

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE1945: Ban the extraction and use of peat for horticulture and all growing media by 2023](#)

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petitioner is concerned about the extraction and sale of peat material for use in compost products, in the context of the role of peatlands in carbon sequestration and storage.

- The petitioner wishes to prohibit “the extraction of peat, peat imports, exports, and sales”.
- The UK Government notes that [70% of the peat sold in the UK is retail sales of bagged growing media](#) (e.g. compost).
- Government commitments to phase out the use of horticultural peat have been made for several years:
 - The [2013 Climate Change Plan \(the Second Report on Policies and Proposals\)](#) stated that the Scottish Government “are working with the other UK Administrations to reduce and eventually phase out the use of peat in horticulture.”
 - The vision set out in the [Scottish Government’s 2015 National Peatland Plan](#) states that “The public will embrace peat-free composts.”
 - The [2018 Climate Change Plan \(the Third Report on Policies and Proposals\)](#) set out that work on peatlands “includes supporting the phasing out of peat in horticultural compost.” It further notes that “This is a global challenge, as most of the peat used for this purpose is sourced from outside Scotland. The Scottish Government is supporting industry led work to develop and promote alternative sources of compost, and demonstrate their effectiveness. This is work which the National Peatland Group will continue to support and pursue.”
 - The Scottish Government committed to “seek to phase out the use of horticultural peat by increasing uptake of alternative growing media substrate” in the [2019-20 Programme for Government](#).

- A [Climate Change Plan Update, published in December 2020](#), stated that in 2021, the Scottish Government would produce a “Delivery plan and timetable for phasing out horticultural peat developed and produced following engagement with stakeholders.” A plan has not been published; the 2021-22 Programme for Government stated that the government “will take forward work to develop and consult on a ban on the sale of peat related gardening products as part of our commitment to phase out the use of peat in horticulture”.
- The petitioner states that previous voluntary initiatives to phase out the use of peat compost have failed. While the Scottish Government has not explicitly set an end date for phasing out the use of peat for horticulture, the [UK Government set a target in 2010](#) to phase out peat for amateur use by 2020 and for the commercial sector by 2030. Since 2011, as a proportion of all growing media sold in retail, peat use has declined from 58.2% to 35.5%. Total volumes of growing media used have increased, however, particularly during the pandemic. The [Horticultural Trades Association notes that](#) “Peat as a proportion of growing media fell from 48% in 2019 to 41% of total volume in 2020. This was due to the industry sourcing one million more cubic metres of peat alternatives than in 2019. However, the volume of peat used rose 9%, due to a 36% increase in the volume of amateur growing media to meet huge demand for gardening during the Covid-19 lockdown.”
- Industry, NGO and government initiatives have been established over the last decade to work towards meeting voluntary targets. For example, a UK Sustainable Growing Media Task Force was established in 2011, and [produced a roadmap, “Towards Sustainable Growing Media” in 2012](#). A Responsible Sourcing Scheme was established in 2016 by the Horticultural Trades Association, retailers, NGOs and Defra. [The scheme rates different products according to seven sustainability criteria](#). Most recently the Growing Media Taskforce made [a commitment in 2021 to remove peat from the retail market by 2025-2028](#), and from professional horticulture between 2028 and 2030.
- The [UK Government held a consultation in early 2022](#) regarding ending the retail sale of peat in horticulture in England and Wales. The consultation states that the UK Government aims to end the retail sale of peat and peat containing products in England and Wales by the end of this Parliament and by 2028 in the professional horticulture sector. The UK Government highlighted industry-led targets but noted that “while these proposals by the industry are promising, further government action is needed to ensure the entire industry continues to make progress in switching to peat alternatives, thus ending the use of peat and peat containing products.”

- Is it estimated that [60% of the UK's peat extraction occurs in Scotland](#). However, [there are information gaps](#), including on the scale of extraction and existing permissions, and the emissions from the extraction. Though up-to-date figures are difficult to find, [a 2014 report suggested that around 94% of the peat extracted in Scotland was used for horticulture](#), and the remainder for “other uses” (e.g. [whisky production, domestic fuel, mushroom compost and animal bedding](#)). [The IUCN Peatland Programme has suggested that minerals permissions periods for peat extraction have been poorly regulated](#), and that there have not been up-to-date records of peat extraction planning permissions. Following the passage of the Planning Bill in 2019, [the Scottish Government stated an intention to write to local authorities](#) seeking a better understanding of the location and scale of existing planning permissions for peat extraction.
- There has been a presumption against permissions for new peat extractions in Scottish planning policy since 2014. [The most recent draft Fourth National Planning Framework](#) states that proposals for new commercial peat extraction, including extensions to existing sites, should not be supported, unless
 - the extraction is supporting an industry of national importance,
 - there is no reasonable substitute,
 - the extraction is the minimum necessary and residual peat depth remains at least one metre,
 - the time-period for extraction is the minimum necessary, and
 - the proposal is accompanied by a comprehensive restoration plan to return the site to its original environmental status.
- However, [two-thirds of the peat sold in the UK is imported from elsewhere in Europe](#), in particular, from the Republic of Ireland. It has therefore been noted that where sale or consumption of peat-based products is not reduced alongside extraction, [this risks displacing emissions abroad](#).
- [Estimates for the emissions from Scotland's degraded peatlands were first included in Scotland's emissions statistics in 2021](#). The addition of these emissions meant that the ‘land use, land use change and forestry’ emissions sector are a ‘source’ rather than a ‘sink’ of emissions for the first time.
- The [UK Climate Change Committee, the statutory body tasked with advising governments on climate change, has recommended](#) banning practices such as rotational burning on peatland by 2020 and banning peat extraction and the sale of peat and peat imports by 2023.

Senior Researcher

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The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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