Steve Reed MP **28 March 2025**
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

cc. Huw Irranca-Davies MS, Deputy First Minister for Wales and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, Welsh Government

cc. Mr Andrew Muir MLA, Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland Executive

cc. Mr John O'Dowd MLA, Minister of Finance, Northern Ireland Executive

cc. Gillian Martin MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy, Scottish Government

Dear Steve Reed MP,

We write on behalf of environmental NGOs across the UK to highlight the vital importance of peatlands in tackling the climate and nature crises.

Ending Peat Sales

We urge the UK Government to introduce legislation to immediately end horticultural peat sales and extraction across the UK. While existing investment is being made to restore peatlands, allowing their continued degradation through sales and extraction for horticulture undermines these efforts and prolongs environmental harm. Ending the use of horticultural peat is a simple, low-cost policy measure that would deliver immense benefits in carbon reduction, biodiversity protection, and climate resilience.

Peat extraction and sales contribute directly to greenhouse gas emissions, as degraded peatlands release stored carbon. This is counterproductive when billions are being invested in climate mitigation.

Through the Peat-free Partnership, we understand that discussions are underway among the four governments regarding a single Bill in Westminster that could end horticultural peat sales. This presents a crucial opportunity to ensure the protection and restoration of peatlands nationwide. We strongly encourage the swift implementation of this legislation alongside sustained restoration funding.

Funding Peatland Restoration

There is an urgent need for dedicated funding for peatland restoration across all four nations, proportionate to their share of the UK's peatlands. Investing in peatland restoration is a highly cost-effective way to combat climate change, enhance biodiversity, and create rural jobs.

Globally, peatlands cover just 3% of the world's land area but store 30% of the carbon held in soils. When healthy, peatlands act as vital carbon sinks; when degraded, they release greenhouse gases. Two-thirds of the UK's peatlands are in Scotland, and the majority are degraded. The UK's damaged peatlands could emit over 20 million tonnes of CO2 annually—more than the entire UK industrial sector.

A recent report by the Climate Change Committee shows that peatland restoration rates are significantly lagging behind what is needed to meet the UK's 2030 and Net Zero targets. Restoration must more than double to meet the UK and devolved administration target of 32,000 hectares per year by 2026. Without urgent action, the ongoing degradation of peatlands will accelerate due to climate change, further exacerbating emissions and biodiversity loss.

The Role of the UK Government: A Step Change in Peat Policy

A stronger commitment to funding peatland restoration at the UK Government level would have significant benefits across the UK. While existing funding mechanisms such as Scotland's Peatland Restoration Grant are making an impact, additional funding is required to meet targets across all four nations. The UK Government must work in cooperation with the devolved governments and the Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to identify how restoration can be better funded and implemented nationwide.

The restoration of peatlands in the devolved nations is not just a regional issue—it directly impacts UK-wide carbon emissions and biodiversity targets, including commitments under the Global Biodiversity Framework and the UK's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). By making further commitments, DEFRA can play a central role in delivering positive outcomes for the entire UK.

The Case for England

Currently, there is a lack of publicly available data on the resourcing required to restore England's peatlands. However, the benefits of restoring peatlands in the devolved nations would extend to the entire UK, as reduced emissions contribute to national Net Zero targets. Given that England has the highest population density, the protection of peatlands could also improve water quality, flood resilience, and biodiversity—providing direct benefits to millions of people.

The Case for Scotland

Scotland's peatlands make up two-thirds of the UK total, but only 10,000 hectares were restored in 2022/23—far short of the annual target of 22,000 hectares. Without accelerated efforts, most UK peatlands will remain degraded. Key benefits of restoration include:

- **Significant Long-Term Savings:** Full restoration could cost £8bn-£22bn over 100 years but save £109bn in avoided carbon emissions.
- **Carbon Removal:** Restoration removes CO2 at costs of £2-£33 per tonne over 60 years.

- **Preventing Further Degradation:** Even a 25% degradation of healthy peatlands could negate the benefits of restoring 250,000 hectares.
- **Reducing Emissions:** Scotland's degraded peatlands emit 6 million tonnes of CO2 per year—around 15% of Scotland's annual emissions.
- **Job Creation:** An annual £54m investment in peatland restoration could create up to 1,540 jobs.
- **Biodiversity Gains:** Peatlands support species such as ground-nesting birds, amphibians, and the Large Heath butterfly.

The Case for Wales

Wales' National Peatland Action Programme estimates that only 10,000 hectares of its 90,052 hectares of peatland are in near-natural condition. The Welsh Government aims to restore 45,000 hectares by 2050, requiring a significant scale-up from the current restoration rate of 600-1,000 hectares per year. Meeting this target will require increasing annual funding from £5 million to at least £11 million by 2030.

The Case for Northern Ireland

Peatlands cover 12% of Northern Ireland's land area, but 86% are damaged. If left unrestored, degraded peatlands could add 9% to Northern Ireland's total emissions. The Garron Plateau restoration project demonstrates the benefits of intervention:

- Restoring site hydrology avoids 9,000 tonnes of carbon emissions annually—equivalent to £600,000 in economic benefits.
- Full restoration could yield £1.2 million in public benefits per year.
- Restoration will enhance carbon sequestration and improve water quality.

A Cost-Effective Policy with UK-Wide Benefits

Banning peat sales and extraction requires little financial investment but offers huge returns in emissions reductions, ecosystem restoration, and long-term economic savings. Ending peat extraction, alongside a ban on sales, is one of the most straightforward and impactful environmental actions the UK Government can take.

The UK has an opportunity to lead by example in global climate and biodiversity efforts. We urge you to commit to ending peat sales and extraction immediately and to work with devolved nations to ensure long-term restoration funding is in place.

We would be delighted to discuss this further and explore ways to secure support for these vital efforts. We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Deborah Long, Chief Officer of Scottish Environment LINK

Karen Whitfield, Director of Wales Environment LINK

Dr Richard Benwell, Chief Executive of Wildlife and Countryside Link

Max Bryant, Chief Executive Officer of Northern Ireland Environment Link

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