

ENGLAND PEAT STRATEGY**Purpose**

1. To provide background on the England Peat Strategy and set out any associated risks to (i) woodland creation aspirations and (ii) activities on the Public Forest Estate.

Recommendation

2. That the Committee note the contents of this paper; no further action is recommended at this time.

Background

3. Defra is developing an 'England Peat Strategy', linked to the 25-Year Environment Plan which sets out a vision that all peatlands should be managed sustainably within 25 years. No distinction is made between shallow and deep peats. A number of eNGOs have a desire to see woodland removed from deep peats and this issue has recently come into sharp focus in the context of FEE's forest plan for Uswayford, in the Cheviots.
4. 51,447 hectares of woodland in England is on deep peat, 60% of which is conifer plantation, with the remainder secondary native woodland. 18% of all woodland on deep peat is on designated sites and, 20,152 ha, if restored, would extend or buffer high quality habitat (blanket bog, lowland fen or lowland raised bog on Priority Habitats Inventory). Woodland removal on these sites would broadly be supported by the open habitats policy if proposals came forward, and the decision as to whether or not to restock is covered by a new UKFS Guideline bullet:

Consider the balance of benefits for carbon and other ecosystem services before making the decision to restock on soils with peat exceeding 50 cm in depth.

5. UKFS rules out afforestation on deep peat, of which the total extent is 680,000 ha. Shallow peat and shallow peat with peaty pockets covers an additional area of 740,000 ha. If the ambition for deforestation was extended to include the restoration of shallow peat and shallow peat with peaty pockets, it would bring an additional 113,000 ha of existing woodland into scope.
6. Forest Research, in collaboration with Natural England published a report in 2014¹ which prioritised sites for woodland removal from deep peat where biodiversity and carbon gains would be maximised. This report did not consider sites on shallow peats or shallow peat with peaty pockets.

¹ An assessment of the afforested peat land in England and opportunities for restoration
[https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/FR_Anderson_peat_assessment_report_2014.pdf/\\$file/FR_Anderson_peat_assessment_report_2014.pdf](https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/FR_Anderson_peat_assessment_report_2014.pdf/$file/FR_Anderson_peat_assessment_report_2014.pdf)

Forestry and deep peat

7. From a greenhouse gas abatement perspective, the case for woodland removal is weak where forest productivity is high, but much stronger for both carbon abatement and biodiversity where tree growth is poor. This is reflected in the UK Forestry's Standards Forests and Climate Change (and both Soils and Biodiversity) Guidelines: consider the balance of benefits for carbon and other ecosystem services before making the decision to restock on soils with peat exceeding 50 cm in depth. The situation is different for new planting, with the UKFS indicating that deep peat should be avoided. As a consequence, grant aid would not be provided for new planting on deep peat and consent would not be given under the Environmental Impact Assessment (forestry) regulations: avoid establishing new forests on soils with peat exceeding 50 cm in depth and on sites that would compromise the hydrology of adjacent bog or wetland habitats.
8. The unconditional felling of trees and woodland to create or restore priority open habitat requires consent under the Forestry Act, needs consideration under the EIA (Forestry) regulations, and needs to comply with best practice under the UK Forestry Standard guidelines. The Open Habitat policy provides a framework for the removal of trees to create priority open habitats, including peatlands. However, peat bogs are only one of the priority habitats and there is no target area set for the creation of peat bogs from woodland. Restoration priorities are decided annually and are usually for designated sites (SSSIs, SPAs, SACs). Compensatory planting may be a requirement and can be a barrier to restoration activity taking place; however, this may not be a condition of consent if the site is designated or capable of restoration to high quality priority open habitat.
9. From a biodiversity perspective there has been no conclusive evidence of successful restoration of blanket bog to a fully functioning bog from forests; restoration is normally to some form of dry (or wet) heath. The drainage of the (blanket) peat has often been so effective that it is extremely challenging to rewet and it is unlikely that the surface of the peat can be rewetted. However, recent trials have shown that new trenching techniques can form a barrier that prevents water drainage through underground cracks, allowing successful rewetting of some afforested sites previously regarded as un-restorable.

Analysis

10. An internal Defra-group workshop was held on 26th September. At the workshop, a requirement for the strategy to consider improved management of afforested deep peat, recognising the economic benefits of productive forest on deep peat and wider ecosystem services, was highlighted. This would bring forestry in line with agriculture and was broadly accepted.
11. A second, stakeholder workshop was held on 11th October, at which forestry came under little scrutiny, prior to a public consultation that will take place next year.
12. The FS Policy advice team (FS PA_t) has worked closely on a number of issues with the Defra soils team who are aware of forestry concerns. As mitigation for addressing potential risk to existing forest cover, future timber supply and woodland expansion aspiration, FS PA_t will develop an outline framework for managing the risk, including:
 - more robust implementation of compensatory planting requirements;

- explicit funding for compensatory planting;
- robust adoption of the UKFS guideline bullet requiring that open habitat restoration does not take place mid-rotation, and
- Defra-group identification of sites where commercial forestry will be welcomed.

Mark Broadmeadow
Forest Services
November 2017