

**Working Group to examine the issues identified during the Review of the Use of Peat
Moss in the Horticultural Industry – Online Meeting Thursday 18 March 2021
commencing at 10am - Minutes of Meeting**

Attendees:

Dr Munoo Prasad – Chairperson
Brian Lucas – Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
Alison Joyce – Secretary to Working Group – Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
Professor Michael Hayes – University of Limerick
Leslie Codd – IFA Horticultural Committee – Mushroom Sector
Declan Harty – Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
Kieran Dunne – Kildare Growers Group
Mel O’Rourke – Commercial Mushroom Producers
John Neenan – Growing Media Ireland
Leslie Carberry – Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications
Ian Lumley – An Taisce
Silvia Contin – Good Energies Alliance Ireland
Kieran Cummins – Eco Advocacy
Brian O’Reilly – Horticultural Industry Forum
Val Farrell – IFA Horticultural Committee - Nursery Stock Sector
Dermot Callaghan – Teagasc
Dr John MacNamara – Bord na Móna
Anna Kavanagh – Independent Horticulture Consultant.
Tristram Whyte – Irish Peatland Conservation Council
Percy Foster – Cré

Agenda

1. Adoption of the minutes of the meeting held on the 4th March 2021.

2. Correspondence
 - Document submitted by Kieran Dunne of Kildare Growers.
 - Document submitted by Dermot Callaghan of Teagasc

3. The current position regarding legislation and large scale peat extraction including the McCann Fitzgerald document provided by GMI to the Departments of the Environment, Climate and Communications and Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

4. Research into alternatives to the use of peat in the Horticultural Industry

5. Any other business

6. Date of next meeting

Item 1 – The minutes of the meeting held on the 4th of March 2021 were proposed by the Chair and adopted by general consensus.

Item 2 – The Chair invited the Horticultural Representatives in the group to recap on the correspondence that had been sent in during the week prior to the meeting taking place. The following points were made by Anna Kavanagh:

- The Use of Peat in Horticulture is essential and the required 1700ha equates to 0.12 of Irish Peatlands
- The Growers require a fair and just transition to alternatives
- The current difficulties need to be addressed to allow harvesting this season
- Peat will be imported if there is no harvesting in Ireland this year and there is a need to use a Carbon Calculator to fairly calculate the impact of importation or other alternatives against domestic harvesting.
- The decision by Bord na Móna to suddenly stop harvesting has had a major impact. This has produced a reduction in Peat Harvesting in the order of 90%
- The Growers want emergency legislation to allow a harvest this year
- Going forward they will work towards the gradual phasing out of peat and use of suitable alternatives
- Currently they feel we should maximise existing open peatlands and then rehabilitate them
- They feel this is the forum to deal with this and that the parties in the Oireachtas will back the need to address the issues urgently.
- The Growers feel that the small amount of emissions from what they would use this year would be counterbalanced by what they grow in plants and to import would create a much bigger carbon footprint.
- At EU level, Horticulture is seen as the solution not the problem and going forward to 2050 the amount needed is going to escalate.
- If there is no harvesting this year there will be huge social and economic impacts on the communities affected
- The Growers advised that the current existing legislative conditions required to harvest peat are prohibitive

The Chair opened the discussion to the floor for questions:

Clarification was sought regarding the reference to 1700ha as to whether the bulk of this was for the domestic market or for export.

GMI advised that the decision by Bord na Móna to stop harvesting had meant that GMI now had to take up the slack to cover the requirements of the Growers but that it would not be a

viable proposition for the remaining horticultural peat extraction companies to supply only the requirements of the Growers and not have the quantity required for export also.

He agreed that prior to the closure of Bord na Mona the majority was for export, however with the closure of Bord na Mona the majority will now be required be for the domestic market”

It was also advised that there is only 1 professional Mix Plant in the country and that harvesting on sub 30ha sites to supply only the domestic horticultural market would not be viable.

The Mushroom Industry representatives advised that while it had plants in Ireland, the industry also serviced the UK market as they own mushroom farms there, and the product required the use of Irish peat to supply both markets.

Further contributions explained that the industry is facing ruin and that everything is a trade off – the benefits of what they grow outweigh the damage of the emissions caused by the use of peat moss. The industry would like to see further research on the benefits of what they do in the Horticultural Industry weighed against the damage that would be caused by having to import peat as opposed to harvesting Irish peat.

An Taisce wanted it noted that it felt that group was very much weighted towards the Horticultural Growers and Harvesters without the same representation from the Environmental side. It also stated that there was no published evidence to back up the claims of carbon gain from horticultural peat extraction and advised that independent scientific advice was required on this. An Taisce said that eminent Irish scientists were the authors of papers on the benefits of the cessation of peat extraction and subsequent peatland restoration as regards carbon emissions reduction, carbon sequestration and storage, biodiversity and water quality.

It was clarified that an invitation had issued to the Environmental Protection Agency to participate in the working group but it had declined the invitation arising from the role of the Environmental Protection Agency in Integrated Pollution Control licensing for peat extraction on sites over 50 hectares.

It was agreed that both sides would circulate the references/links to the scientific papers on which they had based their arguments. It was also argued that the use of a carbon calculator with an agreed set of criteria would be very useful so that the various impacts, arising from horticultural peat extraction and the use of the peat in the Horticultural Industry, get measured from the same starting point in terms of carbon emissions, carbon storage and sequestration etc.

The second piece of correspondence received was from Teagasc. Its representative (Dermot Callaghan) agreed with the points made from the previous contributors as regards the challenges facing the Horticultural Sector and added the following points:

- The Horticultural Industry has no argument that the use of peat moss has a carbon footprint.
- It would like to ensure that any decisions made are properly informed and that all the issues at hand are properly weighed up.
- It would like to see proper in-depth research into the Life Cycle Analysis of Peat Moss

- It would like to see the current practices weighted against the proposed alternatives using an agreed carbon calculator.
- There needs to be funding into research on alternatives to the use of peat and any solutions need to be practical and just.

The Chair said that all points made were valid and that while research is needed it would need to be Government led. In the meantime the current difficulties required immediate action.

A further discussion ensued on how many tonnes of peat were required for the domestic horticultural industry, Teagasc advised that 200,000 cubic meters of peat would be required to service the professional horticultural sector.

Teagasc advised that research is ongoing but, at the moment, there is a battle to compete against imports. The value of Irish peat in terms of quality of product cannot be underestimated. The impact of the exit of Bord na Móna on current supply has been huge and the options of using alternatives that are not 100% reliable could cost the growers up to 30% in losses which would ultimately put them out of business. It needs to be emphasised that these are small businesses and the ability to carry bigger inventory is not possible even if it were available.

It was further stated that the Mushroom Industry is the biggest sub-sector and, while 80% of the product is for export, there are at least 3,500 jobs at stake in Ireland

Item 3 – The discussion then moved to the McCann Fitzgerald Solicitors legal advice document commissioned by Growing Media Ireland and submitted by John Neenan. It contained suggested legislative changes to resolve the situation the Industry finds themselves in. It was firstly noted that the document was two years old and that some of the suggestions it contained were superseded by the 2020 amendments to the substitute consent provisions in the Planning and Development Act 2000.

The Departments of the Environment, Climate and Communications and Housing, Local Government and Heritage advised that they had discussed the possibility of bringing forward new legislation to replace the dual consent system and had agreed that if it were possible, it could not be done by Statutory Instrument but would require primary legislation. Any replacement consent system would still require Environmental Impact Assessment, Appropriate Assessment and substitute consent (in respect of previous horticultural peat extraction) provisions. Both Departments did not consider that a derogation from the existing legislative provisions (without the establishment of an alternative consent system underpinned by legislation) was possible. Any new legislative provisions would take a number of months to be enacted (and the drafting of which would require a political mandate). With regard to 2021, the making of an application for planning permission for the development of an unused site (for peat extraction) under 30 hectares would seem to be the quickest option to implement.

There was a general discussion on how we could address the current issues, based upon the position set out by both Departments. It was also mentioned that to open a new site for horticultural peat extraction would not be feasible and have a greater impact on the biodiversity and carbon footprint than using the existing open sites. In any case it could take a few years to open new site.

Item 4 – There was general agreement that further research on alternatives to the use of peat in horticulture was needed and that this issue would be discussed further at future meetings of the working group.

Item 5 – The Chair suggested that a report should be prepared to send to Minister Noonan stressing the urgency of the situation for both the growers and the industry and the need to move from the dual consent system for large scale peat extraction to a single consent system. It was envisaged that a draft report would be circulated to the working group for comments in advance of its next meeting scheduled for 14 April 2021.

Item 6 – The next meeting was scheduled for the 14th of April 2021 commencing at 10 am.