

Rebecca Pow MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
2 Marsham Street
London, SW1P 4DF

08 October 2019

Dear Minister,

Congratulations on your appointment as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State.

Tuesday 1 October was the start of the heather and grass-burning season. We are writing to ask you to bring an end to the practice of burning England's upland bogs, including internationally important blanket bog. This would make a significant and immediate contribution to our fight against climate change and increase the resilience of these habitats and the benefits they for people and wildlife. It would also be a prime example of global leadership in the run up the UK's Presidency of a nature-based solutions themed COP26.

England's upland blanket bogs are a stunningly valuable public good. They are internationally important for nature. They are also vital in the fight against climate change as they store an estimated 138 million tonnes of carbon, accumulated over millennia.

However, this public good is being destroyed for private gain. Much of our blanket bog is now severely degraded. Historic atmospheric pollution has combined with intensive management practices including drainage, grazing and burning to devastate large areas of protected habitat. These intensive management practices are intended to make the bogs more productive for farming and grouse shooting, but the private benefits they produce are more than offset by the environmental damage they entail in the destruction of public goods.

Scientific evidence shows that burning has a profound impact on the functioning of our blanket bogs, with large areas of bog now devoid of peat-forming bog mosses and vegetation, and the underlying peat soil dried out as a result. In many places, the vegetation has been entirely replaced by a monoculture of heather which further contributes to drying the peat. These habitat changes have significant detrimental impacts on bog structure, peatland invertebrates and internationally important species such as the dunlin, which prefer to live on wet bogs.

Due to this poor management, whilst England's blanket bogs should be a net carbon sink, they are instead releasing 350,000 tonnes of CO₂ to the atmosphere each year, with 75% of these emissions a direct result of burning. This is the equivalent emissions of 140,000 cars per year. Allowing burning to continue will substantially undermine our ability to achieve the Government's target of net zero emissions by 2050. Rather than continuing to allow upland bogs to be burnt, we need a concerted programme to re-wet blanket bog across England making them more resilient to future climate change and any associated increase in fire risk. Healthy blanket bog needs water, not fire.

Burning also has more immediate effects on the ecosystem services provided by our moors and bogs. Healthy bogs help slow the flow of water across the bog surface, reducing the risk of flooding for communities downstream. By contrast, degraded blanket bogs are less able to withstand the worsening and more frequent heatwaves making them vulnerable to an increased risk of wildfires, with the resulting smoke pollution having a major negative impact on the air quality of nearby population centres.

We welcome your personal commitment to tackling the climate and nature crisis and that Parliament has declared a climate emergency. An immediate and outright ban on burning on all upland blanket bogs would be a powerful and proportionate demonstration of practical action to show that the Government is determined to tackle climate change and improve our natural environment.

We would be very grateful for the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this issue further and would be delighted to organise a site visit for you if that would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,



Kath Dalmeny
Chief Executive, Sustain



Dr. Richard Benwell
CEO, Wildlife and Countryside Link

Representing the following Sustain and Link member organisations:



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