

PEAT AND CARBON RICH SOILS

Draft NPF 4 supports the protection of soils, including peat and carbon rich soils which have a critical role to play in helping the country reach its net zero target by sequestering and storing carbon. Soils are also an essential part of ecosystems services, for nature, people and our economy.

Local Development Plans should:

- identify and protect locally, regionally, nationally and internationally valued soils.

Development proposals:

- on undeveloped land should only be supported if they are designed to minimise disturbance to soils and protect them from damage.
- on peatland, carbon rich soils and priority peatland habitat should not be supported unless essential for
 - essential infrastructure where there is a specific locational need and no other site is suitable; or
 - the generation of energy from a renewable source, where the proposal supports a zero-carbon electricity system and will maximise the function of the peatland; or
 - small scale development directly linked to a rural business, farm or croft; or
 - supporting a fragile population in a rural or island area; or
 - the restoration of peatland.
- a detailed site specific assessment will be required to identify depth, quality and stability of soil and the effects of the development on peatland, including the likely effects of development on CO₂ emissions and inform careful project design. A peatland management plan may also be required.
- for new commercial peat extraction, including extensions to existing sites, should not be supported unless:
 - the extracted peat is supporting an industry of national importance; and
 - there is no reasonable substitute;
 - the area of extraction is the minimum necessary and a residual depth of peat at least 1 metre deep is retained across the whole site;
 - the time period for extraction is the minimum necessary; and
 - the proposal includes a comprehensive site restoration plan which will return the site back to its original environmental status.

Responses to the Position Statement

There was support for a prohibition on peat extraction for horticultural use, and for the restoration of existing extraction sites. Some concerns were raised about a potential for conflict between the protection of peatland and the development of further onshore wind farms, which can be sited in areas which contain peatland. Guidance which provides a balance between two potentially conflicting types of development, both of which could contribute to the country's climate change objectives, was called for.

Policy changes

SPP set out that the planning system should seek to protect soils from damage such as erosion or compaction. It was also clear that applications should assess the likely effects of development on peat and carbon rich soils and aim to minimise this release where peatland was drained or disturbed.

The value of our peatlands within the context of the climate emergency and nature crisis is clear. The draft NPF4 aims to strike a balance in protecting our natural resources whilst meeting statutory outcomes on increasing the population of rural areas of Scotland and emissions reductions targets. In terms of commercial extraction, SPP set a high bar for the protection of peat. Draft NPF4 proposes further restrictions for new commercial peat extraction and development on peat.