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Questions About Royal Land Test New British Disclosure Law

By ALAN COWELL

LONDON, Jan. 7 - With riches derived from land and investments, race horses and jewelry, Queen Elizabeth II may be one of Britain's wealthiest women, but a question has arisen: does she, or her son Prince Charles, supplement the royal income with farm subsidies from the European Union?

In a remarkable, early test of Britain's new Freedom of Information Act, which came into force on Jan. 1, a British newspaper and a foreign policy research institute have asked the government to disclose details of the way some $6 billion in European farm subsidies is disbursed in Britain. Equally remarkably, the government farming minister, Lord Whitty, said he would "certainly be recommending that in relation to future payments all single-payment details should be subject to disclosure."

"This is a major breakthrough," said Jack Thurston, a researcher at the London-based Foreign Policy Center, which supported the request for information with the newspaper The Guardian.

Under the new information rules, the government body responsible for distributing the farm subsidies has 20 days to respond to the request for disclosure. Already, there are indications that big landowners - not just the queen, whose personal wealth has been estimated at more than $450 million - will resist disclosure of the amounts they receive.

That is not surprising. Some of Britain's richest, titled landowners - like the Duke of Westminster and the Duke of Marlborough - are said to receive annual subsidies worth up to $700 million each every year, according to a study in 2004 by Oxfam. Information about the subsidies, Mr. Thurston said, "will reveal that most of the money goes to a very small number" of recipients. "Small family farmers get a very small piece of the pie," he said.

Indeed, The Guardian said the royal family qualified for the biggest subsidies because of the extent of the land holdings controlled by the queen and Prince Charles.

It is likely, too, that the very rich will invoke other laws - such as the Data Protection Act - or even provisions in the Freedom of Information Act protecting commercial data - to resist disclosure.

The royals may prove tricky to pin down.

Prince Charles runs a farm on organic principles near his country home at Highgrove that may receive hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in European Union subsidies, according to the Press Association news agency.

But other royal subsidies may be more difficult to define because estates are farmed by tenants, according to a royal official quoted by the Press Association. For instance, in the Duchy of Lancaster in northwestern England, all European Union subsidies "are applied for independently by tenant farmers and the duchy does not receive any such grants," the official was quoted as saying.