

Policy Position Statement

The use of peat

Purpose

The purpose of this PPS is to promote CIWEM's views on the environmental damage caused by the unsustainable extraction and the use of peat and to encourage the use of alternative renewable resources.

CIWEM calls for:

1. The Government's ambition to reduce the use of peat to zero by 2030, as set out in the Natural Environment White Paper, to be achieved in a shorter timeframe.
2. Those industries which use peat, for whatever purpose, to continue to find renewable alternative resources within the shortest timeframes possible and to continue to foster a partnership approach in achieving these aims.
3. The urgent restoration of all damaged peat reserves to a natural habitat and function which will result in the recovery of some of the benefits we gain from the peat resource.
4. Increased monitoring of restoration schemes and the publication of new information.
5. The Government to protect those peat reserves that are deemed to be scientifically and/or environmentally important through existing legislation or new legislation where current measures do not provide the proper protection.
6. Defra to continue to promote and develop public awareness campaigns which will lead to a better understanding of all the issues relating to the use of peat and the environmental damage commercial extraction, along with other pressures on the peat resource, is causing.

CIWEM is the leading independent Chartered professional body for water and environmental professionals, promoting excellence within the sector.

Background

Peat should be considered a non-renewable natural resource within the UK and Republic of Ireland due to its slow rate of formation. Peatlands include upland blanket bogs and lowland raised bogs, as well as drained peatlands currently in agricultural use. Peat soils provide a number of essential services and functions for society; supporting rare wildlife and biodiversity, storing reserves of carbon, producing food and playing an important role in the water cycle.

The UK has 15% of Europe's peat resource, covering around three million hectares. However, the majority of our peatlands are significantly degraded as a result of human activities and pollution, including extraction for horticultural use, forestry planting, agricultural improvement and erosion. It is estimated that around half of the UK peatlands have been drained and converted from their natural state to improve conditions for crops, livestock and to expand commercial forestry.

The use of peat as a domestic fuel and as a construction material can be traced back thousands of years. However, the scale of use was comparatively low, contained within small communities and had little environmental impact. It is only over the last forty years that its properties as a growing and packaging medium for the horticultural, agricultural and related industries has led to extraction and use on a massive scale (originally use in horticulture was to find a use for the waste peat overlying burnable peat). The consequent impact on peat reserves, the wildlife they support, the landscape quality and wider environmental considerations, in particular carbon sequestration, has been irreparable in some cases.

According to the National Ecosystem Assessment, it is estimated that £9.4M of UK peat was extracted in 2009, equating to carbon emissions worth >£10m (at £25/tonne carbon). Degraded peatlands are prone to erosion and gulying, resulting in suspended and dissolved organic matter entering watercourses. It is estimated to cost water companies approximately £0.5m per year in water treatment costs as a result of this. Degradation of peatlands impacts on the whole range of services provided by this resource, many of which are much harder to put a clear value on, such as the loss of habitats and associated species of conservation concern and increased wildfire risk.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has a long-term aim to protect peat soils and to promote management and restoration so future generations benefit from them. Importing peat into the UK and Eire from abroad, over longer distances, is not considered as a suitable alternative given the associated carbon cost of transporting these materials over long distances, and the potential environmental impacts in their country or origin.

Key Issues

CIWEM believes that, wherever practicable, we should maximise the use of renewable resources. Peat extraction, whilst recognised as not being the only pressure on the peat resource, may have a wide range of impacts, including the destruction of natural habitats and the loss of peat reserves within sites which are often of significant scientific interest, reductions in water storage and consequent increased flood risk and the loss of potential carbon sinks.

CIWEM recognises that to be efficient and economic, a significant amount of plant production requires a non-soil based growing medium. Whilst peat may, in some instances, provide the best option for such a medium, the continued use of peat cannot be supported particularly with the development of alternative waste or renewable materials for this purpose.

Restoration of damaged sites to a natural habitat and function can result in the recovery of some of the benefits we gain from the peat resource. Restoration to a condition which recreates as much of the original function of the peat resource as possible should, therefore, be a requirement for all extraction sites.

CIWEM recognises the Government's ambition to reduce the use of peat to zero by 2030, as set out in the Natural Environment White Paper, but calls for the achievement of this aim in a significantly shorter timeframe. CIWEM also recognises the contribution made by the UK growing media industry, the professional horticulture sector and retailers to develop alternatives and urges that these efforts are continued and increased. This Institution believes that the building of a fund of knowledge on the use of any alternative must be continued and the further research and development in this area is necessary.

Conclusions

CIWEM supports the Government's ambition to reduce the use of peat to zero but call for this to be achieved in a significantly shorter timeframe than currently proposed (by 2030, as set out in the Natural Environment White Paper).

CIWEM calls on those industries which use peat, for whatever purpose, to continue to find renewable alternative resources within the shortest possible timeframes. In the interests of sustainability and environmental protection, CIWEM supports the use of renewable alternatives (preferably locally sourced) to replace peat as a plant growing medium.

CIWEM supports the Sustainable Growing Media Task Force and its remit to foster a partnership approach.

CIWEM welcomes the efforts of the Growing Media Association (GMA) to support the Government targets for reducing the use of peat.

CIWEM calls for the urgent restoration of damaged peat reserves to a natural habitat and function which will result in the recovery of some of the benefits we gain from the peat resource. Plans to enable restoration to a condition which recreates as much of the original function of the peat resource as possible should, therefore, be a requirement for all extraction sites. Implementation of such plans should be monitored.

CIWEM urges the Government to protect those peat reserves that are deemed to be scientifically and/or environmentally important through existing legislation or new legislation where current measures do not provide the proper protection.

CIWEM urges Defra to continue to promote and develop public awareness campaigns which will lead to a better understanding of all the issues relating to the use of peat and the environmental damage commercial extraction, along with other pressures on the peat resource, is causing.

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Note: CIWEM Policy Position Statements (PPS) represents the Institution's views on issues at a particular point in time. It is accepted that situations change as research provides new evidence. It should be understood, therefore, that CIWEM PPS's are under constant review and that previously held views may alter and lead to revised PPS's. PPSs are produced as a consensus report and do not represent the view of individual members of CIWEM.