

## **Peat - Update on work with DEFRA on the future of Peat Workings in Somerset**

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**Cabinet Member:** Councillor Sarah Dyke Lead Member Climate and Environment Division and Local Member: N/A

### **1. Summary**

- 1.1.** This is an update on the work undertaken so far to review the current extent of permitted peat extraction on the Somerset Levels and Moors and efforts to limit extraction.
- 1.2.** This issue relates to the County Plan in terms of preventing climate change and in response to the Council declaring a Climate Emergency in November 2019 and an Ecological Emergency as announced on 20th July 2022, given that Peatlands are recognised as being important to carbon capture and for biodiversity.

### **2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations**

- 2.1.** An Officer Non-Key decision has previously been taken by the Director of ECI Commissioning who approved authorised officers to engage with owners/operators of peat extraction sites in Somerset and gave approval to explore with those operators the possibilities of voluntarily ending peat extraction on their sites in exchange for financial compensation.

Following a meeting on Monday 21st November 2022 between DEFRA and Senior Officers from Somerset County Council DEFRA has confirmed that in order to facilitate the cessation of peat extraction funding could\* be made available to reimburse the authority where compensation is paid to an operator/owner to end peat extraction. Reimbursement would be on a \*case-by-case basis and will be conditional. DEFRA has also advised members of the Somerset peat industry that this funding may be available for SCC to progress the cessation of peat extraction. DEFRA has agreed to send a formal letter of intent or engagement to SCC. This is now awaited.

- 2.2.** This report was presented to the Executive at the Executive/ SLT meeting of 5th December and approval was given to Officers to engage with DEFRA to reduce the extent of extraction of peat on the Somerset Levels and Moors and on the intention to facilitate this through financial compensation provided by DEFRA to the Council.

The Scrutiny for Environment and Policy is asked to note the approval to take discussions forward with DEFRA and the peat producers in Somerset and to support the proposed approach.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1.** The extraction of peat from the Somerset Levels and Moors is known to have taken place during Roman times and has been carried out since the Levels were first drained. After the Romans left Britain, from this period forward peat extraction was undertaken by hand by the owning or tenanted farmers with more intensive mechanised and commercial extraction taking over from around the 1970s.
- 3.2.** On 7 August 2020 the BBC reported that a DEFRA spokesperson stated: "This Government remains dedicated to being a world leader in tackling climate change. Healthy peatlands have an important role to play in cutting greenhouse gas emissions and helping us reach our net zero target, which is why we have committed £640m through the Nature for Climate Fund to restore 35,000 hectares of England's peatland by 2025. We will also phase out the use of peat in horticulture in England by 2030 and have been clear that we will consider further measures to end the use of peat once and for all."
- 3.3.** The chief executive of the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC), Chris Stark, said: "Peatland restoration is a no-brainer but action needs to start now. Most of the UK's peatlands are in bad shape, accounting for around 5% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions. This problem is fixable, by restoring and managing our land more sustainably. In the longer-term, well-functioning peatlands can continuously suck up CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere, unlike trees, and represent an important and potentially growing reservoir of carbon. Healthy peatland can also deliver additional benefits such as cleaner water and reduced flood risk."
- 3.4.** It is estimated there are over three billion tonnes of carbon stored in the peatlands in the UK – equivalent to all carbon stored in the forests of the UK, Germany and France put together.
- 3.5.** The Liberal Democrat manifesto launched in the run up to the May 2022 elections makes a specific pledge to work with partners to end peat digging on the Somerset Levels and restore bog areas to act as a carbon sink.

- 3.6.** Earlier this year the Government undertook an extensive public consultation on the future of the retail sale of peat which identified significant support for the banning of peat sales to the retail market. It is likely that a ban will come into effect by the end of 2024.
- 3.7.** The importance of protecting peatlands is becoming increasingly understood with benefits including carbon storage, sustaining unique habitats and biodiversity, water quality improvements, flood water storage and mitigation. Somerset County Council has declared a Climate Emergency and an Ecological Emergency both of which are impacted by extraction of peat. There is no national or local policy for ending peat extraction so in order to try and bring about the early cessation of peat extraction from sites benefitting from the relevant planning permissions a proactive engagement and support is required rather than a regulatory approach.
- 3.8.** In its role as Mineral Planning Authority SCC has historically granted planning permission for peat extraction on multiple sites within the county in line with national and local policy at that time. Extraction on many of these sites is complete but there are a number where extraction is continuing or has the potential to start.
- 3.9.** The need to protect peatlands has been highlighted nationally and the Government is set to introduce legislation which will ban retail sales of peat in 2024. Sales to the professional sector will be exempted for now, probably until after 2030, with different timeframes for different types of plant - edible, ornamental etc. Most Somerset peat producers have at least a foot in the professional market and therefore a ban on retail sales may not be enough by itself to stop extraction. Most peat extraction in Somerset will probably be completed before a ban on sales to professional market takes effect.

#### **4. Consultations undertaken**

- 4.1.** DEFRA has already funded an officer to take this work forward. This supports a dedicated resource at Somerset County Council for the remainder of financial year 2022/23 and for the next financial year 2023/24. This resource is intended to support the review of peat extraction permissions and to provide evidence that will help inform DEFRA and SCC policy decisions related to the ending peat extraction.
- 4.2.** Recently Officers met with senior figures from DEFRA to undertake a tour of a peat site and a composting factory. Discussions around compensation for Peat site owners were undertaken and an agreement was reached that this would be paid for from DEFRA's funds.

## **5. Implications**

- 5.1.** If peat was continued to be produced from the Levels and Moors this will continue to have serious implications in terms of climate change, our ability to deliver on our Climate Emergency goals and environmental pledges and continue to have a significant negative impact on the planet.
- 5.2.** DEFRA has agreed to send a formal letter of intent or engagement to SCC offering the compensation. This is now awaited.
- 5.3.** If the preliminary engagement shows that there is an interest from owners/operators in the voluntary ending of peat extraction on their sites in exchange for financial compensation from the Council further decisions will be sought to formalise approval to proceed with this approach.

## **6. Background papers**

- 6.1.** Officers Non-Key Decision dated 21/10/22

Note: For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author