

Environmental bodies set joint vision to tackle climate change

The chairs of England's three environmental bodies have today (23 January 2020) responded to the Committee on Climate Change's (CCC) land use report by outlining a shared vision and practical actions to tackle the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

In a landmark commitment, Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the Environment Agency; Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England; and Sir Harry Studholme, Chair of the Forestry Commission; have pledged to work together to deliver nature-based solutions to climate change, helping the government meet its ambition to reach net zero by 2050.

This comes as the CCC publishes its Land Use: Policies for a Net Zero UK report, presenting a range of options to reduce the UK's carbon footprint, including through nature-based solutions such as tree planting, peatland restoration, and low-carbon farming practices.

With the planet in the grip of a climate emergency, the UK is rightly taking steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions both at home and abroad. The protection and restoration of nature is a vital part of how we must do this, delivering benefits not only for climate change, but also solutions to the parallel and closely linked crisis seen in the rapid decline of nature.

For example, new forests will take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and reduce the impact of flooding that is already being caused by climate change, while at the same time enabling wildlife recovery and the restoration of beautiful landscapes. Similarly, the protection and restoration of peatland will prevent the release of greenhouse gases, while also helping rare species to expand their populations.

As such, the Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and Natural England commit to collaborating their responses to the climate and biodiversity emergencies by:

- Delivering large-scale woodland creation – fulfilling the government's plans to increase tree planting rates up to 30,000 hectares per year, across the UK, by 2025 – working closely with devolved authorities, communities and landowners – and ensuring that new and existing woodland is based on the right trees in the right place and is properly managed. Meeting the tree-planting commitment will help to take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, while also providing habitats for wildlife, better soil health and water retention, and recreational benefits.
- Protecting and restoring peatlands – peatlands have a vital part to play in tackling climate change, storing more carbon than all other types of vegetation in the world combined, and damage to peatlands is a major source of carbon emissions. Natural England is actively restoring peatland on sites that it owns or manages and is supporting other

landowners and managers in restoration. The government's England Peat Strategy will be published in the spring, and we will implement its measures to protect and restore our precious peatland.

- Supporting farmers towards net zero – working alongside the government in the development and delivery of the Environmental Land Management scheme, which will reward farmers for delivering public goods such as supporting wildlife and tackling climate change.
- Working with nature to manage flood risk – climate change is already causing more frequent and intense flooding. Alongside traditional flood defences, by planting trees, building leaky dams and restoring natural habitats such as wetlands, sand dunes and salt marsh, we can use nature to reduce the impact of floods while removing carbon from the atmosphere and improving habitats for wildlife. This is already an important part of the Environment Agency's draft FCRM strategy, and the Forestry Commission and Natural England will play a part in delivering this.
- Taking a strategic approach to land use – ensuring that nature-based solutions are used in places where they can be most effective, avoiding potential adverse impacts on the environment and communities, while also ensuring that developments in renewable energy and other infrastructure do not mean compromising on nature-based solutions. In other words, we will seek ways to go low carbon in our energy while at the same time going 'high wildlife'.
- Encouraging alternatives to carbon intensive materials – promoting and encouraging the use of timber products for construction and other industries will mean a move away from carbon intensive materials such as concrete and steel. This means that there is the potential to store millions of tonnes of carbon in the UK's new and refurbished homes simply through the use of different building materials and techniques.
- Pushing for action across the UK and abroad – we cannot act alone. At a UK level, we have already brought together representatives from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to agree how we can work together on nature-based solutions for climate change, and are hoping to continue this collaboration with a further summit in the near future. Hosting COP26 in Glasgow represents a one-off opportunity for the UK to turn the tide on the climate emergency. The UK government is already working on a bold and ambitious agenda for the summit, and we will work with the government to ensure that nature recovery is at the heart of this.

Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the Environment Agency, said:

As we're seeing with tragic bushfires in Australia and some of the extreme weather in the UK over the past few years, the climate emergency can no longer be underestimated. We must do everything we can to not only tackle climate change, but also adapt to its impacts, including the increased risk of drought and flooding here in the UK.

Building hard flood and coastal defences will always be important, but as our draft FCRM strategy shows, natural solutions like restoring wetlands to store flood water and planting trees to hold water in the soil will play an increasingly important role in the

future – all whilst taking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere.

2020 must be a year of ambitious climate action both at home and across the globe, and it's only by working together and agreeing collective action that we can both deliver net zero and adapt to the climate future.

Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England, said:

In meeting the climate change emergency it will be vital to reduce emissions from power, heating and transport. It is equally important, however, that we combine these efforts with plans for the protection and recovery of the natural environment. Given the scale of the challenge, a joined-up approach that embraces nature's recovery is not an optional extra, but must be central to the whole plan, to both catch carbon and to help us adapt to what are now inevitable climate change impacts.

The good news is that restoring of peatlands, the reestablishing of forest cover, and the renaturalising of the coast will deliver multiple additional benefits for the country, including for our wildlife and collective health and wellbeing.

And just as individual organisations cannot deliver the scale of change needed on their own, neither can individual nations, which is why we must seize the opportunity of COP26 in Glasgow to agree ambitious global action with nature based solutions at its heart.

Sir Harry Studholme, Chair of the Forestry Commission, said:

Public interest in trees has never been higher. The climate emergency has highlighted the role forests play in absorbing carbon dioxide, while we also remember the breadth of their benefits. They provide homes for birds and other wildlife, help to retain water in the soil to reduce flood risk, offer sustainable and profitable timber supplies and provide huge benefits for our health and wellbeing.

We are encouraging farmers and land managers to invest in tree-planting, and through schemes such as our recently launched Woodland Carbon Guarantee we are making sure we tackle climate change through nature-based solutions, while also providing a long term financial incentive to increase their carbon capture.

But, while the importance of planting more trees cannot be underestimated, it is also vital that we nurture and manage our woods to allow them to thrive to the fullest extent. Working hand in hand with the government and England's other environmental bodies gives us the perfect opportunity to deliver on our vision

and help with our journey to reach net zero by 2050.