

Response to the:
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee Peatland inquiry

The Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) was launched in 2017 to address the current crisis in our soils. Its aim is to restore soils to health within one generation by seeing soil health elevated to where it belongs as a priority alongside clean air and clean water. The SSA is a non-profit organisation (CIC number 10802764).

The SSA adds its voice to those who highlight the urgency for English peatlands to be protected in recognition of the vital role they play in climate change adaptation and mitigation, in ecosystem conservation and as a biodiversity habitat.

Alongside the submissions of the research and academic institutions highlighting the state of English peatlands and the steps needed to address them, we would draw the Committee's attention to the clear political mandate for peatland restoration based on long-standing national and international commitments.

National

- Recent government commitments in this arena date back to the 2011 white paper The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature, where it stated the aim of reducing peat use to zero by 2030.
- The 2016 Environmental Audit Committee Soil Health Inquiry noted that the UK's peatlands store around 40% of our soil carbon but that the majority of England's peatlands are currently net sources of greenhouse gases rather than net sinks. The inquiry noted that the UK's arable soils have seen a widespread and ongoing decline in peat soil carbon. It urged the Government to take tougher action to tackle land use practices which degrade peat.
- This Year's Committee on Climate Change progress report states that "*plans for protecting terrestrial habitats, including peatlands, contain targets, which if met, would go a long way to reducing vulnerability to climate change.*" It then goes on to warn however that these plans do not include a specific set of actions to meet the goal.

In terms of goals, the Committee's Net Zero report suggests a fifth of UK agricultural land should be dedicated to peatland restoration, tree planting and energy.

- The 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (25 YEP) highlights that over 70% of England's peatlands are drained or in poor condition and states that conventional agricultural production using current techniques on drained peatland is inherently unsustainable.

The 25 YEP also reiterates the above mentioned 2011 aim to phase out peat use by 2030. Again, while this remains a voluntary measure, we feel little confidence that it will be achieved. We are therefore heartened that the 25 YEP further states that "*if by 2020 we have not seen sufficient movement to peat alternatives, we will look at introducing further measures.*"

- There have been additional targets for protecting our peatlands that have been endorsed by government through other mechanisms. Notable examples include the 2009 Peatland Code proposed in the 25 YEP as the key mechanism to achieve its goals, which include: *two million hectares of UK peatland in good condition, under restoration or sustainably managed by 2040.*

International

- We would remind the government of the UK's responsibility to the global community to protect peatlands, given that estimates of peatland scale in the UK lie between 8.8 and 14.8% of Europe's peatland area and about 13% of the world resource of the specific peatland type, blanket bog, which also forms the largest expanse of semi-natural habitat in the UK.
- We would also remind the government that the UK is a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specifically Goal 15: Life on Land which commits us to restore degraded land and soil by 2030 (15.3). However, in the June 2019 review of progress on the SDGs, there was little evidence that activities are taking place to achieve this target with regards to peatlands, although we would highlight that the review signposts the Welsh initiative as positive progress.
- The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) 2018 UK Peatland Strategy warns that *"Without further action it is likely that the current level of degradation will increase with climate change. Instead of providing vital and valued services, peatlands will increasingly cause costly problems to society."* The strategy calls for a step change warning that insufficient action now will lead to far greater costs to society in future with *"hugely damaging social and economic costs of environmental degradation."*

The strategy urges that we take the strategic approach recommended by IUCN Resolution 043 "Securing the future for global peatlands", stating that the UK is required to meet international obligations towards peatlands and climate (Annex 2) and offering to assist the Government in meeting these.

- The IUCN report reminds that peatlands are the largest carbon store on land (despite occupying only 3% of the earth's land surface), they play a vital role in the earth's ability to mitigate climate change, which in turn supports biodiversity to thrive. They have been placed at the heart of prospective nature-based solutions to climate change in the UK and internationally. In addition to this, they are of global significance to biodiversity given that the majority of habitats and species that peatlands support are rare, threatened or declining.
- As stated in the Convention on Biological Diversity Aichi Target 11, peatlands are critical ecosystems that are of particular importance for biodiversity, and therefore require "particular emphasis" on their protection. The Aichi Targets were agreed by the UK government in 2010 but the latest review of UK Biodiversity Indicators (published 5 Sept 2019) which presents the UK's progress towards meeting these targets makes no mention of peat and only one reference to soil (in relation to removal of greenhouse gases by UK forests).

In summary, the protection and restoration of our peatlands provide a unique opportunity to reduce our vulnerability to climate change and biodiversity loss. We call on the Government to scale up its commitments to tackling this critical issue and honour our international commitments reinforced by the range of organisations providing the clear mandate and rationale for doing so.

With this in mind the England Peatland Strategy, scheduled for the end of 2019, provides a critical opportunity for the government to examine progress against the 2020 milestone, to re-affirm its commitment to the measures and objectives laid out above, and for the first time develop and implement a clear ambitious strategy with defined goals and milestones to achieve them.

With Glasgow scheduled to host the COP 2020 Climate Change Summit, we urge the government to consider the impact that an ambitious English Peatland strategy, alongside clear evidence of progress in Wales and action in the other UK nations, could have in showcasing our nationwide ambition in this area.

The SSA feels there is an abundant available resource of unequivocal evidence and recommendations in support of urgent strategic action to restore and safeguard our nation's peatlands. We look forward to this taking place and we are available to help and support solution-finding for policy makers and land managers to make this possible.