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Three things the government must do to end the peat scandal

If the government wants other nations to step up to the climate and ecological crises, it must show a clean pair of hands on peat.

Britain's peatlands are unique in many ways. They could be our ally in helping to curb climate change, restoring Britain's dire state of nature and reducing flood risk.

But the dreadful state of the nation's peatlands means they are being prevented from playing their full part – and there's no mystery why.

2021 must be the year that ministers stop giving the peat industry more time to clean up its act.

The dire state of the nation's buried treasure

The UK's peatlands have been degraded by a combination of decades of harmful peat extraction, bad land-management practices such as the burning of peat moorlands, and a failure to invest in the restoration of all peatlands.

The UK has behaved as though it can afford to let the best tools in its environment toolkit get rusty and blunt. Yet the costs of protecting peatlands are tiny compared with the costs of letting them decline. The dreadful state of the nation's peatlands means that instead of continuing to quietly store carbon as they have for thousands of years, they are leaking vast volumes of climate-changing gases.

Allowing peatlands to switch from being carbon stores to a source of emissions makes no sense on any level. It also undermines the good actions that some sectors of the economy are taking to cut their climate emissions and kick the fossil fuel habit.

Industrial scale peat cutting © **iStock**

And as the peat we use is also sourced from Ireland and the Baltic states, the impact is not on the UK's carbon emissions alone. Peat sold in this country has already released carbon where it was dug up, adding to the global accumulation in the atmosphere.

Ministers must stop dithering and do three things to stop the peat scandal.

1. **End peat sales now**

A decade ago, the government declared an end to the sale of peat by 2020. Ministers asked the gardening trade to start phasing out peat and to give their customers a real choice to go truly peat free.

But the peat and horticulture trade has dragged its feet. A trip to a garden centre or DIY store will show that peat sales are still booming and that few stores offer their customers peat-free choices at a comparable price.

Close up of delivery lorry showing plastic sacks of peat stacked high © **Paul de Zylva**

The irony is that no one really needs to use peat to garden successfully. Garden borders, allotments, patio pots and window boxes will be productive without peat. In fact, peat never used to be used much in gardening. It’s just that peat has been marketed so much, it's on sale everywhere.

By 2017 it was clear to everyone that the industry was not on track to end peat use by 2020, as ministers wanted. It didn't help that ministers took their eye off the ball and thought they could rely on the industry to regulate itself. We and others told ministers the voluntary approach wouldn't work, but were ignored.

Despite failing to act, the gardening and horticulture trade now wants ministers to give it more time.

If ministers cave in on preserving the nation’s peatlands and ending peat sales now, the government's own climate and nature aims will be seriously undermined. Giving in to the industry’s claims that it will act at its own leisure means that peat will continue to be on sale for up to twenty years – that's twenty years after peat sales should have ended in the first place.

2. **Invest in restoring all of Britain’s peatlands**

The government also needs to get serious about restoring the natural condition of the nation’s peatlands. Letting degraded peatlands continue to leak carbon is counter-productive and makes a mockery of the government's aspiration to lead global action on climate change and get other nations to follow suit.

The government has invested in restoration projects covering a modest 35,000 hectares in England. Peatlands will also get a share of an equally modest £640 million for some restoration projects. It’s a start, but it’s nowhere near enough to repair the damage and will only last for a few years, when peatlands need decades to repair the damage.

Ministers must get real about proper funding for wholesale peatland restoration. Restoring some peatlands is not good enough, when all peatlands need to be returned to good condition, so they stop leaking carbon and play their full part in storing carbon, restoring nature, and reducing flood risk.

Restoring peatlands makes sense on many levels, including economically, because doing so will be less expensive than the higher costs to come if peatlands are allowed to decline.

View of rare crescent pool on peat bog, Northumberland, stream in foreground **© iStock**

To put costs into perspective, the government estimates that flooding in recent years cost the economy £1.6 billion. Ministers are giving peatland restoration a share of a very modest £640 million.

3. **End the burning of peat moorlands**

There’s no excuse to burn peat – it’s a lazy bad practice which has no place in the responsible use of land.

Burning dries out and degrades the soil and its ability to hold water, including holding back potential flood waters. Burning means the land supports a reduced range of plant species, which in turn support a less diverse range of insects, birds and other wildlife.

The government has said it will ban burning of peatlands that are in important nature areas, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

That’s the minimum you’d expect. But as most peatlands are not within SSSIs, vast swathes of UK peatlands are still at risk of being burned by irresponsible landowners and managers, who claim to be guardians of the countryside.

This year, the UK hosts the global climate negotiations. Ending the peat scandal would be a quick win and show the kind of leadership the world expects from the host nation.