

## Peatland Programme conference 2023 workshop summary:

### Peatland Policy: a just transition for people and nature

#### Context and aims

This session examined how we can achieve a peatland future in the lowlands that secures environmental goals, including reducing carbon emissions, managing water effectively and conserving biodiversity, whilst achieving a just transition for people and nature in restoring and managing peatlands. Farmers are concerned that a shift to more natural peatland function will disadvantage them. The session aimed to explore what the peatland community wants from lowland peatlands and then looked at the capacity of agriculture policy and support to deliver this.

#### Summary of discussions

What do lowland peatlands currently provide?	What should they provide in future/what does the community need?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Food security but only for limited time due to soil loss</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Continued food security/economic sustainability and quality</li><li>• Long-term viable and productive peatlands</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jobs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More/new sustainable jobs</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Biodiversity refugia</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased healthy peatlands Ecosystems/biodiversity</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wellbeing/recreation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greater understanding by more people of the benefits of peatlands</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Beauty/ Cultural heritage</li><li>• Tourism</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Education on the cultural/heritage benefits</li><li>• Greater access provision for enjoyment</li><li>• Protection of historic archive</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Water security</li><li>• Flood management</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Better understanding of the water management challenges and solutions</li><li>• Water security/quality</li><li>• Strategic water management – aim for self-regulating with better flood/drought resilience</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greenhouse gas emissions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contribution to global climate cooling</li><li>• Climate change resilience</li><li>• Emissions reduction/sequestration</li></ul>

- (Almost?) no-one sees keeping peatlands as they are as an option, including farmers. Farmers generally want to conserve peat and leave future generations a viable future. There was no suggestion that we are going too quickly. In fact, there's only 60 years left of peat if we carry on farming arable land under current conditions which is hardly a long term food production strategy.
- However, farmers feel like they're being let down on all sides – pressure to cut emissions from public narrative, net zero targets, supermarkets etc, but government aren't offering

enough support for restoration/wetter farming. We need longer term contracts and higher payment rates. There are also issues accessing support for capital costs for those not in Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship.

- Viability came up a lot as a reason why things are as they are, with some scepticism over whether policy is going to change what is viable.
- Supermarkets are not supporting farmers either in terms of guaranteeing purchase (resulting in large amounts of waste), or in some cases dropping farms on lowland peat as suppliers for the sake of the supermarket's own net zero targets.
- Perverse policy decisions are undermining a sensible way forward including a biomass plant aimed at tackling climate change that uses wheat (a dry agriculture crop) that relies on continued drainage and contributes to soil loss and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Some suggested we need more data and more sharing of that data to make change, but generally there was support for getting on with what we have enough evidence to know now, with the opportunity to gather more evidence and refine/adjust along the way.
- It was discussed how important a place-based approach is in policymaking that recognises differences in lowlands/uplands/within each.
- Most people thought peatlands in the future should look different to how they do – some suggested they might look similar but be managed very differently. There was some difference in visions of how much food/fuel/other production vs near-natural should exist.
- There was a reminder of the need to respond to multiple objectives and aim for healthy ecosystems not just short-term carbon reduction – biodiversity and climate crisis must both be addressed.
- Some participants thought it unfair that there's pressure to cut emissions from peatland, particularly felt by farmers, whilst other areas of the economy are being let off (e.g. recent delay to petrol car ban) and people choosing to live high carbon lifestyles (e.g. air travel, buying food from abroad).
- A piecemeal approach to rewetting won't work as the infrastructure is so complex and unstable as well as being in a highly dangerous precarious state. We need an urgent regional scale plan put in place – and this is not beyond human capability as the Dutch have demonstrated – provided government put the correct levers and finance into place.
- There was a shared view from farmers and environmental bodies that we can't continue as we are and that there is an urgency to sort this out in a coordinated multi-agency 'big project' way.
- Dutch experience has calculated that rewetted fens would contribute as much to the economy as the value of food currently produced (£3bn).
- Other nations are taking different approaches to policymaking. Northern Ireland have a concept of just transition more baked into their policymaking process with specific fund set aside.
- There was a feeling of frustration, uncertainty and loss of hope as a result of repeatedly having these conversations while nothing changes. There is a question of what do we do with the outcomes of these discussions afterwards - how do we get the right people to listen?