

Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: Peatlands: natural and environmental benefits and impacts, HC 1731

Wednesday 4 March 2026

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Members present: Mr Toby Perkins (Chair); Julia Buckley; Jonathan Davies; Carla Denyer; Barry Gardiner; Chris Hinchliff; Sojan Joseph; Manuela Perteghella; Martin Rhodes; Dr Roz Savage; Blake Stephenson; John Whitby; Sammy Wilson.

Questions 1 - 45

Witnesses

[I](#): Sally Nex, Advocate, The Peat-free Partnership, Plantlife; David Denny, Director of Research and Knowledge Transfer, Horticultural Trades Association; Andrew Gilruth, Chief Executive, Moorland Association.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sally Nex, David Denny and Andrew Gilruth.

Q1 Chair: Welcome, everyone, to the latest meeting of the Environmental Audit Committee. This is a one-off session that we are doing on peatland. As a result of the environment in focus investigation that we did, we had representations on both peatlands and woodlands. The Committee decided that we would like to look at these matters.

I am pleased to say that we have an excellent panel in front of us. I will invite them to introduce themselves in a moment. First, could you tell us who you are, the organisation that you represent and what it is, and then secondly give us a basic assessment of the current state of our peatlands and your organisation's perspective on the matter?

Sally Nex: I am Sally Nex. I am the advocate for the Peat-free Partnership. We are a very broad coalition that draws together horticultural businesses and industry with organisations such as the RHS, Garden Organic and the National Trust, and ENGOS such as Plantlife, which hosts us, and the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts. It is a very wide spectrum.

We are focused on procuring legislation to end peat sales for horticulture across all four nations of the UK, and that is essentially what we are about. It is legislation that has been on the cards for a very long time, but it has been an unfulfilled promise ever since—well, it depends when you want to start it, really: the first targets were set in about 2010, so we are now 16 years on, and there is still no sign of any legislation anywhere in the UK.

The state of peatlands is a bit of a sad tale, really, because our peatlands have the potential to be one of our most important defences against the threat of climate change. They are exceptionally good carbon stores. The carbon sequestration that they offer is extreme. For example, they occupy 12% of the UK's land area, but they absorb as much carbon as all of our forests and woodlands put together.

That is because, if you look at a peatland from above, it occupies quite a small area on the top, so you might think that it does not have the capability to absorb that much carbon, but in fact, due to the way they form, the depths can be extraordinary. They can be between three metres and nine metres deep in places, and all of that is concentrated carbon because of the way that peat bogs form. They form anaerobically. This means that they also form very slowly, at the rate of about one millimetre a year or one metre per thousand years. When you are looking at three to nine metres of depth of peat bog, you are looking at 3,000 to 9,000 years of carbon deposits.

That is why they are such exceptionally good stores when they are in good condition. Unfortunately, according to the England peat map, which



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was published last year, 80% of our peatlands are in damaged, degraded or drained condition. That means that they are now turning from what could be our most efficient carbon sinks into net carbon emitters. That is because, when a peat bog is drained or extracted for peat sales to horticulture, the carbon that it contains is exposed to the air. That is carbon dioxide, which, as we know, is a greenhouse gas. That is how they contribute to climate change.

In terms of other services that healthy peatland can give us, there are really important ecosystem services such as flood prevention and water purification. About 70% of the UK's drinking water comes through highlands, most of which are peatlands. There is wildfire limitation as well. There was a celebrated case at Llyn Gorast in mid-Wales, where rewetted, restored peatland stopped a wildfire in its tracks. The peatland next door that was drained and due to be restored was blackened and completely destroyed.

The services that peatlands can provide us are exceptionally good, and they need to be preserved and valued for what they can offer us.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. That was a very comprehensive introduction to the issues and the importance of peatland. Mr Denny, is there anything you want to respond to in that or anything you want to say from the perspective of your organisation about the value of peatlands, and can you give us a top-level overview of your perspective on the health of our peatlands and what is being done?

David Denny: If I start by introducing the Horticultural Trades Association very briefly, we represent the businesses in the UK that are involved with the supply of plants and trees to our gardens, green spaces, forestry, etc. Unusually for a trade association, we go right through the supply chain from the manufacturers, which includes most of the UK's growing media manufacturers, as well as some of the producers of the substrates that go into those and the growers who are producing those plants and trees as commercial crops, through to the 30 million gardeners who are going to the garden centre and buying their plants.

Our interest in this is really about how that industry transitions away from peat, making sure that some of the regulatory barriers are unpicked, and that some of the practical support has gone through.

I would not really build on anything Sally said about the value of peatlands. The ecosystem benefits are very clear-cut. Our focus within the peatlands themselves is twofold. One is on the extractive areas of peat for horticulture, which are around 2,000 hectares and diminishing. We are looking at how we reduce that and transition it, but our focus is also on land use, which has the potential to be used to scale up some of those peat alternatives such as sphagnum moss. Our focus is really about how we balance the three pillars of sustainability: the economic, the environmental and the social.



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To add a little bit of flavour about our members, we often talk about how big our industry is and its economic footprint. To bring that to life, the typical grower in our membership has about £3 million to £5 million turnover. These are family businesses or SMEs that are, if you forgive the pun, deeply rooted in their local communities—I'm sorry; I couldn't help it.

We are trying to provide practical support to help those guys move away from it. There are some very real consequences for getting a commercial crop wrong, or even a little bit wrong, and this affects their ability to inward invest in things such as water resilience, and in the experience and skills curves that those businesses need to go through to transition away from peat.

Q3 Chair: Thank you very much for that. We will explore some of those questions as we move forward. Just to be absolutely clear, in terms of the importance of the peatlands and the health of them currently, you would not disagree with anything we heard from Ms Nex.

David Denny: No, not at all. It is the 0.07% of peatlands that are used for commercial horticulture extraction that we are focused on; but, yes, we absolutely endorse and accept the value of peatlands.

Q4 Chair: Wonderful, thank you. I will turn now to you, Mr Gilruth. Again, could you just explain the perspective that your membership has on this? If there is anything you want to add in terms of the value and current state of our peatlands, please do, and then give your perspective on their health and what has been done so far.

Andrew Gilruth: Good afternoon. I am Andrew Gilruth, the chief executive of the Moorland Association. Our members manage 1 million acres. Much of it is the deep peat we have just been hearing about. Last year, wildfires destroyed vast quantities of that peat. As DEFRA's bans on the controlled burning of vegetation cause a huge build-up of fuel loads, these fires increasingly threaten the lives of your constituents.

I will be giving evidence on how DEFRA is totally isolated from the international consensus, how it is defying warnings from our national fire chiefs, and how officials have badly misled Ministers over the science. Thank you.

Q5 Chair: You have come out swinging there. We will obviously get into details, but to suggest that government officials have deliberately misled Ministers, and that it has led to damaging the very habitats that they claim they wish to repair, is not a minor charge. Do you want to just expand upon that slightly?

Andrew Gilruth: You are absolutely right that this is a serious issue. I would also take it back a stage further. We are talking about where peatlands have been drained. We should remember that it has been government policy to drain those moors and dry them out.



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Moving on to Ministers being badly misled over the science, last month DEFRA told Parliament that the evidence review on which the de facto burning ban was based was subject to rigorous peer review, yet this document, which I can email to Committee members afterwards, shows that, however hard officials try to wriggle, there was no rigorous peer review, and that DEFRA policy, which threatens the lives of your constituents, is actually built on a house of cards.

Q6 **Chair:** Can we be specific? You are bandying a lot of accusations together; I am interested in some actual facts here.

Andrew Gilruth: Okay, can I give you some? One of the reviewers in this peer review process said that they could not pretend to have read it from end to end, while another said that their brain could not keep track. Reviewers were given no written brief, terms of reference or guidance. They had no templates, questions or scoring systems.

Q7 **Chair:** What is wrong with the actual report from your perspective?

Andrew Gilruth: It is a work of fantasy that we have ended up with a government policy that is in defiance of the international consensus. Last year, the G7 and the EU all agreed that controlled burning was an important element of reducing wildfire risk. The only people who decided that we should introduce a de facto ban were in DEFRA.

Q8 **Chair:** What is helpful here is to keep focused on the factual matters of the issue rather than who said or did what. Do you disagree with what Ms Nex said about the state of our peatland? If so, are you saying that controlled burning would have improved that? Is that what you are trying to say?

Andrew Gilruth: Controlled burning is very much in a situation whereby, through this de facto ban, you are putting the very peat that we are seeking to protect at risk.

Q9 **Chair:** You believe that what Ms Nex said about the state of our peatlands is true, but you have a different idea as to what should be done about it.

Andrew Gilruth: I am not sure we have any difference of opinion. We all want to achieve the same thing.

Q10 **Chair:** Ms Nex, I will just bring you in briefly before I move on. From your perspective, if we stick to the main thrust of the remarks that we have just heard from Mr Gilruth, what is your response to the suggestion that more controlled burning rather than the approach DEFRA is taking would be better?

Sally Nex: The way I see it, there are two things that need to go hand in hand here. The reason why burning and degraded peat go hand in hand is that degraded peat is dry. It is dry habitat; it is not the way that peatlands are meant to be.



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For example, three-quarters of peatlands are covered by plants and land uses associated with dry conditions. We are talking about arable horticulture, bare and abandoned former peat workings, and all those kinds of things. That is why they are not behaving in the way that a peat bog should. It needs to go hand in hand with accelerated peatland restoration, which is rewetting of peatland. As soon as you get peatland that is rewetted and able to function as the ecosystem it was meant to be, then burning does not become an issue. It reverts to its natural habitat. Therefore, the two need to go hand in hand. In order to see through, if you like, the intended impact of banning burning, you need to restore peatlands properly as well.

Q11 Chair: Mr Gilruth, why do your members not want to wet peatland but instead want to have controlled burning?

Andrew Gilruth: Our members are thoroughly delighted to rewet their peatland. I wish for the Committee to be totally clear on that. The issue is that we need to deal with reality. If you start rewetting the peat, in many situations you actually increase rather than decrease the vegetation growth, and it increases the fuel loads.

It is perfectly possible that you follow the line of argument that Sally has just outlined. However, that is the view that is taken by Natural England: that at some point in the future we should be able to reach a utopian state where land will naturally be fire-resilient. Try to tell that to the Canadians, who lost a burned area of peatland two years ago that was larger than the size of the whole of England and most of Wales.

It is fair enough to be able to say that rewetting is incredibly helpful, and all of our members are desperately trying to do that, but let us be honest. Once we have filled in all the ditches that the Government told us to start digging, and those have all been filled in, you cannot keep water on top of a hill, nor can you keep water in a location where there is very little water.

For example, the North York Moors had a terrible wildfire last summer. You would struggle to rewet it because there is very little rainfall. There are no rivers or drains. It was not extensively drained. We have to take a slightly more proactive approach. We do have a national asset up on that moor at RAF Fylingdales. We lost 5,500 acres of moorland last year, and it cannot keep happening. The last time the North York Moors caught fire, it was the same area, unmanaged, and the same problem.

Q12 Dr Roz Savage: This is a question for Sally Nex, please. In your introductory remarks, you outlined the many benefits of healthy peatlands. Thank you for that. Given those valuable functions that they can serve in terms of climate change mitigation, nature recovery and net zero targets, do you think that they are suitably highly prioritised in Government policy?



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Sally Nex: There is a priority given to them in Government policy, but Government policy is not joined up. It is not consistent. It contradicts itself. It is very difficult to see the way through.

It seems to me that, a lot of the time, peat policy is siloed. You are talking about a peat plan for horticulture, talking about peatland restoration or talking about peatland burning, but you are never seeing it as a whole. Peatlands are a whole and they should be seen in the round. There is not very much evidence of that approach within Government policy. Different bits of DEFRA seem to deal with different bits of peatland policy, when a much more joined-up approach is required.

There is also a feeling that there is a failure to grasp the nettle when it comes to actually legislating for ending peat sales in horticulture, for example. It is not a straightforward thing to do, but it is something that has been very well talked through and developed. The issues are extremely well understood. As I said earlier, we have had years to do that. There is almost no more talking to be done. We have shown that there is a lot of support within the horticulture industry for legislation, just for the sheer clarity that it would bring, and the end to business uncertainty that the industry has been labouring under for years and years now.

There is support within the industry. There is cross-party support among MPs. We just handed in a petition that is now at over 17,000 signatures calling for legislation this year, in the next parliamentary Session. There is public support as well. Two-thirds of gardeners are actively choosing peat-free compost. This is something that is desired and wanted. It is such a popular policy that it is inexplicable why it has not gone through. The only thing that can explain that is that it is just a bit too difficult.

Q13 **Chair:** When you say difficult, do you mean expensive?

Sally Nex: No, not necessarily, because, as I say, this is causing real harm to the horticultural industry at the moment. It is being left in limbo with absolutely no direction and no timetable. It is under a vague threat of legislation at some point—who knows when? It has no way of knowing whether to invest, what to invest in, and what deadlines to work to. It has absolutely nothing.

This is harmful to the industry. It is preventing the industry from moving forward, developing and growing as much as it would be able to do, had it got the certainty of knowing where it is on peat policy. This is a really big issue within the industry. As soon as you start talking to anybody for any length of time in the horticultural industry, they will start to talk to you about peat.

Q14 **Julia Buckley:** Just continuing on that proposed ban, when parliamentary time allows, to what extent would you say England has kept pace with the devolved nations on this?



Sally Nex: In some ways the devolved nations are actually a little bit ahead of England, to be honest. An end to peat sales has been stated policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for many years now; not so much in Northern Ireland, of course, because they had the break in legislation, but in Scotland it was in the programme for government in 2021 to 2022. Wales has had a stated policy since 2022. Northern Ireland published its peatland policy last year, and in there they are ahead of everybody because they stated a policy to phase out peat use in horticulture by 2030, so they are the only ones who have put a date on it. In England, on the other hand, the UK Government have simply said “when parliamentary time allows”, as you say, which is so vague as to be meaningless.

There was a recent meeting of the EFRA inter-ministerial group—the IMG—which is for information exchange for environmental Ministers from all over the UK. Just before that meeting happened, the Scottish Agriculture Minister, Jim Fairlie, wrote a fairly strongly worded letter to the Secretary of State basically saying, “Let’s get on with this”. The general frustration that is felt among the devolved nations on this matter came to a head at that meeting. It was decided, first of all, that this would go forward as a joint piece of legislation, because the devolved nations have been effectively prevented from acting on what should be a devolved issue by the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

They have decided to go forward as a joint piece of legislation. In addition to that, DEFRA also undertook a commitment to produce options for a timeframe towards legislation at that meeting. We very much hope that DEFRA will stick to that promise and bring forward those options at the earliest opportunity, ideally by the next EFRA IMG, which we are told is happening towards the end of this month.

- Q15 **Julia Buckley:** Just imagine that you had a mechanism to get a message through to the people who are drafting the King’s Speech for next year’s list of legislation. Imagine that mechanism is the report of today’s session, and so any recommendations in there will be read by the Ministers, who will feed into the people drafting next year’s list of legislation. What information could you bring today to explain the cost, challenge or consequences of losing another year of not doing this?

Sally Nex: The trouble is that peat is a non-renewable resource. It forms so slowly that, under any human life scale, it is completely non-renewable. Every year that passes, we are digging out another 900,000—now it is 760,000—cubic metres of peat. It is not necessarily just from England; most of it comes from Scotland and Northern Ireland in terms of the UK supply. Also, 60% of the peat that UK horticulture uses is imported. Every single year, that peat is coming out of a peat bog somewhere, contributing to climate change.

We know that climate change is no respecter of boundaries. It is going to affect the climate change crisis, whether it comes from Finland, Scotland or the Somerset levels. The fact is that every single year those peat bogs



are being depleted. They are not going to come back. They are not going to be recreated. That peat is gone. That is the urgency and the reason why we need this to happen.

If you want the economic argument, it is simply to end this business uncertainty, because it is such a block for the horticultural industry at the moment. I feel really sorry for the people who are having to labour under this level of insecurity and uncertainty, not knowing what to do for the best. It is impossible.

Q16 Chair: I will just give Mr Denny an opportunity to respond to that. You heard Ms Nex's sympathy for your members there. Just reflect on what you have heard about the sense in which your members are desperate for certainty. Is the certainty that they are desperate for what is being proposed?

David Denny: I would pick up on two points Sally made there. First, she is right; it is not simple, from either a regulatory or a technical point of view. She is also right that certainty is what our industry needs on all sorts of levels, so I would echo that. The members we have are caught on the horns of a dilemma around this.

Building on the joined-up policy point that Sally made, our instinct is that DEFRA's policy on this has been a little like tunnel vision, with a real lack of system thinking about what regulation and collaboration could be done to enable that transition. We have heard lots of talk about a ban as if that is the only regulatory barrier or enabler for this to happen. There is a lot of stuff that we have been asking for and suggesting to DEFRA that it could do to unlock some of those things.

Chair: We will come on to some of that in more detail in a moment, but I just wanted to give you an opportunity, seeing as the horticultural industry's desires were being spoken about for you, to make sure that it was consistent with your members' views.

Q17 Martin Rhodes: Just to follow on from that, Mr Denny, in terms of the horticultural industry, how reliant is it on peat? How prepared is it for a potential ban on the use of peat or products with peat in them?

David Denny: It is reliant mostly in the professional sector, which is businesses that are producing plants and trees as a commercial crop. At the moment, the levels of that are falling substantially, but on average about a third of the growing media that they use is composed of peat.

What they are dependent on is a managed and manageable transition across from that. If they get it even slightly wrong with the replacements, or how those replacements interact with each other in the crop, then they are facing really serious losses. That is a cost and a risk.

The other cost and risk is the raw material that goes into it. When we asked our grower members, in a survey in 2024, what it would take in terms of the cost of that substrate to go entirely peat-free tomorrow, it



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was a 37% increase. I want to put that into something that is a little less abstract. Most of our grower members will be working on an operating profit of 5% to 10%. That increase would take up between 15% and 35% of their operating profit were it to happen.

When you factor in all the other costs that they are trying to deal with, such as the increasing living wage, increasing water, or increasing extended producer responsibilities, there is very little margin for error. A lot of the things that DEFRA could do further back in the supply chain to ease some of their costs and some of the regulation are not really happening.

It is dependent on peat. Can crops be produced without peat? Yes, they absolutely can; about a quarter of members are already peat-free. What they are dependent on is a manageable, reasonable timeframe with regulatory interventions that enable that to be a success and for us to not have a really perverse disincentive so that the businesses fail and we end up bringing in plants and trees from overseas with more carbon miles, which ironically are produced at the moment in 60% to 70% peat.

Q18 **Martin Rhodes:** In terms of moving to alternatives to peat, what are the alternatives that the research tells us could be used?

David Denny: There are near-term and long-term ones. The near-term ones are materials such as wood fibres, barks and coir. Those are the main ones. You could add into that digestate fibres. What they all have in common is that they are by-products from other industries: wood chippings from the forestry industry, digestate fibre from the production of biogas, and coir as a by-product of coconuts. They are dependent on other economies and other areas. Those are the main ones in the near term.

They are volatile in terms of their supply chains, and there are regulations there that could make it easier to access them. If I take wood fibres, which are the bulk one, they are dependent on the forestry industry. Something that could really help there is DEFRA meeting its tree-planting targets in the long term, as the by-product is from the forestry industry.

Waste wood would be another one. At the moment, if I wanted to reprocess class A, which is uncontaminated waste wood pallets and the like, there is a huge amount of regulation that you have to go through to reprocess those in terms of easements on waste regulations. If I wanted to import wood chip, there are very good reasons for having phytosanitary controls so I am not just able to bring those in, but it is a hugely complex raft to navigate. I was talking to one of our growing media manufacturers last week who is already peat-free. They threw their hands up and said, "We just could not go near importing it. It is so complex". Those are the near-term ones.



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In the slightly longer term, sphagnum moss would be an example. That is essentially farmed sphagnum. There are some really good trials that DEFRA and some of our members have been involved with, looking at the yields for that. They show a lot of promise, but again, on the regulatory side of that, a barrier to scaling that up would be the capital investment that farmers might need to wet and irrigate that. Also, on converting grasslands to production, there are very good reasons for disincentivising converting grasslands to other purposes. Again, we need a pragmatic, can-do, innovative approach to working with us on those transitions rather than just wielding a ban without really thinking about how that could work in pragmatic terms. That is how we are most dependent on the Government.

- Q19 **Martin Rhodes:** At the moment, there are people who have switched to being peat-free. They are using these alternatives. You are talking about potentially other ones. What is the supply of that? If we were to move, either voluntarily or through legislation, to everybody switching to peat-free, is there enough supply of these alternatives at the moment? How quickly could we get to that level of supply? Where would they be coming from? Would they be coming from within the UK or are we importing them? What would be the need?

David Denny: It depends on the supply stream. Something like coir, for example, is clearly all imported. It is vulnerable to supply chain disruptions, as we have seen over recent weeks. Globally, there is enough of it, but we are going to see increasing competition for that as more food crops and urban greening solutions around the world have to compete for these materials.

There is a great study from Wageningen University that is forecasting a 700% global increase in demand for coir by the year 2050. For wood fibre, the figures are a 1,250% increase in demand. Even if those factors are exaggerated by a long way, that is still a huge amount of global competition.

To answer the question directly, there is enough material. What will be an issue is processing it, making sure that can be done in an environmentally and economically sustainable way, and competing for it in the longer term.

- Q20 **Martin Rhodes:** We would be more reliant on a global market than we are currently.

David Denny: Very much more so, yes.

- Q21 **Barry Gardiner:** Mr Gilruth, can I just check something with you about what you were saying? You are absolutely right that successive Governments did absolutely incentivise land managers to drain the upland moors. Many of us thought it was a disastrous policy at the time, but that was what the Governments did. I totally understand where you are coming from there.



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They did that because they wanted to encourage the production of young, nutrient-rich fodder, partly for the grazing, and partly for the way in which it would aid shooting in grouse moors and so on. There was a dramatic reduction in key peatland species, though, as a result of that. Sphagnum declined. There was trampling by the livestock and the grazing, and that resulted in a change to the vegetation, turning much of it into heath and acid grassland.

When you talked about the North York Moors, I did a quick Google search and looked up the precipitation on the Moors, because you said it is very difficult to keep water on a hill. Of course, the Lord does tend to provide, and he provides very well on the North York Moors, because I gather that the average rainfall over a 31-day period is between 40 and 100 millilitres, so there is a constant supply.

If the chocks that were taken out to allow the drainage were in place, would you agree that, if those peatlands were in pristine condition, in that wet condition that you say your members would love to restore them to, then what Ms Nex said is correct? A healthy peatland that is wetted would reduce the need to have controlled burns, which are there at the moment to stop fires spreading. Indeed, she adumbrated an example of that in Wales last year, where a fire had stopped at a healthy peat. Are we agreed on the objective that we all wish to get to?

Andrew Gilruth: I might nuance it a little bit. It is very easy to have generalisations.

Barry Gardiner: I am trying to be as specific as possible.

Andrew Gilruth: Of course, but let us deal with some reality. On the North York Moors, how are you going to stop it going through the bedrock underneath? There are huge parts of the Peak district where we have the same issue. No one has come up with any mapping that will tell us how much of it can genuinely be rewetted. To assume that you can achieve it everywhere is a classic mistake.

Very few drains on the North York Moors were ever dug, and they were dug for agricultural purposes. You are absolutely right. No Government ever paid for a ditch to be dug on a grouse moor for the benefit of sporting purposes. That would serve no benefit for sporting purposes; otherwise they might have been dug by the Victorians.

Barry Gardiner: They did not pay for it, but it was done. I do not want you to pursue this too much, because—

Andrew Gilruth: Can I just come back on one other point you raised about areas that are being rewetted? Places that are ideal for being rewetted are, for example, the Flow Country, which is completely different. It is a soup bowl as opposed to being a hog's back on top of a hill. In 2019, there was a significant wildfire there, and they estimated that 700,000 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent were released in that fire. Please do not tell me that rewetting solves all of our problems.



It is also the case that, in 2025, the emissions as a result of wildfire equate to 12% of all of the peatland emissions in England. Please pay attention to how much we are losing to wildfire. Just because it does not appear in a table does not mean that it is not important.

Q22 Barry Gardiner: Mr Gilruth, I entirely accept that the wildfires and the burning are causing emissions. My point to you would simply be this. If we have, as you said, a shared objective in that your members want to see the rewetting, then let us focus on that.

Andrew Gilruth: May I come back on another point? On the rewetting, for example, there is an excellent piece of work being done in the Peak district at Eastern Moors. It is a moor that is owned by Sheffield City Council and is currently managed by the RSPB and the National Trust. It is an amazing flagship site to go and see.

The aspiration through rewetting is to make it wildfire-resilient, but I would like to point out to this Committee that that is an aspiration. No one has managed to demonstrate any landscape that is fire-resilient as a result of rewetting, but they believe that they can achieve it within 50 years. With the officials you will be speaking to next, ask them if they can take you to anywhere in the world where a landscape has been made wildfire-resilient as a result of rewetting, because, whenever we ask them, they say there is nowhere. We have to be careful about making generalisations. It is very important to rewet the peat. We need more peat, and we need to protect what we have.

Q23 Barry Gardiner: Mr Gilruth, you did make some generalisations. You have just done so as well in saying that there is nowhere in the world. You said that there was no reason to do the rewetting because no mapping had been done, but surely that is no reason to decide that you should just have burning of the peat.

Andrew Gilruth: I was trying to make clear to the Committee that, if you want to have a generalisation and to choose a single tool, which is what DEFRA have done, in order to restore and make your land wildfire-resilient, watch out! If you cannot rewet it, what are you now proposing to do? It is very risky for any Government. We will soon be back in the same place again.

Q24 Barry Gardiner: That is a counsel of despair, isn't it? You say, "If you cannot rewet it, watch out, because you will get those wildfires", but I like to stick with the positives. You have said that your members want to rewet the land.

Andrew Gilruth: Absolutely.

Barry Gardiner: In that case, let us make sure that the mapping is being done that enables us to do that most effectively in the most appropriate places.

Andrew Gilruth: We are clear about that, but we should not ignore—



Barry Gardiner: We must move on because the Chair did not actually allow me to ask you a question.

Q25 **Chris Hinchliff:** I am going to continue along a similar line of conversation. You have made it fairly clear from your initial comments that you do not agree with the Government when they say they believe they have reached a consensus that burning vegetation on blanket bogs is damaging to peatland formation.

Andrew Gilruth: They have formed their own consensus, but it is in defiance of the consensus from around the world.

Q26 **Chris Hinchliff:** Brilliant. That was the point I wanted to come to. Thank you for your note to the Committee earlier raising some of your concerns about that. You highlighted statements by the EU, G7, US and Scottish Government. I have looked at those. The EU, G7 and US talk about controlled burning generically but do not mention peatland specifically, and the Scottish Government are still planning to implement their ban in autumn this year.

Coming back to my colleague's point, does that not leave some space for a consensus around absolutely accepting that vegetation burning is an important tool in certain contexts, but that, for deep peat, rewetting is the preferred approach?

Andrew Gilruth: The laws of physics in relation to fire are not interested in what is underneath. We have to protect the peat underneath, and we are trying to avoid a hot fire getting down into the peat and destroying it. In order to avoid that, any firefighter sitting here from anywhere around the world will tell you not to have a large fuel load sitting above it so the surface fuels allow the peat to ignite.

The North York Moors fire broke out on 28 June. It was not officially extinguished until 27 December. They could not get it out because it got into the peat. The smouldering fires are the dangerous ones. They retain their heat. They destroy the peat and everything that we need.

We have to be focused on reality. We also have to be focused on the real threat. The fire chiefs made clear in their submission to DEFRA last summer that they felt that the ban could increase the danger to firefighters and the public. I feel that that was a flashing red light, and it is embarrassing to DEFRA that, when it met the fire chiefs, the officials decided not to take any minutes. It has transpired this morning in response to a parliamentary question that that is now seen as an administrative error.

I suggest that DEFRA is now in retreat. Earlier, it was saying that the reason that we are travelling in the opposite direction to the rest of the world is because of Natural England's evidence review, which had been done rigorously. Now DEFRA has backtracked on that. This morning, it is saying any questions to do with the evidence review need to be referred to Natural England. It is no longer calling it a rigorous peer review.



Equally, I asked Marian Spain about this on 28 February. Her office came back to me on Monday saying that there would be no further communication about this because it was subject to a legal challenge. I went back and asked what legal challenge this was. I did not understand why I had received a communication from the Natural England correspondence unit from a do-not-reply email address saying that they will not follow any further communication on this.

I queried it. By the afternoon, I had received an email from the Natural England chief of staff saying that that was an administrative error, and that, in actual fact, we would receive a clear response to our letter. These administrative responses keep happening, and I suggest it is no wonder that those who live and work in the rural community are losing faith in the Government's approach to this.

Q27 Chris Hinchliff: Thank you, Mr Gilruth. Your frustration is clear. If I perhaps naively try one further time, the International Union for Conservation of Nature UK Peatland Programme says that it has undertaken a detailed review of the evidence, which concludes that wet peatlands are less prone to wildfires, and that healthy peatlands do not need burning for their maintenance. It says that the most effective, long-term and sustainable solution for addressing wildfire risk on peatlands is to return the sites to fully functioning bog habitat. Crucially, given what you have said, its position is that rewetting and restoring will naturally remove the higher fuel load from degraded peatland vegetation.

As a final point of clarity then, do you disagree with the science of that, or is there anything that you can say to the Committee today that we can take forward as a recommendation for the Government to help your members move towards the aspiration? I appreciate that you have outlined that there is a large gap in reality between where we are and that aspiration.

Andrew Gilruth: The gap is about the arrangement of fuels on the surface. It is not about just reducing all fuels; it is about how they are actually reduced. If you speak to any firefighters and wildfire fighters from around the world, and you ask them about that IUCN report, which was actually a DEFRA-led quango run by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, that is an aspirational dream. That is the example I talked about in the Peak district, which is the 50-year dream of trying to create a fire-resilient landscape. No one anywhere in the world has managed to achieve it, including in Canada.

There is a real risk here. If you go to Natural England's lead uplands site, which is at Moor House national nature reserve, the fuel loads on that moor are near-continuous and about eight tonnes per hectare. That is near the upper limit of wildfire capability anywhere in the world. You are reaching a point where it does not matter how many aircraft, helicopters or other pieces of kit you have. You will not be able to tackle the fire, because once the temperature gets too hot, you get pyroconvection and it creates its own weather. Then that is when firefighters get killed.



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I am bringing that to the attention of this Committee now because every nation that has gone down this route of trying to curb and limit controlled burning in the winter has ultimately changed its position. It does not matter whether it is in North America, South America or Europe. Each time, it has changed its position when people have been killed.

Surely we should not be waiting in this country for a coroner to provide direction on this point. Surely it is Parliament and this Committee that can instigate that before we have a tragedy.

Q28 Chair: I would like to bring in Sally Nex in a moment, because I saw you shaking your head when Mr Gilruth was speaking earlier, and I wanted to give you an opportunity to respond.

We are all agreed on the fact that wildfires are a bad thing, but I believe that a Natural England report in 2020 found that 68% of wildfires that had a known cause were initially started by controlled burning. They were controlled burns that ran out of control. While we all agree that we do not want wildfires, is it not the case that sometimes what starts as a controlled fire turns into a wildfire? Would we not all agree that returning these bogs to their natural condition should be aspired to, and that controlled burning does not in itself mean that we never have wildfires?

Andrew Gilruth: Chair, that figure you just quoted from Natural England is highly misleading. If you check the paperwork, it says that that is the number where there has been a wildfire where we attribute and know the cause.

Chair: That is what I just said.

Andrew Gilruth: Okay, but look at it relative to the total number of wildfires and it is a very small percentage. Also, those fires are the smaller fires. If you are in the fire and rescue service, and if anybody here gets involved in tackling a wildfire, I can assure you that you want to be tackling the small fires.

Q29 Chair: They are wildfires. You do accept that it is true that sometimes controlled burnings run out of control.

Andrew Gilruth: They absolutely do, and that is the statistic around the world. In North America, South America and Europe, they accept that some of those fires may temporarily escape outside the original controlled area, but that is very different from having a large-scale wildfire that is burning down into the peat, which is the very thing we are all trying to protect.

Q30 Chair: Let me bring you in, Ms Nex. We have heard a lot from Mr Gilruth recently. Do you want to just respond to what you have heard there?

Sally Nex: The bit I was wincing about a little bit was the idea that somehow water drains out of the North York Moors. If that were the case, there would not be any peat bogs on the top of the North York Moors. It



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is actually one of our best peat bog systems. There is a lot of work going on with the Yorkshire Peat Partnership to restore the moorlands up there.

In fact, the greatest threat to the North York Moors at the moment is the Calderdale wind farm project, which is another example of not very joined-up thinking in terms of peatland policy. The problem there is that it takes the extraction of about 8,000 cubic metres per turbine to install a wind farm on a peat bog. Under the national planning policy framework, we have apparently stopped peat excavation or the extension of existing permissions to extract peat, yet suddenly we are allowed to take peat out in order to install wind turbines. Those kinds of contradictions are a real problem in policy at the moment.

Q31 Manuela Perteghella: Following on from my colleagues, are there or should there be differences in the management of heathland or moorland, and specifically in relation to peatland? I am interested in whether different complex landscapes call for different management policies.

Sally Nex: This is quite far outside of my field of expertise, so I will pass on that one, if that is okay.

Andrew Gilruth: Is this in relation to any type of management?

Manuela Perteghella: Moorland or heathland, yes.

Andrew Gilruth: In relation to some of the points that I have been talking to the Committee about in terms of wildfire, we need to pay great attention to heathland particularly, although we are not actually protecting the peat underneath, because often it is just gravel. If you go down to the Dorset heaths or the Surrey heaths, there are fuel loads now building up in those areas, and that is very close to the urban fringe. I am afraid that, if there is going to be a tragedy, this Committee needs to be aware that it is most likely going to be in those areas. We should not take any of this lightly. In Europe, 20 people lost their lives to wildfire; in Los Angeles it was 30, and that was just last year.

The management on the surface is very similar. What is underneath and needs protecting is quite different. The issue you have down in Dorset on the heath and in Surrey is that after the fire it is just gravel or sand. You now have to re-establish it. The National Trust has issues down in Dorset just trying to get any type of vegetation back again.

On the North York Moors, we have lost 5,500 acres. Some of it has burned all the way through all of the deep peat, and there is no peat left there at all. Remember that this fire was so out of control that the only way the fire and rescue service could get it back under control was to dig a trench using excavators that was eight metres wide and 29 kilometres long in order to try to contain it. This was a serious wildfire, so please do not think that these are small things. They are very serious.

Q32 Manuela Perteghella: The Chair has already mentioned Natural England evidence. There is disputed evidence between landowners and Natural



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England in relation to rewetting peatland so that the sphagnum can be restored versus the managed burning to combat wildfires, if we accept that that, as you say, is something that works against wildfires. We also heard that some of these managed wildfires are getting out of control as well. Can you say a little bit more about that?

Andrew Gilruth: In relation to the evidence, you characterised it as a challenge between Natural England and landowners. I appreciate you are saying that because I am sitting here representing landowners, but actually there is a dispute between academics and Natural England. The lead element on that is a study that Natural England instigated and DEFRA originally funded for five years to answer this exact question. It is currently run by the University of York.

This is the plain English version of the 10-year point. I can share it with the Committee afterwards. In here, it explains that, if you look at it in the short term, when you have had a prescribed burn or controlled winter burn, obviously you get the release of that carbon, but by the time you have got to the 10-year point you are actually storing more carbon. You are storing more carbon than if you had done nothing. It also has a higher water table than if you had done nothing.

It may be different if the clock carries on for another 10 years, but this is a live issue around the way Natural England is gathering the evidence. We have talked about the evidence review on heather burning, which it published last year. Similarly, the evidence review that it produced in 2023 on heather cutting has been severely challenged in the peer-reviewed scientific literature by academics saying that it just does not add up. Natural England has just taken a water off a duck's back approach and said, "We stuck to our methodology. Therefore, we are right".

This is not landowners; this is academics. They were criticising that two years ago in peer-reviewed literature. Natural England has not budged one inch on the heather cutting. As night follows day, academics in peer-reviewed literature will be criticising Natural England's review of heather burning. It just takes time. They will do it, I am sure. As a result, this is the question: how come this keeps happening time and time again? With the heather cutting, it did not involve the fire service and the risk to life; this one does.

Q33 **Manuela Perteghella:** Thank you, but do you accept that, to restore and promote sphagnum growth, we need to restore water levels?

Andrew Gilruth: We need higher water levels, but also we need to be honest about some of the best places where you can find sphagnum out on the ground. You can ask the Yorkshire Peat Partnership, because I sit on one of its committees. Often it is areas that were burned in the previous few years, because they need light. Once the vegetation gets too tall, the sphagnum gets smothered out. There are always sensitivities to this. Nothing is simple when it comes to the uplands.



Sally Nex: Of our damaged peatland, only 1% shows signs of sphagnum moss growth. Sphagnum moss is an indicator of healthy deep peatland. Rewetting and restoration takes time. It does not recreate the peat; as I said, that is a non-renewable resource, but it certainly takes time to start to boost biodiversity and to return some of the plant biodiversity back to that environment. Sphagnum moss is only an indicator in 1% of the peatlands that there are.

I should also point out that sphagnum moss is absolutely essential to that ecosystem service of preventing flood damage, filtering water and all those kinds of things. Sphagnum moss is capable of holding 20 times its own weight in water. That is one of the things that make peat bogs as effective as they are in terms of flood prevention. We need sphagnum moss if we are going to allow peat bogs to give us the benefits that they can give us.

Q34 **Sammy Wilson:** Mr Denny, could I just come back to some of the questions that were asked of you? You had indicated that transitioning from the current usage of peat to alternatives could have an impact on your industry. You talked about economic impacts, competitiveness, et cetera. Are there any environmental impacts of moving from using peat to using some of the alternatives that you talked about?

David Denny: The short answer is yes. I can expand on a couple of those. They are positive and negative. HTA absolutely accepts the carbon footprint and biodiversity impact of peat extraction. I would like to put that there, but it is part of the holistic picture.

I can give you an example of one of our members. They are a growing media manufacturer. They are on the journey to transition away from peat-based mixes. One of the things they have had to do as part of that is to invest in wood chip extrusion. Essentially, it uses hammering and heat to convert wood chips into wood fibre. What they have had to do there is to increase the energy signature to run the materials. They have had to wait for quite some time for connections to the grid and to water around that. That in itself comes with local costs with planning and so on. There are economic costs in that respect, but also, in that specific example, some carbon impacts.

Where the industry has been at the forefront is trying to come up with methods that look at it not so much from the tunnel vision I was talking about—"We must get rid of peat"—but through to how we have that longer journey about what is sustainable growing media. I use the word "sustainable" deliberately because all of those alternatives have pros and cons in terms of crop production and of environmental and social impacts. Where we are as an industry and as an association is that we want to take that whole-system view of things. We cannot move to the extent that the industry collapses and we can no longer produce our own trees and plants. The fact that we are doing that is not a "get out of jail free" card.



We need to take a holistic view of how we are moving in the right way sustainably. There are impacts for most of those alternatives—economic, environmental and social—and all of our members are working to try to minimise those and get them on the right path.

Q35 Sammy Wilson: We sometimes make recommendations for the best of reasons. For example, with Drax B power station, we decided not to use coal any longer and to use wood chip, and now we find that that has probably been more environmentally damaging than using coal. I can think of a plant grower in my own constituency who uses coir, but he is concerned about the huge impact that that is having. I do not know whether the coconut production is done on industrial-scale plantations for the coir, but there is certainly a big increase in that now.

Do you see a situation where, maybe in 20 years' time, we look back at the economic or environmental damage that we have done with the alternatives? You gave the figure of 0.07% of peatlands being used for extraction. Is that the correct figure? Could you see a situation where we look back and kick ourselves and think, "We have done far more environmental damage looking at alternatives"?

David Denny: That is an interesting question. I would say that the industry is moving in a direction, knowing that there are risks in progress, but there are probably bigger risks in not progressing. It is a constructive, forward-looking industry. We are alert to those possibilities. We are not looking at this and saying that any one of those ingredients is a panacea.

To take the other point on coir, for the Committee, it is, essentially, coconut farming on plantations. As a by-product of the harvesting process, the pith from the residue is dried, compacted and shipped across, and so on.

Would we look back and think, "Have we done the wrong thing?" That is why it is so important that things such as the responsible sourcing scheme and other lifecycle assessment methodologies from Europe are taking a view of all of those materials, what their impacts are and what continuity of supply is available around those different things.

The industry will learn, more information will become available, and novel materials will come on stream. I highlighted farmed sphagnum. One of my members said that, essentially, that is peat without the 10,000 years attached to it and the carbon impacts; it is not ready at the moment.

The way that we would approach growing media is that a tunnel vision around a peat ban being the only thing that counts here could well be counterproductive, with a lot of unintended consequences. We need to look quite holistically at how we are going to bring on stream ever more sustainable and effective materials.

With the Committee's permission, I can give one other example of a material around that. You mentioned wood chip. One of the perverse



incentives there is renewable energy obligations and contracts for difference, which incentivise the use of wood pellets and keep the price high for, again, very good reasons. That, in turn, makes it less accessible for our industry in terms of the price that goes through. Digestate fibre is a huge beneficiary of some of those similar incentives and so on, but, if those incentives disappear, that material is, arguably, increasingly at risk.

It is really quite a volatile economic and environmental piece here that our industry is having to deal with. It is not a simple case of, "Let's remove peat from the equation and everything's simple". There is a much longer and more complex journey for us in terms of the economics and the environmental impacts, which is really what our members are trying to wrestle with: doing the right thing and, as you say, not having to look back at their staff, their communities and their customers and having to explain that they got it wrong.

Q36 Sammy Wilson: Do you remember the all-party horticultural group? We highlight the importance of the horticultural industry to the UK economy. What are you finding that your competitors are doing? Are they rushing to transition in the same way as the horticultural industry in the United Kingdom is trying to transition? Indeed, are they facing the same kind of threat of regulatory action to make them transition?

David Denny: Our global competitors?

Sammy Wilson: Yes.

David Denny: No, UK industry is leading the way, and leading the way by quite some margin, on this. I referenced that, in the UK professional sector at the moment, about 35% of growing medium is made of a peat. In the Netherlands, their target for 2025—I might need to correct the figures—was around two-thirds that they were pledging to get to. The UK is significantly ahead of that.

That carries cost advantages for our competitors in terms of the direct cost of materials. They are also not having to go through that change in terms of how they produce their crops. They are not having to go through that learning curve. They are not having to go through the capital investments to change those things. Our industry is ahead of those things, but it is a very real competitive disadvantage combined with all the other costs of doing business that they are facing into.

What they are most afraid of, though, is a level playing field between those competitors. As our members invest in that transition, as they soak up the costs of that and as they absorb some of the crop losses, what they cannot have is growth from overseas being enabled to have a competitive advantage in terms of the cost by using more peat.

There is a complex international dimension here to make sure that, frankly, this country retains its ability to grow its own plants and trees, and the green infrastructure that it needs. That is something we want to really highlight to this Committee.



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Chair: We have already expended the time that we had allocated for this session, but there are a couple of last questions that we are going to bring in briefly, firstly from Barry Gardiner.

Q37 **Barry Gardiner:** Mr Gilruth, I am keen that we end up here as friends and that we get some consensus.

Andrew Gilruth: Thank you. I am very keen too.

Barry Gardiner: You urged the Committee to look at the science and to look at the world as it is, not at the world that we might like it to be. We agreed that the Government had, in the past, incentivised the draining of peatlands. I think you would accept that your members did lobby heavily for them to do that, but the key thing now is this. Given what you said about their own desire to rewet those lands, how many hectares have your members remediated or rewetted, with the peat dams, the plastic piling, the bunding and the drain blocking that needs to go on? How many hectares have your members done to show what you said was their intent, which is that we should get back to a restored peatland? How about taking some of the livestock off the land that were causing damage and so on? That is my last question to you.

Andrew Gilruth: Thank you. With your permission, I will come back with the exact number. Of all the numbers I brought with me, I am afraid that that is not one that I have sitting in front of me, but that is important. If I may, in the spirit of making sure that we all leave here as friends, in terms of the condition assessments up on the moors and what condition they are in, we need to be careful and understand how just using land-based aerial photography, and using land management as a proxy for harm, gets interpreted. There is no substitute for on-site inspections.

Q38 **Barry Gardiner:** On-site inspections are very difficult to cover the areas. It is remote land. Since May last year, we do have the England peat map. You said there had not been mapping done, but, of course, that was done in May of last year.

Andrew Gilruth: The England peat map does not tell you which areas are and are not suitable for rewetting programmes. That work still has not been worked out, and I think we have agreed as a Committee—sorry, I am putting words into your mouths—that that could be looked into. I might just push back a little bit. We do have a statutory system of SSSI units to go and inspect. I am afraid that that is woefully behind, and that will be for the next session to perhaps delve into.

Q39 **Barry Gardiner:** Is it 8% or 12% now? It used to be that 6% had been inspected in the past five years. SSSIs are, in effect, not worth the name that—

Andrew Gilruth: The Committee may want to speak to the officials about why that is so, because it is a requirement.

Barry Gardiner: We have, on many occasions.



Chair: If I could just interrupt you two for a minute, I will bring in Chris Hinchliff now.

Q40 **Chris Hinchliff:** Mr Gilruth, I am also grasping for an opportunity to end on a positive note here. It seemed to me that there was agreement that, broadly, where possible, we want to see the water table rising on deep peat and returning to blanket bog. You have set out that you believe that there is scientific evidence that vegetation burning can contribute towards that objective.

I was just looking back at the derogations that exist within the legislation and, as I understand it, there is an exception to the bans on burning where there is a provable conservation benefit. There are derogations where burning can still be carried out where the land is on a steep slope, and you have referred to concerns around hills.

I just wondered whether there was anything further that you would recommend in terms of derogations to help, in your view, your members to use that burning method to move towards, in the longer term—appreciating, as you said, 50 years—wetter peat and blanket bog.

Andrew Gilruth: Thank you. You have certainly given me a gift, and we will leave here hugging each other if you manage to persuade in the next session. The system that you have just described was made workable. To be able to illustrate that to the Committee, with the implementation of what I called a de facto ban—and you refer to it in the Committee notes as a ban—of all the licence applications that have gone in since that regulation came in, not a single one has been issued, so we are talking about a fairly hard-hitting application of a handbrake, and that has to be a concern to this Committee.

Right now, there is only one licence in England that has been issued. It is signed off personally by the Minister to be able to burn. It is a two-year licence. In 10 days' time, it is going to expire, and it will never have been used, because it has a condition attached to it that nobody can satisfy. The estate has been required to put in, to satisfy Natural England, that less burning will be required again in the future. They have taken five submissions to Natural England in terms of management plans so that they can get that condition addressed and can strike a match.

The Minister has been satisfied for wildfire risk—not for conservation but just for wildfire risk—that there is a real risk, and it is the only way to deal with it. For two years, that risk has existed. It is still there today. The landowner cannot use it because it has this additional condition, nobody can find a way of satisfying it, and the licence is just about to expire. There is only one licence in England that is currently available.

You talked about Scotland and quite rightly said that they are still looking at introducing regulation. Let us be clear. One of the reasons they wanted to delay the implementation of the regulation in Scotland is that they realised, after the significant fire in southern Scotland, that they did not want to lose the capability to tackle fires, because the Scottish fire and



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rescue service pleaded that there is no way that we need the farmers and gamekeepers to get rid of their firefighting equipment that they use for controlled burning. These are the individuals who know how to work with fire.

You have to remember that, on the North York Moors, the only people who did the backburning to help the fire and rescue service were the gamekeepers, because they felt confident about how to use it. Bear in mind that they had one of Donald Trump's listening posts just behind them; if they messed up, they would have been on the front page of every newspaper. They could not make a mistake, so they had to get it right. These skills need to be kept on the land.

If you go to Europe, the firefighters there will tell you, "Please don't ask me how much equipment I want. What I need is people back on the land, managing the fuel loads. Please don't just keep asking me what firefighting equipment". Thank you, Chair. I know you need to move on.

Q41 Chair: Thank you. Mr Denny, we heard Ms Nex's frustration with the fact that Government have not got on and legislated in the way that this and previous Governments have suggested they would. You said that your members would welcome certainty. We have been through lots of the different complications, but I just wanted to check with you that it is not your organisation that is asking the Government to have this delay. If we ask the Minister next week, "Why are you not getting on with this?" she is not going to come and say, "The Horticultural Trades Association asked us to delay because of the impact on its members". Can you just assure us on that?

David Denny: Our policy paper is freely available on our website. We are in favour of a peat-free future for horticulture. The majority of our retail members think that that should be achievable by the end of 2028, and the majority of professionals, with a few caveats and exemptions, by the end of 2030. What we are asking from DEFRA is manageable time to help with the regulatory unlockers to make that a success. That is our position.

Q42 Chair: Ms Nex, you came here arguing strongly for this ban on the sale of horticultural peat. The session has also reflected heavily on the issue of burning, which was not so much of a priority that you outlined. Do you want to respond to what we have heard on the issue of burning?

Sally Nex: There is just one thing. I would like to come back on what you were saying. I sit on the responsible sourcing scheme, which David referred to. There is such a lot of work going on in the horticultural industry to address exactly the problem that you are talking about, which is to make sure that we do not replace peat with something that is environmentally more harmful. They have gone to an enormous amount of trouble to assess every single possible ingredient that might be used as an alternative to peat that exists at the moment. I do appreciate that there are novel ingredients coming down the road.



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They have looked at it from every angle and are giving them values, so that we can be sure that any future peat-free compost that you buy—while obviously, everything has an environmental impact—is not more environmentally damaging than peat. Even coir, which we recognise has its quite serious difficulties and drawbacks, comes out considerably less damaging than the use of extracted peat for horticulture, so the figures are very clear on that one.

A number of organisations, including Westland Horticulture, which is the biggest producer of compost in the UK, have a policy of being coir-free as well as peat-free in the future. That is the direction of travel. Quite a lot of the new start-up peat-free compost manufacturers that you will find are deliberately starting out without coir in the first place.

I might also point out—it has been pointed out already—that most of the alternatives to peat are also derived from the circular economy, so that feeds into the Government's policy of encouraging the circular economy. They are also sourced from within the UK, so you are not quite so dependent on really quite volatile imported sources of peat. As I said, 60% of our peat for horticulture is imported at the moment. That has to be trucked up to 1,600 miles across Europe in order to get to us.

Q43 Chair: Can I just come back to the question? On the question of burning, do your members have a contradictory view on the benefits of burning or are you really just focused on horticultural sales?

Sally Nex: We are focused mainly on horticultural peat. We work with a lot of our partners who do, indeed, address things such as burning. We work with the IUCN, for example, but my main focus is on horticultural peat.

Q44 Chair: Finally, Mr Gilruth, I am conscious that the Moorland Association had a legal challenge to the UK Government's restrictions defeated in court. Were you clear on why the courts found against you on that?

Andrew Gilruth: That was a permission hearing. At that hearing, the judge did not support proceeding to a full hearing, and that matter is now at the Court of Appeal. As I mentioned at the beginning, the Minister had a meeting with a category 1 responder and with the fire chiefs. There are no minutes, and there is no take-out and no record. You will also be aware, because I shared it just before this meeting, that, in response to a parliamentary question this morning, DEFRA has said that that was a mistake. It was an error.

We probably should not be discussing it too much further, but, if I may come back, we were talking right at the beginning about the state of our peatlands. Mr Gardiner was quite clear that the SSSI inspections are running woefully behind. But, if we look at where they were, the JNCC report from 2011—

Q45 Chair: I am sorry, but we are moving way beyond the question that I have asked you. I just wanted to finally get your response to that. I was



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not aware that you were appealing that, so there is nothing more to say on that.

Andrew Gilruth: It is a matter of public record, Chair.

Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you to all three of you for your evidence. It has been a longer session than we anticipated, but a very thorough one. We are extremely grateful to all three of you for sparing your time and, clearly, the research that has gone into providing the evidence you have today. We will bring this first panel to a close, with eager anticipation for the next one. With that, I will very briefly adjourn. The sitting is suspended.