



Title: Restoring Scotland's peatlands – our ambition and role.

Date: 3 February 2021

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| Purpose: | This is a short covering paper to support a presentation to stimulate a discussion on our ambition and role in restoring Scotland's peatlands. |
| How does this link with our corporate priorities of improving biodiversity or delivering nature-based solutions to climate change | Accelerating peatland restoration through our Peatland Action Programme and in collaboration with others is a key corporate priority, and demonstrates our leadership role in delivering nature-based solutions to climate change. |
| Summary: | <p>With a significant new financial commitment from Scottish Government to contribute £250 million to peatland restoration over the next 10 years, as well Scottish Government playing a new and stronger role in peatland restoration, the Board asked for a discussion of the issues and opportunities arising. To note the useful summary in Annex A from the Peatland Summit, hosted by the Cabinet Secretary.</p> <p>In order to support engagement and discussion, the issues will be discussed through a presentation at the meeting.</p> |
| Actions | The Board to offer further suggestions where we might do more in terms of engagement and influence, to support our ambition and leadership role summarised in paragraph 9; recognise challenges (summarised in Annex A) and explore creative solutions. |
| Recommendations: | To confirm the ongoing importance of this work; and our leadership role in supporting Scottish Government's increased ambitions for peatland restoration. |
| Appendix | <p>Annex A: Peatland Summit – Scottish Government note of outcomes and actions</p> <p>Annex B: Peatland ACTION – some facts and figures</p> <p>Annex C: Information on the benefits of peatland</p> |
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Purpose

1. This paper has been prepared to support a presentation at the Board to stimulate discussion on our role and ambition in supporting peatland restoration in Scotland.

Background

2. The transition to Net Zero will require radical changes in the way the land is used in Scotland. Nature based solutions, such as peatland restoration, will be essential to meeting the Net Zero target, helping society adapt to the changing climate and reversing the overall decline in biodiversity.
3. In February 2020, the Scottish Government announced a substantial, multi-annual investment in peatland restoration of more than £250 million over the next 10 years, recognising that restoring peatlands is one of the most effective ways of locking in carbon; offering a clear nature-based solution to the climate crisis.
4. Peatland ACTION is NatureScot's flagship project helping to deliver nature-based solutions on the ground to address the climate emergency. It is a NatureScot partnership initiative, funded by Scottish Government. Working with a wide range of partners, applicants, contractors, consultants and sites, it is delivering projects across the length and breadth of Scotland.
5. The focus of the project is to provide support through funding and expertise to restore damaged peatlands in Scotland in order to safeguard existing stores of carbon in peat and encourage the sequestration of carbon dioxide. In doing so, restoration also ensures peatlands are in a resilient condition to cope with the anticipated impacts of climate change, as well as contributing to Scotland's target of net-zero emissions by 2045.
6. The Project forms part of the Scottish Government's approach to deliver Scotland's ambitious [Climate Change Plan 2017-2032](#), which sets out the long-term ambition to restore 250,000 hectares of peatland by 2030. The Plan is currently being updated to reflect the increased ambition of the new targets set in the [Climate Change \(Emissions Reduction Targets\)\(Scotland\) Act 2019 \(August 2020\)](#).
7. The project contributes to the objectives of [Scotland's National Peatland Plan](#) which highlights the major ecological and societal contributions peatlands make to Scotland.
8. Peatland restoration also plays a key role in Scotland's green recovery, by supporting the rural economy through the creation and development of land-based jobs and skills across Scotland
9. Our ambition and leadership role in peatland restoration can be summarised as:
 - Delivery - build capacity to scale up and expand quickly
 - Advisory - support land owners and managers
 - Training - develop contractor capacity, training and skills

- Evidence – co-ordinate monitoring and data across Delivery Partners
- Financial - promote private investment and Peatland Carbon Code
- Strategic – evolve our Delivery Role in response to changing context

Recommendations

10. To confirm the ongoing importance of this work; and our leadership role in supporting Scottish Government's increased ambitions for peatland restoration.

Annex A: Peatland Summit – Scottish Government - Note of outcomes and actions

Opening statement

The peatland summit, held on 14 December 2020, was opened by Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Cabinet Secretary for the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, who invited delegates to share challenges and barriers facing the sector on delivering peatland restoration across Scotland. A varied group of delegates joined the event, including contractors, NGOs, land owners, land managers and delivery partners.

The Cabinet Secretary opened the summit by affirming the Scottish Government's commitment to tackling the climate emergency, noting that the [Climate Change Plan update](#) would be published shortly (since published on 16 December) in which peatlands would play a significant role.

The Cabinet Secretary also noted that, in addition to supporting a green recovery from the COVID pandemic, peatland restoration plays a key role in protecting important habitats and supporting biodiversity, and highlighted the publication of a high-level [Statement of Intent on biodiversity](#). This signals a direction of travel and a number of Ministers' priorities on biodiversity being considered in the development of a new biodiversity strategy for Scotland.

Presentation

Andrew McBride, the Project Manager for Peatland Action, provided an overview of peatland restoration undertaken with the support of Peatland Action and other partners since its inception in 2012. Andrew included case studies in the Monadhliath and at Loch Orasaigh on Lewis. A copy of Andrew's presentation has been provided to delegates.

Discussion

Keith Connal, Deputy Director in Environment and Forestry, Natural Resources Division, opened the floor for comments, questions and discussion. A range of issues were raised through verbal interventions and in the chat function of the virtual platform. These are summarised and grouped below.

Multi-year funding

A number of delegates noted that the introduction of multi-year funding would be beneficial to restoration. General discussion highlighted that bad weather (generally January until April but sometimes from December), the bird breeding season (February to late autumn) and the time taken to process funding applications combined to constrain the restoration window to around 6 months per year.

It was suggested that multi-year funding could help to mitigate, to an extent, some of these problems by supporting a pipeline of funding and more efficient multi-year landscape scale projects. It was also noted that signalling availability of future funds, across multiple years, could also help to address the shortage of contractors. Representatives of this industry commented that certainty and security of funding was key to help provide much needed confidence for contractor businesses considering investing in plant machinery and upskilling staff.

There was general consensus that multi-year funding would allow more efficient planning and increase capacity. Noted by some was the current programme is not geared to the best use of time with the annualised approach and there is, therefore, a real need for multi-year funding to provide required flexibility.

Strategy / targeting

Some delegates highlighted the importance and benefits of restoring bare peat in terms of the emissions savings, the associated costs of doing this at altitude, and the potential for future targeting of these specific areas. Similarly some discussion was had on the merits of restoring degraded sites, including benefits to the river fishing sector, where it was specifically noted that in south-west Scotland there have been historic incidences of replanting commercial forestry on deep peat which some delegates highlighted has impacted fisheries in this area.

Further suggestions were provided during discussions on the merits of considering flexibility around the breeding season of ground nesting birds, which could potentially assist in providing an extended window for restoration activities to commence on the ground.

Also highlighted was a strategic opportunity going forward, the role of government in ensuring policy coherence, alignment of public and private funding and providing clarity for land managers. Initial investment is needed to build a pipeline of activity for this relatively embryonic activity.

Other delegates raised the need for public bodies to work more coherently together to deliver things from the land and deliver goals in the CCPu, and move away from functional silos. Regional Land Use Partnerships may be the vehicle to achieve this, enthusing communities, land owners and land managers through dialogue and communication.

Peatland Code

Another significant area of discussion was that of increasing private funding through the Peatland Code, given not all funding for this activity could or should be sourced from the public purse. There is therefore a need for a strategic approach to bring in private funding and integrate it with public funding for peatland restoration and agriculture.

Also noted was that the price of tradeable carbon is low at present, which could potentially be a barrier to seeking this private investment. Concerns around accessibility and eligibility of activities, in respect to carbon and peatland, were mooted as a potential barrier to private sector uptake.

The general consensus of discussions was that the Peatland Code is a well-established mechanism, albeit with perhaps limited traction to date, which could be utilised in the future and holds significant potential to play an important role in harnessing private sector investment in peatland restoration activities. Some further discussion followed noting that there are often perceived conflicts, for example peat cutting for distillery use and restoring peat. It was noted there are incentives offered by following the Peatland Code, such as long term income for landowners. However, one representative highlighted the perception that all land managers with peatlands need to abide by the Peatland Code, when it is a voluntary code not a mandatory one.

Competing activities

There was some feeling among delegates that peatland restoration must not be impacted negatively through the pursuit of other priority activities and that loss and damage to peatlands, for example in instances such as the restocking of forestry and development of windfarm infrastructure, is detrimental to policy ambitions on restoration. Consensus was that delivery of these important priorities should be done with the aim of limiting damage to peatlands.

The Cabinet Secretary commented that Scottish Government is aware of such issues, of competing priorities and the varied demands placed on each hectare of land. The planning system has a role here, to seek to resolve such conflict before it happens.

There was some discussion of the need to reward land owners and managers whose peatlands are already in good condition, and to incentivise them to keep them that way, rather than for all funding to flow to areas of already-damaged peatland.

Raising awareness

The group discussed in some detail wider awareness of the importance of peatland restoration among the wider general public, the private sector (including potential investors), and the need for wider acknowledgement and recognition of the role of peatlands in tackling climate change. It was suggested that further efforts are required to highlight the importance of peatland restoration and develop synergies within communities to further enhance general awareness.

Crofting

Delegates highlighted the opportunity for the crofting community in peatland restoration, underlining that Grazings Committees should be involved and are well placed to help co-ordinate involvement of crofters and would welcome future dialogue regarding this. There was suggestion that long term funding mechanisms could potentially be offered to crofters/farmers in exchange for delivering public goods and environmental services. The Cabinet Secretary noted that a crofting National Development Plan is in preparation in which peatland restoration will be an important element.

Employment

Discussions highlighted the benefits of being able to fully understand the relationship between the methods used, impact on restoration sites and long term employment opportunities for local communities and not only deliver short term employment opportunities. There was a general agreement that peatland restoration should be treated as part of a bigger package of work, which includes ecological landscape restoration, in order to provide reliable, long-term rural employment.

One representative noted that estates could potentially be better utilised to undertake localised restoration activities using existing estate staff, with funding provided for training and machinery, to aid increased rates of restoration and programme it around other activities such as stalking.

Monitoring

There was some discussion about the potential efficiencies that monitoring could provide in targeting delivery for desired outputs, helping to concentrate future restoration efforts. It was suggested that monitoring should be built into any revised peatland restoration programme to ensure delivery of Scottish Government's targets.

Training

The provision of training was considered by the group to be a crucial part of any revised peatland restoration plan. It was noted that, at present, the main facilitation of training is provided through Peatland Action, who commission the Crichton Carbon Centre to run training courses in conjunction with Peatland Action staff. It was also noted that we should view this as an opportunity to build capacity and embed principles and learning within every sector. There is a need to think longer term on training, not solely through an annualised approach.

A further suggestion was that all site operators should be trained in environmental awareness so that work was completed with an appreciation of potential effects on the environment, such as measures that could be taken to allow work during the bird breeding season.

COP 26

There was agreement that COP 26 represents a significant opportunity for Scotland to showcase and promote its work on peatland restoration on the international stage. The Cabinet Secretary indicated that her officials were working with the COP26 team to plan wider engagement before, during and after the event, and consider the possibility of site visits for international delegates during the event.

Closing remarks

The Cabinet Secretary commented how useful it had been to hear the discussion, was pleased that there seemed to be a genuine enthusiasm to overcome challenges and assist in meeting the step change needed for restoration and, having heard from delegates, was confident Scottish Government could rely on the input of this community to help jointly address barriers in the future.

She further committed to setting up a stakeholders' working group, chaired by Officials, to work with partners to overcome the issues raised during the summit.

Whilst the Cabinet Secretary is not standing for election in May 2021, she noted that she wished to convene another summit in the near future, possibly early in 2021. The Cabinet Secretary highlighted her personal commitment to achieving increased peatland restoration as one of her key legacies for her time in office.

The Cabinet Secretary commented on the need to increase public awareness of peatlands and peatland restoration, beyond those present, and commented on the opportunity presented by COP26 to address the assumption that peatland restoration is something that happens far away.

Finally, the Cabinet Secretary undertook to keep peatland restoration at the forefront of awareness with her colleagues and more widely, acknowledging the commitment demonstrated by delegates as fundamental to achieving this.

Annex B Peatland Action – some facts and figures

- Over **£30m spent** via NatureScot Peatland ACTION, of the £33m invested by Government
- **Restoring 25,000 ha** of degraded peatland
- **200,000 ha of feasibility studies**
- **Over 350 projects**, 186 successful applicants
- **Training** - 270 training days delivered
- In 2019/20 Peatland Action set approximately 6,000 hectares of land on the road to restoration; maintaining the area of hectares on the road to restoration delivered in 18/19 and building on the success of previous years so that in total over 25,000 hectares* have been put on the road to recovery with funding provided by the Scottish Government since 2012/13 (*data up to 31 March 2020).
- In 2019/20 Peatland Action carried out feasibility studies on a land area of 74,700 hectares; maintaining the area of feasibility studies in 2018/19 and building on the success of previous years so that over 200,000 hectares of targeted feasibility studies have been undertaken with funding provided by the Scottish Government since 2012/13.
- In 2019/20 Peatland Action delivered the highest amount of training for land managers and contractors in a single year; 147 training days delivered.
- In 2019/20 Peatland Action invested £9.802 million; the largest amount of money spent in one year as yet, bringing the total invested through Peatland Action since 2012/13 to £30.176 million.
- It should be noted that in 2019/20 the non-grant costs increased largely because feasibility studies were taken in house as well as significant investment in monitoring equipment required to gather data to support Scotland-wide peatland restoration.

Annex C: Healthy peatlands provide many benefits for people and nature:

- **Carbon store** - Scotland's peatland store 7,000MtCO₂e carbon (the carbon locked up in Scottish peatland soils is equivalent to 140 years' worth of Scotland's total annual greenhouse gas emissions).
- **Internationally important habitat**, and a home to rare plants, invertebrates and birds;
- **A regulator of water flow and quality**: important in flood management, fisheries and drinking water supplies;
- **Places of employment**: rural farming, tourism and crofting are vital to the Scottish economy.
- **A place for recreation** – hillwalking, deer stalking and grouse shooting;
- **Iconic and culturally significant landscapes** and valuable archives of our past;
- **A natural defence against wildfire**, the high water table reducing risk and slowing spread;
- **A benefit to those managing grouse for sporting interests** since peatlands in good condition provide an abundance of invertebrates on which grouse feed.