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SECURING BENEFITS FROM UK PEATLANDS

We welcome the publication of the IUCN UK Peatland Programme Commission of Inquiry on Peatlands. The UK's peatland habitats are of importance for wildlife and biodiversity, landscape value and economic, including leisure, activities. The Commission of Inquiry has drawn public attention to the value of our peatlands.

Recognising the impact of past land use on the condition of our peatland ecosystems, this letter outlines the actions and intentions of Defra, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to achieve our collective aim of enhancing the natural capital of UK peatlands.

Policy co-ordination

The UK, together with the British Overseas Territories, supports internationally important peatland habitats and species including some of the finest examples of Atlantic blanket bog in the world. Conserving and restoring peatlands (blanket bogs, raised bogs and fens) makes an important contribution to the UK's biodiversity objectives. As one of our major wetland types, peatlands have a potentially significant role in contributing to water quality and quantity benefits. The importance of peatlands in terms of climate change mitigation through conserving the carbon stocks and enhancing sequestration makes a strong case for improving the condition of our peatlands.

We recognise the wide ranging importance of peatlands and the need for co-ordinated Government action across biodiversity, climate change, water, heritage and land use. Whilst acknowledging that further research is required, action can be and is being taken.



Partnership and coordinated action

We welcome the consensual partnership approach taken by the IUCN UK Peatland Programme and note the strong representation of land managing interests including environmental NGOs, farming organisations, and moorland owners and managers. The important role of businesses and local communities is also recognised. There are clearly shared interests in ensuring that our peatlands are managed sustainably, and there is a need for significant ongoing engagement from all these groups to make this happen.

We also welcome the tremendous contributions made by the local partnerships across the UK which have helped deliver often large, landscape scale, peatland restoration. Working together at national, devolved government and local levels is important in helping support delivery of peatland objectives across these partnerships. The skills and expertise in managing these excellent examples of nature-based solutions to improving biodiversity, contributing to climate change mitigation and improving water quality and quantity are an important asset which should not be underestimated. We are keen to see this work being continued and to help share this experience internationally.

A Framework for Action

This letter is a statement of intent to protect and enhance the natural capital provided by peatlands in the UK and British Overseas Territories. We hope this letter will provide a signal to encourage public bodies, the private sector and local partnerships to continue working together towards our shared goals. We will continue to provide support through our work in the following areas:

- land management policies for the conservation of peatlands, including through the planning framework;
- funding support through agri-environment schemes;
- engagement with work by the IUCN and others to develop the potential for private funding mechanisms to support peatland restoration; and
- further research on the management of peatlands for water quantity and quality regulation, preserving archaeological and historic record, and the abatement potential and carbon sequestration that might be expected from management interventions including restoration.

Several research studies have shown the benefits of peatlands, including water quantity and quality regulation; they also preserve an archaeological and historic record. However, further significant further research is needed on the abatement potential and carbon sequestration that might be expected from management interventions including restoration, especially in the light of the UNFCCC decision that wetland management may be included in the LULUCF provisions of GHG emissions reporting.

In England, Government provides protection for peatland habitats through statutory area designations, such as SSSIs and AONBs, as well as providing specific incentives for peatland restoration through agri-environment schemes. In addition, three of the twelve Nature Improvement Areas announced by Defra in February 2012 are focussed on improving peatland habitats in both upland and lowland areas. With respect to peat

extraction, in the Natural Environment White Paper Government set out its goal to reduce the use of peat in horticulture to zero by 2030, underpinned by a number of voluntary targets. In January 2013 Defra announced a package of measures to support the industry in moving towards more sustainable growing media. This is supported by the National Planning Policy Framework, which states that local authorities should not grant further planning permission for peat extraction. Finally, Defra has invested £3.5m in research to establish which restoration methods result in the most cost beneficial impacts, and to investigate the greenhouse gas emissions associated with lowland fens under different management regimes.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government has made available funding for moorland and peatland measures in the Scotland Rural Development Programme. It has also provided financial support for peatland restoration run by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) at Forsinard in the Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland; this is one of the largest peatland restoration projects in the world. Funding of £1.7m is being made available to Scottish Natural Heritage over the 3 years 2012-15 to develop a Peatland Plan for Scotland and to support innovative projects. In the second Report on Policies and Proposals (RPP2) for climate change mitigation, published on 29 January, the Scottish Government is proposing that 20,000 hectares a year of peatland should be restored over the next 15 years.

In Wales the Welsh Government supports and delivers a range of actions which both protect and enhance peatland ecosystems. In addition to area designations such as National Parks and SSSIs, funding for management and restoration action is provided from a range of sources. For example, designated sites are supported through management agreements administered by the Countryside Council for Wales, whilst funding for restoration including extensive grip blocking is provided by Welsh Government through its Ecosystem Resilience and Diversity Fund. The Welsh Government's legacy agri environment schemes Tir Gofal and Tir Cynnal reward farmers for specific management action, and the new agri-environment scheme Glastir has adopted an ecosystem approach to intervention which identifies peatlands for priority action within the enhanced element of the scheme.

In Northern Ireland Government provides protection for peatland habitats through statutory area designations, particularly ASSIs, planning policy and by providing incentives for peatland management through agri-environment schemes. Financial support has also been given to peatland management and restoration projects such as recent work on the Garron Plateau which bring an integrated approach between a range of stakeholders.

We look forward to continuing to work together on this issue as we aim to secure the benefits delivered by UK peatlands. We are copying this letter to the Chief Executives of Natural England, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Countryside Council for Wales and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Richard Benyon.

RICHARD BENYON Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries, Defra

John Griffiths

JOHN GRIFFITHS Minister for Environment and Sustainable Development, Welsh Government

Alex Attwood

ALEX ATTWOOD Minister for the Environment, Northern Ireland Executive

Paul Wheelhouse

PAUL WHEELHOUSE Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Scottish Government