing them, unlovely as they may be, in arable agricultural settings.

4. It is also the widespread experience in the UK and elsewhere, that large-scale polytunnels can lead to significant environmental problems including flooding and chemical pollution, permanent soil degradation and habitat loss, damage to the amenities of residential properties and severe intrusion in landscapes. As an example of potential scale, a celebrated case in Surrey UK, tested through the planning system and the courts in 2007, involved a covered area of continuous polytunnels of 43 hectares (103 acres). It resulted in numerous environmental problems despite the particular polytunnels being in place for periods of only between three and nine months of the year to suit the crop production system. There are numerous other examples of similar scale in the UK and still larger areas in Spain. It might be thought that such scale of polytunnels would be inapplicable to St Helena but arable land in the Longwood area amounts to something over 54 hectares (130acres) largely in a compact block and it is close to dwellings and highly visible in the landscape. Care is therefore needed over scale.

5. This policy is intended to find the appropriate balance between permitting polytunnels in the economic interests of agriculture and avoiding significant problems and damage. For the purposes of the policy, polytunnels, glasshouses and shade houses will be treated as one but because glasshouses and shade houses may have less visual impact in the landscape than polytunnels the Planning Board will be able to distinguish the environmental effects of each when considering borderline cases.

6. The need for development permission: the Planning Ordinance defines "development" and "building" in terms which leave no doubt that normal polytunnels as so far erected on St Helena require development permission. There are however various different types of polytunnels available and there is a fine line to be drawn because, for example, mesh or sheeting used at ground level, or polythene cloches, do not amount to buildings. Nor do tents. In finding this fine line, it is proposed to use the criteria of scale and permanence of attachment to the ground as the deciding criteria. This is not necessarily straightforward: the very extensive polytunnels in the

UK case mentioned above were secured to screw-anchors in the ground between 600 and 900 mm (2 and 3 feet) deep and there was lengthy argument as to whether this amounted to permanence, especially as it was the practice in the particular case to remove the polythene and in some cases also the frames for part of each year. In the event the courts held that they were permanent structures but in reaching that conclusion they were also mindful of the overall scale.

For the purposes of this policy a polytunnel does not constitute development needing development permission if:

- **it is not attached to another polytunnel nor within 25m (82 ft) of one, and**
- **it has a floor area not in excess of 15m^2 (161 ft^2), and**
- **it has a height not in excess of 2m (6ft 6in), and**
- **it has neither permanent foundations nor a concrete floor.**

If a polytunnel meets these criteria it will not need development permission at all. If it does not meet the criteria it will come under planning control and fall to be considered under the various criteria of this policy.

7. The presumption is that development permission will be granted for polytunnels but in making the decision regard will be had to:

- location
- siting in relation to dwelling houses
- siting in relation to places and buildings of significance
- siting and size in relation to other polytunnels
- consequent need for water tanks, reservoirs, storage sheds and windbreaks

Each of these issues is considered below, also the issue of future condition of any polytunnel that is permitted, because the materials have a limited serviceable life and a derelict polytunnel is both an unnecessary eyesore and a potential danger; and restriction of use of polytunnels to their intended purpose.

8. Location. It is the case that zoning in the Land Development Control Plan is intended to direct development to areas where it will be most advantageous and least damaging and this needs to be respected in agricultural structures equally as other types of development as far as the specific policies relating to the zones are relevant to agriculture.

Subject to the detailed issues considered in paragraphs 9 to 12 below, development permission for polytunnels will therefore generally be granted:

- **in the Intermediate Zone;**
- **in the Coastal Zone unless they would demonstrably damage the tourism potential of the area or unless the site is within a sub-zone designated as one where no development is appropriate;**
- **in the Green Heartland only below the 550m. contour and where it can be demonstrated that they will not harm the landscape.**

9. Siting in relation to dwelling houses. Polytunnels, because of the light appearance of the plastic covering and because of their bulbous form, can have a greater visual impact and greater sense of blocking the view than their dimensions might suggest. For large polytunnel installations experience has been that there is also potential for problems from dust, chemical fumes, noise, lights and traffic. As a result there have been various attempts in the UK to reach agreement on what minimum distance from dwellings might generally be adopted. A voluntary code of practice by the Country Landowners Association and National Farmers Union was based on 30m but, after public consultation, those planning authorities affected by large scale polytunnel development have adopted 50m.

Polytunnels:

- will not generally be permitted within 50m of a dwelling house but down to 30m where the total floor area of polytunnel is limited to 130m² (1400 ft²) (this area covers the current standard commercial polytunnel recommended by ANRD measuring 8 x 16m (26 x 52ft)).

10. Siting in relation to places and buildings of significance. The island's strategy for economic development is based on growth of tourism, in turn based on the island's natural and historic attributes. It is therefore important to protect them. Polytunnels can damage natural habitats, mar the setting of historic sites and buildings, block or spoil the experience of using paths, block critical views, damage or obliterate archaeology. All of these negative impacts need to be minimised or avoided.

Polytunnels:

- **will not be permitted in recorded wirebird habitats;**
- **will not be permitted where they will affect recorded endemic plants;**
- **will not be permitted in a National Conservation Area unless it can be demonstrated that they would not affect its character;**
- **will not be permitted where they would materially affect the setting of, or views from, a listed building or recorded historic structure nor where they would affect recorded or historic archaeological remains;**
- **will not be permitted where they would obstruct a public right of way nor where they would be closer to its centre line than 3m.**

11. Siting and size in relation to other polytunnels. Evidence generally is that the visual and other impacts associated with polytunnels increase massively in relation to their overall area. The relatively vast continuous areas of polytunnels seen particularly in soft fruit production in Europe (as is the case of the Surrey polytunnels quoted in paragraph 4) have a massive effect on landscape, ecology and drainage. In the context of St Helena where the landscapes are critical because of the topography, where soil structures and natural drainage systems are fragile and rainfall patterns unpredictable, it is appropriate to limit the area of individual installations and their proximity to others.

- **any single or continuous area of polytunnels shall be limited to a total area not exceeding 600m² (6450 ft²), and**
- **where the combined floor area of polytunnels within any area of 0.4 ha (1acre) amounts to more than 600m² (6450 ft²) they will be permitted only if a comprehensive drainage system is installed to deal with surface water without significant risk of flooding or soil erosion.**

12. Consequent need for water tanks, reservoirs, storage sheds and windbreaks. Crop production in polytunnels necessarily demands some means of irrigation which in turn usually requires water storage and pumped systems. It is desirable that irrigation is done in a sustainable manner, preferably using water caught and retained on site rather than abstracted from boreholes or watercourses. Intensification of production also often demands construction of ancillary buildings for storage of materials and equipment. Susceptibility to wind damage in some cases demands construction of windbreaks, typically of perforated plastic sheets erected on poles, which in themselves can be intrusive in the landscape (the intrusiveness of windbreaks was one of the issues in the Surrey case quoted in paragraph 4).

- **Where water tanks, reservoirs and ancillary buildings are to be installed in connection with proposals for polytunnels, details of them are to be submitted with the application and like criteria under this policy will apply generally to them as to the polytunnels themselves, and**
- **where irrigation is proposed to rely on abstraction from boreholes or watercourses this shall be stated in the application and the effects of such abstraction will be a material consideration in the decision whether to grant development permission, and**
- **where windbreaks of any form other than growing trees or hedges are to be used, details including the height are to be submitted with the application.**

13. Planning condition to control derelict polytunnels. Most plastic sheeting used in polytunnels has a life of about five years, sometimes less under the effects of strong sunlight or high winds. It is desirable, for every reason, to avoid the results of decayed sheeting being allowed to remain indefinitely. Being relatively frail there is also the risk of polytunnel frames becoming derelict.

Development permission will be granted for polytunnels subject in all cases to the following planning condition:

- **This development permission shall cease to be of effect and the polytunnel(s) hereby permitted shall be permanently removed from the site if the covering material or framing becomes significantly decayed and is allowed to remain so for any continuous period of nine months.**

Reason: to ensure that decayed and derelict polytunnels are removed in the interests of visual amenity and safety.

14. Planning condition to define the use of polytunnels. There are opportunities for possible use of polytunnels for purposes other than their intended use. In view of the fact that this policy permits polytunnels specifically to assist agricultural and horticultural production and does so more permissively than it would for other purposes, it is appropriate to define their use

Development permission will be granted for polytunnels subject in all cases to the following planning condition:

- **The use of the polytunnel(s) hereby permitted shall be limited to agriculture or horticulture and no other use unless development permission has first been applied for and granted for an alternative use.**

Reason: this permission is granted specifically for agricultural and horticultural production and alternative uses may not be appropriate on this site for reasons of planning policy or amenity.

Policy formally adopted by the Land Planning Development Control Board 13th July 2011
(Minor wording amendments April 2013 to reflect adoption of the new Land Development Control Plan 2012)