

## Action for Scotland's peatlands

### Summary

RSPB Scotland welcomes Rob Gibson MSP's motion and member's debate on *Investing in the future of Scotland's peatlands*. Scotland is **internationally renowned** for its peatlands. The Scottish Government should aim to provide a global example in its actions to conserve and restore peatlands. Delivering peatland biodiversity objectives provides a range of ecosystem services including carbon emissions reduction and maintaining water quality. To deliver such benefits there needs to be a step change in effort to ensure a **clear programme of peatland restoration activity**. Damaged peatlands are a huge cost to society and the longer they are left to deteriorate the more costly it becomes to repair them. The Report on Policies and Programmes (RPP) should signal a strong commitment to increasing peatland restoration, with Scottish Government taking a lead. The Land Use Strategy also provides an ideal opportunity to recognise the value of peatland restoration in terms of the multiple benefits it provides.



### Scotland's peatlands are in need of urgent action

There are global calls for urgent action to restore damaged peatlands to stop the loss of carbon and return the range of services that a fully functioning peatland delivers. Peatlands are found across Scotland, both in remote areas like the Flow Country and in more populated areas such as the Central Belt. They support many important species and unique ecosystems and much of Scotland's peatland is identified as internationally important under EU wildlife legislation. Over 50% of Scotland's estimated 2 million ha peatland area<sup>1</sup> has been damaged by past activity such as peat extraction, burning, grazing, drainage and forestry planting. Such damage affects the peatland ecosystem with losses of biodiversity, archaeology, and of carbon storage and water management functions. Restoration techniques aim to raise water levels to allow the bog vegetation to thrive and return the system to one that is capable of forming and storing peat.

<sup>1</sup> SNH Natural Heritage Trends, Scotland 2001, SNH, Battleby

Without restoration, damaged peatlands will continue to deteriorate and in extreme situations this can occur at an alarming rate, with dramatic bog bursts and severe erosion causing costly damage to infrastructure such as water supplies. The carbon consequences can also be high, with estimates of 10 million tonnes of carbon dioxide being lost each year from the UK's damaged peatlands. The longer the damage continues, the more difficult and costly it becomes to restore the peatland back to a functioning system. Clifton Bain, IUCN Peatland Programme director, explains how restoring peatlands can help meet Scotland's climate change targets at: <http://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/resources/60>

The Scottish Government already has a commitment to restore peatlands, in recognition of their climate change benefits<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>, as a biodiversity priority and as an important soil ecosystem. The UK Biodiversity target for blanket bog<sup>4</sup> equates to around 800,000ha to be restored by 2015. With Scotland supporting over 80% of the resource it is reasonable to apportion around 600,000ha by 2015 for restoration. The Scottish Government has a variety of peatland restoration policies and funding measures available, such as those under the SRDP and payments for management of protected sites (SSSI and Natura 2000 areas). Forestry Commission Scotland has policies to support the removal of trees from peatland on private land and in the national forest estate. In the early 1980s large areas of peatland were planted with trees, resulting in a long-term net loss of carbon as well as damage to the peatland habitat and its important species.

Environmental NGOs such as RSPB Scotland have undertaken large-scale peatland restoration in recent years (see case study below). Recently there has also been support for peatland restoration by the business community. In England, many water companies, faced with spending millions of pounds for water treatment in damaged peatland catchments, have begun habitat restoration as a long-term cost saving exercise with benefits in some catchments of up to £2.5 million. Scottish Water faces similar problems of damaged peatlands affecting water supplies resulting in costly water treatment. There is potential for Scottish Water to use its priority catchment fund to target restoration of peatlands and reduce water treatment costs as well as help meet climate change and biodiversity targets. Such funding has been allocated by the Water Industry Commission but no action has, to date, been taken.

### **Wind farms and peatland**

The RSPB has led discussions with the renewable energy industry and conservation bodies in Scotland to agree new good practice principles in an effort to maximise the protection and restoration of peatlands, while encouraging the development of clean, green energy from wind farms<sup>5</sup>. The RSPB believes that wind farms play a key role in tackling climate change but must be designed and located in ways that avoid environmentally sensitive areas of peatland as well as ensuring that peat carbon losses are minimised. The wind farm industry also has a major role in restoring previously damaged peatland habitat.

### **Emissions savings from restoring peatlands**

Across the world, large-scale degradation of peatlands is causing serious environmental and social impacts<sup>6</sup>. One of the most pressing concerns is the loss of stored carbon that is contributing to climate change. Globally, damage to peatlands is responsible for around 2Gt of carbon dioxide – 10% of all global carbon dioxide emissions. Of the world's 175 peatland nations, the UK is among the top 20 for carbon emissions from damaged peatlands. Scotland supports over 80% of the UK's deepest blanket bog peatlands.

---

<sup>2</sup> Climate Change Delivery Plan: Meeting Scotland's Statutory Climate Change Targets <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/06/18103720/0>

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Soil Framework <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/05/20145602/0>

<sup>4</sup> UK Biodiversity Group (1999) Blanket bog Habitat action Plan. Tranch 2 Action Plans Vol IV. DEFRA

<sup>5</sup> Wind Farm and Peatland Good Practice Principles: <http://www.scottishrenewables.com/MultimediaGallery/00ed11c0-3253-4ffc-b9f8-02aa9f96aec8.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Assessment on Peatlands, Biodiversity and Climate Change, 2007. <http://www.peat-portal.net/index.cfm?&menuid=113>

Rewetting damaged peatlands reduces the loss of climate change relevant emissions from the peat store and provides a long-term carbon sink. Briefing from the IUCN UK Peatland Programme<sup>7</sup> shows that **delivering peatland restoration targets of 600,000ha by 2015 in Scotland could provide at least 2.7Mt CO<sub>2</sub>-eq savings per year**. This is equivalent to as much as a third of the total savings originally proposed in the annual climate change targets for 2010-2012 by the Scottish Government. Reviews of peat carbon science have presented often contradictory lines of evidence, in part due to the complexity of the subject and in part due to differences in methodology and definition of peatland under study. *"Peatbogs and carbon - a critical synthesis"*<sup>8</sup> by Richard Lindsay reviews the impacts of current and historical use of peatlands, and the effects of restoration on greenhouse gas emissions. The report draws the conclusion that while healthy peatbogs can release a certain amount of methane in the short term, the overall impact on the climate is significantly less than that of the carbon dioxide which leaks from damaged peat. The report was commissioned by the RSPB, and received financial support from SNH, Forestry Commission and the IUCN UK Peatland Programme, amongst others.

### **Delivering peatland restoration**

We welcome the Scottish Government's intention that peatland restoration will be included in greenhouse gas emissions inventory calculations<sup>9</sup>. However, it is essential that this is accompanied by a clear programme of activity to deliver that restoration. **We believe that the Minister should announce a package of measures on peatlands. The RPP is a great opportunity to do this.** Modest additional spending will help more speedy delivery and reduce the long-term costs, but much of the delivery can be achieved through more coordinated and focused activity within existing budgets. Some of the key areas we would suggest could bring immediate benefits are:

- A Ministerial Direction for the statutory agencies to deliver peatland restoration. Furthermore there should be a signal for key agencies such as SEPA, SNH and FCS to work cooperatively to help deliver restoration on both state-controlled and private land. FCS should be asked to review the area of deep peat in the State owned forests and identify areas for restoration. FCS must not be permitted to require replanting elsewhere to compensate for the removal of trees on peatlands, as this will inhibit progress.
- The RPP and the Land Use Strategy must give clear direction on peatland restoration, with targets and actions.
- Planning authorities should be directed to enforce peatland restoration conditions associated with past peat extraction permissions and to avoid further consents (or the extension of existing consents) for commercial peat extraction.
- There should be improved targeting and promotion of SRDP funds towards restoring peatlands – existing measures do support peatlands but are often limited in scope and extent. For example, for land currently classified as forestry, payments for tree removal are not available through moorland management options but can only be accessed through the woodland improvement grant. Payments will only be granted to cover the costs of removing trees on 20% of the site, which limits recovery where large areas of bog have been planted. There is a need to introduce a measure covering 100% of the site so full costs of restoring an area of peatland could be covered. This should be addressed urgently.
- Scottish Water should be directed to use its priority catchment management fund to deliver peatland restoration in catchments affected by damaged peatlands.
- Scottish Government should provide pump-priming funds to support internationally important peatland restoration projects which are capable of drawing in additional EU funds such as EU Life money.

---

<sup>7</sup> Peatlands and GHG Emissions Reduction Opportunities in Scotland <http://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/resources/47>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.uel.ac.uk/erg/PeatandCarbonReport.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/ticc/documents/LetterfromtheMinister-190510.pdf>

### Case Study: RSPB Forsinard reserve, Caithness

The prime example of large-scale peatland restoration in Scotland to date is that undertaken in the Flow Country in Caithness and Sutherland. Probably the largest area of Atlantic blanket bog in the world, this 400,000ha blanket bog is one of the UK's showcase peatlands of international importance. A partnership of statutory bodies, NGOs and private individuals have agreed a strategy to help restore this damaged habitat, secure sustainable development and promote the benefits of a healthy peatland ecosystem. With the benefit of EU Life funding, large areas of drains have been blocked and plantation trees removed to help restore the peatland. Almost 10,000ha have so far been brought under restoration management. See the RSPB website for more details<sup>10</sup>.

*Blocks of plantation forestry have been removed at Forsinard reserve*



For further information please contact:

**Lloyd Austin**, Head of Conservation Policy or **Julia Harrison**, Parliamentary Officer (07912-667874)

RSPB Scotland, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP Tel: 0131 311 6500 Fax: 0131 311 6569

Email: [Lloyd.Austin@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Lloyd.Austin@rspb.org.uk) or [Julia.Harrison@rspb.org.uk](mailto:Julia.Harrison@rspb.org.uk)

*Registered Charity England and Wales Number 207076, Scotland Number SC037654 – November 2010*

*RSPB Scotland is part of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the UK-wide charity which speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.*

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/f/forsinard/index.aspx>