

Submission from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency – Friday 28 August 2026

Introduction and context

1. SEPA welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's consideration of its priorities for the new parliamentary session. We recognise that this is a new Committee and felt it would be useful to summarise the key services that SEPA provides for communities and businesses across Scotland.
2. A thriving environment is the foundation upon which our wellbeing and prosperity as a country depend. The resources provided by our environment underpin many of Scotland's most important industries and exports, thereby supporting jobs and investment across the country. A healthy environment provides the land we use, the landscapes people travel to see, the natural resources businesses need and high quality places that make Scotland an attractive place to live, work and invest.
3. A high quality environment is also vital in supporting health and wellbeing. It is our sense of place and culture. It links generations together. A well cared for environment is therefore an important part of creating communities that thrive.
4. Protecting and improving Scotland's environment is therefore not peripheral to national success, but central to it.

What we do

5. Our 2024-27 [Corporate Plan](#) sets out our five priorities:
6. *Net Zero* – Ensuring we play our part in helping Scotland to become a net zero country by 2045 and ensuring we reduce our own emissions towards net zero.
7. *Climate Resilience* – Delivering services that help to prepare for, prevent and reduce the impacts from floods and droughts, while also supporting resilience to the impacts of our changing climate.
8. *Water Environment* – Delivering services that help ensure the water environment is protected and improved to a good or better condition.
9. *Resource Efficiency* – Ensuring we fully play our part in helping Scotland to transition to a circular economy and that the management of waste does not cause harm to the environment or communities.
10. *Business Environmental Performance* – Delivering services that regulate activities and ensure the environment and communities are protected from harm and taking action to check compliance and make Scotland an inhospitable place for environmental crime.

11. These priorities have driven our work for the past three years as we deliver our plan. Through this, we operate a wide range of services that support businesses and communities and keep people safe.
12. Our statutory purpose is to protect and improve Scotland's environment in ways that, as far as possible, also create health, wellbeing, and economic benefits. We deliver this through:

Environmental regulation

- We are Scotland's principal environmental regulator
- We regulate a wide range activities that may impact communities and the environment These include activities with potential to impact air, water and soil, waste activities, industrial activities and management of radioactive substances. We also regulate chemicals
- We authorise activities, undertake compliance monitoring and, where necessary, undertake enforcement to ensure that activities are undertaken safely. We respond to emergencies and incidents where the environment may be impacted
- We advise businesses on what they need to do in order to comply and to protect the environment
- We gather intelligence and tackle environmental crime
- We operate the Airborne Hazards Emergency Response (AHERS) service
- We play a key role in shaping future Scottish Water investment programmes through the Strategic Review of Charges process.

Flood forecasting and warning

- We are Scotland's strategic flood risk management authority
- We prepare Flood Risk Management Plans that help the nation adapt to future flood risks
- We publish national flood maps that provide indicative information about long term flood risk from rivers, coasts and surface water
- We provide advance warnings about potential flood events. We also operate Floodline, which gives personalised alerts when potential flooding is forecast
- We respond and are on the ground in impacted communities during flood events
- We provide weekly water scarcity forecasts and give advice to land managers about the steps they need to take to ensure water availability across a catchment

- We provide advice to Planning Authorities about flood risk, helping new development avoid areas at potential risk from flooding.

Environmental monitoring, science and evidence

- We assess and report on Scotland's air, water, land and ecological quality to inform decision-making and public reporting
- We operate two labs that analyse samples and are part of our nationwide monitoring network
- We provide information about bathing water quality at 90 designated sites throughout the season
- We maintain a national network of hydrometric gauging stations that provide "real time" river level data

Environmental improvement

- We work with partners to restore the environment through delivery of the Water Environment Fund
- We prepare River Basin Management Plans that set out actions and targets for water resource improvements
- We help deliver the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy
- We reduce our own environmental footprint
- We provide advice to partners to help them make decisions that enhance the environment.

Incident response

- We are a designated Category 1 emergency responder under the Civil Contingencies Act
- We attend on the ground where events have the potential to harm the environment and communities
- We follow up after incidents to investigate and where necessary to hold those responsible to account

Supporting a circular, net-zero, climate-resilient Scotland

- We work with businesses, communities and partners to reduce emissions, reduce waste, drive innovation and build climate resilience
- We regulate industry to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions, including operating the UK Emissions Trading Scheme

- We regulate waste activities, helping to avoid waste going to landfill
- We will shortly operate digital waste tracking and Deposit Return which will avoid waste to landfill
- We operate regulations such as extended producer responsibility that avoids unnecessary packaging materials

Looking ahead

13. This year is our 30th anniversary and we are marking the successes we have had over that time and reflecting on the important role our services play in Scottish civic life.
14. However, the environmental context within which Scotland now operates is changing rapidly and the challenges ahead are certain to be more complex than those we have faced during the last three decades. These include:

The transition to net zero

15. Climate change is Scotland's most significant long-term environmental challenge. While substantial progress has been made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, progress remains uneven and delivery of Scotland's net zero ambitions will require a significant acceleration of action, particularly across transport, buildings and agriculture.
16. We consider that the challenge is no longer primarily one of policy development. Scotland now has many of the strategic frameworks required. The challenge is implementation at pace and scale.
17. Becoming a low-carbon, resource-efficient and adapted economy is one of the largest economic transformations of our lifetimes and across the world, governments, investors and businesses are repositioning themselves for that future. Tackling greenhouse gas emissions is an environmental imperative. But increasingly it is also becoming a major driver of economic growth, competitiveness and long-term prosperity. As a regulator, we need to make sure that we enable that transition by supporting businesses to reduce emissions and allowing scope to innovate in ways that drive growth and protect our environment and communities.

Adapting to a changing climate

18. The impacts of a changing climate are also becoming increasingly visible. Wetter winters, hotter and drier summers, more extreme rainfall events and increasing weather volatility are already affecting communities, public services and economic activity.
19. We know that flooding is Scotland's most significant climate-related risk, with around 400,000 properties now located in areas at medium risk of flooding and by 2100 this could reach over 600,000. At the same time longer periods of dry weather are increasing pressure on water resources, impacting on businesses

and recreational users of water. Furthermore, wildfires – the devastation of which we have witnessed this summer in the Cairngorms - may no longer be isolated events, but a seasonal occurrence.

20. SEPA have a critical, distinctive role in providing the evidence, forecasting, regulation, and emergency response services that help the nation adapt to these risks. Demands on these vital services will also increase as climate risks intensify, putting greater pressure on our resources.
21. Responding effectively therefore requires more than reactive, site-by-site and event by event responses. It demands a long-term shift towards prevention, resilience and place-based adaptation. Nature-based solutions, including peatland restoration, floodplain management and catchment-scale approaches all have an increasingly important role to play.

Nature loss

22. Biodiversity loss undermines the natural systems on which Scotland depends. Healthy ecosystems provide essential services, including flood regulation, carbon storage, water purification, pollination and food production. The State of Nature Scotland report 2023 demonstrates continuing declines in species abundance and highlights the importance of restoring ecosystems. Scotland remains one of the more nature depleted countries in Europe.
23. Through regulation, river basin management planning, environmental monitoring, planning advice, restoration programmes and incident response, SEPA plays a central role in protecting and improving Scotland's environment. Just as for climate adaption, addressing nature loss demands a long-term shift towards prevention, restoration, recovery and nature based solutions to challenges such as the management of risks from flooding. We need to see more of these approaches which deliver multiple benefits for ecosystems and for communities. Nature-based solutions also promote stronger resilience.

Resource use and the circular economy

24. Developing a circular economy is an integral part of transitioning to a low carbon economy.
25. Growing pressures on global supply chains, critical materials and resource security mean that Scotland must make better use of the resources it already has, keeping them in productive circulation for as long as possible. Circular economy approaches reduce waste, lower emissions, improve resilience and create economic opportunities.
26. SEPA has a leading role in regulating Scotland's waste sector and implementing major transformational initiatives including Digital Waste Tracking, Extended Producer Responsibility schemes and wider circular economy reforms.

A new approach

27. All of these challenges require a long term, multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approach. In response, SEPA is developing a new long-term strategy that will set out the type of agency we need to become over the next decade and beyond. This isn't just a bit of future proofing, but a profound look at what a successful environment protection agency needs to be like if it is to play a prominent and fulsome part in the transformations that will play out across Scotland in the next 20 years. We will be consulting on the strategy in September.
28. It will cover how we want to simplify regulation and create greater flexibility for responsible operators to deliver environmental improvements in innovative ways while maintaining strong protections for communities and the environment. This will help us to become an enabling regulator that can help the transition to a low carbon and circular economy.
29. We also want to enhance our environmental intelligence, monitoring, forecasting, regulatory and emergency response functions so that they help prepare Scotland for climate impacts. Long-term monitoring, scientific analysis and transparent reporting remain fundamental to understanding Scotland's environmental condition and whether interventions are delivering results.
30. A key part of our delivery of our long-term strategy will centre on public sector leadership and public service reform. SEPA is fully committed to public service reform. The environmental challenges facing Scotland do not align to organisational boundaries. We have already embarked on an ambitious agenda of reforms aimed at developing and improving our services, improving customer experiences, making more services digitally available, improving governance and simplifying regulation. These improvements fully align with public service reform ambitions and will ensure that we can deliver more, do it more efficiently and do it collaboratively with others. The Long Term Strategy will ensure that we both continue and accelerate these transformational programmes.
31. It is important however that we think about public service reform not just about how we can do things more efficiently, but how it can help us to have a bigger impact, how it can create better outcomes for the environment and for the communities we serve. For example, river catchments provide an ideal scale to apply a place based, people centred approach to aligning a range of public services. SEPA is testing this way of working with our partners in the Environment and Economic Leaders Group (EELG) through the Pioneer catchment projects in the Angus South Esk and Upper Dee Catchments.
32. We look forward to attending the committee on 3rd September 2026 and providing as much insight as we can to help you set your priorities for the forthcoming parliamentary session.

Annex – Links to further information:

[About SEPA | Beta | SEPA | Scottish Environment Protection Agency](#)

[Our performance | Beta | SEPA | Scottish Environment Protection Agency](#)

[Corporate Plan | Beta | SEPA | Scottish Environment Protection Agency](#)

[Annual Operating Plan 2026 – 2027 | Beta | SEPA | Scottish Environment Protection Agency](#)

[Live flooding information – Scottish Environment Protection Agency | SEPA](#)

[Water scarcity | Beta | SEPA | Scottish Environment Protection Agency](#)

[Bathing waters | Beta | SEPA | Scottish Environment Protection Agency](#)