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Short Notes of 1st Peat Extraction Sector Roundtable

The H2020 MERLIN roundtables aim to build a community of practice linking the economic sector representatives with MERLIN scientific and implementation partners. This report captures the main discussion points of the roundtable. A further briefing on the sector, reflecting on all sources of data, will follow in autumn 2022.

What we did

The Peat Extraction roundtable was held on 25th April 2022. The meeting brought together 15 peat extraction experts from private and non-governmental organisations across Europe to deliberate on restoration issues in the sector. One of the key experts in the sector highlighted that this roundtable is the first time that a unique and different group of industry experts have come together to discuss restoration. A guest speaker, Asha Hingorani, shared the Canadian Sphagnum Peat Moss Association's (CSPMA) experience with restoration of peat extraction sites. The discussion was structured along four main themes, which emerged from a literature review, questionnaire responses and consultation with MERLIN peat extraction sector partner, the International Peatland Society (IPS).

Themes discussed

The following main discussion points are not the views of all participants or the authors.

Trends in restoration of peat extraction sites

Extraction of peat in the EU occurs in already drained or disused agricultural lands, depending on national law. Extraction is not permitted on protected or pristine peatlands. How restoration is undertaken, however, varies across countries. In some cases, restoration is only one option for the after-use of the sites. In other cases, the land is returned to the landowner to carry out after-use, which is often forestry, agriculture (e.g., paludiculture), wetlands or pilot projects such as generation of green/solar energy.

Restoration is usually limited to individual sites where extraction occurs and as required by regulation, it will be the responsibility of the company undertaking the extraction. Restoration plans are usually part of the licensing process, which can take several years to obtain. The duration of peat extraction on a single site can be from 20 to 40 years. Restoration may not commence until after extraction ceases or it can be phased depending on the area of the site and conditions of the licence. The long timeline requires assurance that all the responsible extraction requirements, including funding, can be met before permission is granted.

The regulatory requirement, own responsibility and potential for employment are the key motivations for restoration in the sector. However, large-scale restoration beyond the extraction sites (e.g., degraded peatlands used for agriculture) raises the question of 'who funds it'. The sector can only provide skilled labour, expertise, knowledge, equipment and practical execution of restoration to support large-scale restoration. Peatland restoration could be a business opportunity for the industry.



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Understanding of NbS and integration into extraction sites

‘Rewetting’ is what the sector mostly undertakes, usually involving building dams, introducing water to the extracted site and closing drainage facilities. Presently, peat extraction licences are vague on details of restoration apart from it being a requirement. Not all extracted peatlands are suitable for rewetting depending on underlying substrate, cutover topography and water availability. The industry skills can be improved to undertake ecological restoration across landscapes based on scientific research.

In addition, peat extraction industry contributes a very small proportion of environmental challenges such as GHG emissions. Although drained peatlands emit from 3-10% of a country’s GHG emissions, this came mostly from peatland used for agriculture and forestry. In UK, for example, peat extraction contributes only 0.6% of emissions from drained peatland or 0.03% of total UK GHG emissions.

Also, the industry cannot necessarily control how landowners use land once peat companies complete their activities. Older peat extraction licences issued 20+ years ago mostly have no restoration conditions, so companies have no obligation to restore such sites. However, as part of corporate responsibility and sustainability strategies, peat extraction companies are applying for ‘best practice’ certification of their products that includes commitment to restore sites when extraction ends.

Green Deal objectives and sustainability

Despite the initial concern following the introduction of the Green Deal, the sector believes it can contribute to achieving the goals and now sees it as an opportunity to become part of the solution rather than the cause of the problem. Some companies have renewed their sustainability strategy to align with the Green Deal. These include reduction of emissions at the operational level and ambitions to reduce emissions across the entire value chain. The use of energy peat is being sharply reduced due to high emission right prices (Finland) and licensing problems (Ireland).

The peat extraction sector is seen as an enabler to achieving the goals. For instance, many green features in urban areas rely on the use of peat for horticulture. Peat is also needed for food security (in horticulture, including plant breeding) and afforestation. There are few alternatives to peat growing media, and their quality and quantity are not sufficient at the moment.

Requirements for meeting Green Deal goals

There is the need for increased cooperation and dialogue within the industry. The increasing demand for peat products will result in continuing extraction: cooperation will enable the industry to develop the best techniques to restore drained peatlands. Also, restoration should not focus on only extraction sites, but on all peatlands because commercial extraction focuses on already degraded and a very small proportion of peatlands. It is not the responsibility of the extraction industry to restore peatlands beyond the permitted extraction sites. However, through cooperation with actors outside the industry, their skills and knowledge can be utilised to enable large-scale restoration.

It is also challenging to create a win-win solution for all stakeholders. Business models regarding who pays for large-scale restoration will be needed. The requirement should not be just about restoration: alternative use of drained peatlands (e.g., wind, solar energy and biomass cultivation) should be explored – taking CO₂ and methane emissions into consideration.

Bureaucratic requirements pose further challenges. In some cases, companies cannot start restoration or other after-uses earlier than originally approved, as this requires new approval of after use plans.

Finally, research, data availability and information exchange need to improve, focusing on issues such as inventory of companies involved in peat extraction and peatland restoration; area of peatland under extraction; GHG emission from drained peatlands; and how to move towards net zero emissions by 2050.



What MERLIN could do

- Provide information on outcome of peatland restoration and other potential restoration measures to help the sector to meet Green Deal objectives.
- Provide information on potential finance schemes.
- Help to develop a route map on how to achieve a win-win solution.
- Enable more cooperation within the industry. The IPS could coordinate data acquisition.

Next steps

- Feedback from the roundtable to other parts of MERLIN project
- IPS will convene an internal roundtable of the IPS and industry RT participants to discuss the roundtable, its outcomes, and next steps and future action.
- Develop and share a draft briefing in autumn for comments before distributing to the public.
- Build towards mid-project peat extraction roundtable (possible solutions & policy modifications).
- Keep up with upcoming events or reports relevant to us as we build a community of practice linking the peat extraction sector to NbS.

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