

**Opening Statement by officials of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage at the Meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture and Marine
Commencing 3.30pm, Tuesday 25th May 2021**

‘Rewetting of bogs and management of peatlands, and the impact on drainage for surrounding farmland’

I would like to thank the Committee for its invitation and for the opportunity to make this presentation on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Peatlands cover approximately 20% of the State's land area and their use has implications across a wide spectrum of public policy. The conservation, restoration and management of Irelands peatlands is guided by national and international legal obligations such as the EU Habitats Directive, European and national polices and international conventions and the consideration of stakeholder needs.

In conjunction with the National Biodiversity Strategy 2017-2021, the National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation Management Plan 2017-2022 and Irelands Climate Action Plan, the National Peatlands Strategy 2015-2025 is the cornerstone of Ireland’s peatlands policy. The National Peatlands Strategy has as its vision statement “to provide a long-term framework within which all of the peatlands within the State can be managed responsibly in order to optimise their social, environmental and economic contribution to the well-being of this and future generations”.

It sets out a cross-governmental approach to managing issues that relate to peatlands, including: compliance with relevant national and international

environmental legislation; climate change; forestry; water quality; flood control; energy; nature conservation and restoration; land use planning; and agriculture.

The Strategy had been developed in partnership between relevant Government Departments and State bodies, through key stakeholders and the Peatlands Council. It is underlined by 25 key principles and commits to the undertaking of 32 actions across various sectors and themes, including inter alia Research, Tourism, Agriculture, Forestry, Conservation, Peat Extraction, Energy, Water Quality and Climate Change.

Progress reports on the Strategy have been published for 2017 and for 2018/2019 with many of the actions already completed within the Strategy. There has been many developments and changes which impact on peatlands since its publication and the Strategy is currently going through a mid-term review in the context of those reports. The review will set out where the Strategy currently is, what it can achieve over the next five years, and, if necessary, propose changes to the actions set out in the Strategy to refocus it in line with its overall goals and the current context.

Malcolm Noonan T.D., Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform launched a two month public consultation on the mid-term review of the National Peatlands Strategy on 30 April, 2021. The closing date for receipt of submissions is 5.30 pm on Wednesday 30 June, 2021.

The National Raised bog SACs Management plan 2017-2022 published in 2017, sets out a roadmap for the long-term management, restoration and conservation of protected raised bogs in Ireland. The Plan strikes an appropriate balance between the need to conserve and restore Ireland's raised bog designated sites network and

the needs of stakeholders and gives recognition to the important role that communities have to play in the conservation and restoration of raised bogs.

Ireland, like all Member States, is bound by the requirements of the EU Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive. These Directives aim to ensure the protection of the habitats and species which have been selected for conservation within European sites – Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas.

The Government's approach, as set out in the National Peatlands Strategy, is to recognise that domestic turf cutters have a traditional right to cut turf and that this right is balanced with the conservation objectives for protected bogs and the legal obligations on the State.

Significant efforts have been made by the State to resolve the issue of the protection of Ireland's protected raised bogs within the framework of the Habitats Directive. This has included the establishment of the Peatlands Council, on-going engagement with turf cutting interests and other stakeholders and with the European Commission, as well as the establishment of a long-term compensation scheme for affected turf cutters.

Those who have been impacted by the cessation of turf-cutting on protected raised bogs are being provided with annual payments or have been offered the possibility to relocate to a non-designated bog, where feasible. Under the Cessation of Turf Cutting Compensation Scheme, my Department has spent approximately €47 million on payments to turf cutters and in facilitating applicants who have chosen to relocate to a non-designated bog. 107 turf cutters have been relocated to date and a number of other sites are being progressed through the various stages in the relocation

process. Within the framework of the National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation Management Plan 2017-2022, the Department, in consultation with turf cutter representatives, is considering the available options to provide for domestic turf cutting within certain areas of a limited number of raised bog Special Areas of Conservation, where no suitable relocation site is available or there are capacity issues with a relocation site.

Functioning peatlands support biodiversity, improve water and air quality and capture (sequester) carbon from the atmosphere and store it in the form of peat. Peatlands are under severe pressure from drainage associated with agriculture, peat extraction, afforestation, overgrazing and burning. It is essential to restore and rehabilitate them to return their natural hydrological balance.

Restoring degraded peatlands will lead to reduced carbon emissions and in the long run help the bog to become a carbon sink, thus helping to prevent further climate change. The main goals of restoring degraded peatlands is to re-wet them by identifying the drainage points and blocking those drains, it not intended to flood the land but rather to keep the peat saturated and encourage the growth of peat forming species.

In order to help allay concerns in relation to any potential impacts of restoration on areas of land adjacent to the protected bogs, the Department is developing drainage management plans for special area of conservation sites and some of the natural heritage areas as part of its national protected raised bog restoration programme. Restoration plans have been developed to ensure that the impact of the restoration measures to surrounding lands is kept to a minimum.

In Ireland, numerous government and EU-funded restoration projects are underway to halt and reverse this loss of peatlands through sustainable management, rehabilitation and restoration. The National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Housing local Government and Heritage are leading on this programme for nature based change by restoring over 22,000 hectares of protected raised bog. There are also a number of blanket bog restoration projects on-going in Ireland. The Wild Atlantic Nature Life project is addressing bogs on the western seaboard, the CANN project is remediating bogs across the northwest and northern Ireland, and a new collaboration with Intel is focusing on blanket bogs in the Wicklow Mountains National Park.

I thank the committee for inviting the Department to make this presentation and officials are available to answer any questions that members may have for the Department.