



IWT Submission to the National Peatlands Strategy, May 2014 (Press Release)

The IWT has made a submission to the draft National Peatland Strategy. The draft strategic plan is composed of a number of draft documents including a National Peatlands Strategy, a National Raised Bog SAC management plan (bogs protected at a European level) and a review of the network of Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs, protected under national legislation). The strategy applies to all 1.47 million hectares of peat soils in the State whether privately or publicly owned. The IWT submission, while acknowledging that the draft documents are a step forward towards conserving Irish peatlands, expressed concerns about their adequacy to ensure conservation and restoration of these habitats. The IWT welcomes the acknowledgement in the report of the valuable ecosystem services provided by peatlands, the plans to regulate private turf cutting activities under planning legislation, the proposed peatland education plan and the establishment of an inter-departmental peatlands working group, in order to introduce a unified and cohesive approach to peatland issues from the Government.

The IWT outlined a number of concerns with some of the proposals in the strategy document, namely the de-designation of NHAs, the allowance of limited turf cutting on protected sites and the strategy of providing alternative bogs for affected turf cutters. We emphasised that the value of peatlands in adapting or mitigating climate change cannot be understated, in addition to the benefits they provide in mitigating flooding and protecting water quality. It would be far more progressive and proactive to designate the additional sites while enforcing conservation of existing NHAs and SACs.

The IWT also raised concerns with the protocol used for de-designation, which balanced the ecological value of the site versus the cost of compensating turf cutters and restoration. We argued that the de-designation process should only take a scientific approach and at the very least any sites of high ecological value that have been selected for de-designation should retain their NHA status and turf cutting should be stopped, despite any potential short-term costs to the tax payer. The IWT strongly urged the Government and Peatlands Council to reconsider the de-designation of these sites and to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of conserving these peatlands for the future.

The IWT wants the National Peatland Strategy take a long-term approach to compensation by working with the local communities affected by the designation of bogs to provide alternative renewable heating fuel.