

Blanket Bog Roundtable: Minutes - 1 February 2018, 808 Nobel House, 12:00-13:00

Attendees

Defra

Secretary of State
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
for the Environment
Sonia Phippard - Directorate General,
Environment, Rural & Marine
Marie Southgate - Deputy Director, Land
Use

██████████ – Senior Policy Adviser to the
Secretary of State

██████████ – Policy lead,
Uplands

Natural England

Julia Aglionby – NE Board

██████████ – Director of Operations

██████████ – National
Operations Manager

(Land Owners, Managers and agents)

██████████
██████████
Moors, Northumberland
(Agent)

██████████ - North York
Moors National Park
Authority

██████████ -
Gunnernside Estate, North
Pennines

██████████ - Stags
Fell, Yorkshire Dales
(Agent for Wemmergill
Moor)

██████████ -
Garrigill Estate, Cumbria
(Agent Davis & Bowring)

██████████
██████████
██████████
Nidderdale, Yorkshire

██████████
- Dallowgill Estate

██████████ - Raby,
Durham

██████████ - Bolton
Estate

██████████ -
Muggleswick,
Allenshields, Durham
██████████ - West
Arkengarthdale,
Yorkshire Dales

██████████
- Northumberland Estates

██████████ -
Director, Savills York

██████████ -
Moorland Association

1. Introductions and context

The Secretary of State set the scene of the meeting, referring to the EU Infraction proceeding regarding the practice of rotational burning of heather on blanket bog. He explained that the Government had presented its new policy approach for the cessation of rotational burning to the Commission and, with their agreement, is now pursuing voluntary commitments from consent holders to suspend the practice of rotational heather burning, whilst committing to work with Natural England on their long term land management plans to deliver the restoration of blanket bog on their land.

2. Outline of new approach to management of blanket bog

The Secretary of State acknowledged the diversity of the uplands and that a range of options are required to ensure sustainable land management. He particularly noted that land managers already have various models in place and look to run their land in a responsible way. He advised that protecting soils was high on the Government's agenda and introducing an immediate ban on rotational burning on blanket bog could have significant consequence on land management practices currently underway; changes to land management could impact on the long term outcomes of the 25 Year Environment Plan.

The Secretary of State advised that the Government is looking to consent holders to sign up to a voluntary commitment to suspend the practice of rotational burning with immediate effect and to work with Natural England on their long term land management plans to restore the blanket bog on their land. Doing this would help the Government demonstrate its intent to the Commission to cease rotational burning on blanket bog as well as to help the Government achieve its goal for sustainable management of the uplands in meeting the long term outcomes as set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan. The landowners agreed with an outcomes approach and recognised the need to protect unique habitats and biodiversity, which they cherish.

Natural England provided an overview of the long term land management plans and how they look to deliver multiple outcomes, including the restoration of blanket bog. Four plans have been agreed so far and the SoS praised the hard work Natural England and land managers in achieving these, appreciating the complexities for each plan and the investment given to each of them.

Defra shared a copy of the voluntary commitment for the cessation of rotational burning. The issue around the clarity of burning for restoration was raised. The Moorland Association advised that the Government would need to make it clear that the voluntary commitment is just for suspending the practice of rotational burning, but would not affect burning for restoration where it is required to aid the restoration of peat. Defra agreed to reflect the term restoration burning more clearly within the document. Natural England also confirmed that any burning for restoration purposes carried out prior to a long term management plan being agreed would be acceptable, provided it was covered by an extant consent and would need to be in line with the Land management Guidance [add link] and recorded accordingly.

The timescale for voluntary commitment was also discussed. The Secretary of State confirmed that he sought voluntary commitments to be signed by the end of March 2018 and long term management plans to be agreed by June 2019. Natural England explained that this was a two stage process to demonstrate that the Government is serious about delivering this change and the voluntary commitment gives a strong indication of Government's direction of travel. They also confirmed that suspending the practice of rotational burning on blanket bog would not affect extant consents that have been granted by Natural England.

Minister Coffey advised that there needed to be a significant number of voluntary commitments signed by March 2018 and long term management plans in place by June 2019 such that rotational burning will have ceased, otherwise Government would need to introduce legislation to cease rotational burning. Natural England confirmed that they would monitor progress closely and report back to Defra on a regular basis demonstrating that they were on a trajectory and moving forward.

It was agreed that land areas needed to be considered on a site by site basis, as some are more complex than others, particularly common land, and although challenging, Natural England is siding to complete these within the timeframe set. NE confirmed that it was allocating additional resource to help deliver this programme of work. Introducing a voluntary commitment for consent holders to sign should not affect progress made on the long term plans, but NE will explore different options of revoking rotational burning consents by mutual agreement with each consent holder. These options will include looking at amending existing HLS agreements that run beyond June 2019.

There was discussion on whether signing the voluntary commitment would impact on existing agri-environment schemes and applications for future agri-environment schemes. Signing the voluntary commitment would not modify any existing HLS agreements; any amendments needed for HLS that run post 2019 to address rotational burning would be picked up in one-to-one discussion between NE and the agreement holders. Signing the voluntary commitment would not impact on anyone in a Countryside Stewardship scheme or planning to apply for a new Countryside Stewardship Scheme. It is not possible to give guarantees about future policy, the commitment would be given voluntarily and is not intended to have any bearing on the design of policy after EU exit; the Agriculture Command Paper is due to be published shortly by Defra.

3. Reflections, summing up and next steps

Minister Coffey confirmed that the government appreciates all the hard work and investment that land managers put into their land and that working together to achieve the cessation of rotational burning through voluntary commitments and the restoration of blanket bog through long term land management plans would be necessary. Landowners reflected how important trust and joint working is and will continue to be and were in general pleased with Natural England's improved handling of the long term land management plans.

Defra reiterated that the long term management plans are very much an outcomes approach, which is in line with the direction of travel for 25 year environment plan, showing robust signs of thinking and underpinning a broader approach. Defra also re-confirmed that the voluntary commitment is not a legally binding document and would show intent from both the government and land managers to achieve long term outcomes approach for restoring blanket bog.

There was general support for, and agreement to, the government's position in seeking voluntary commitments to suspend rotational burning on blanket bog and to work toward long-term management plans at each site to restore blanket bog.

Natural England advised that regional workshops start week commencing 6 February 2018 and encouraged land managers to attend where possible to show support.