



Introduction

The way our land is managed has huge consequences for how we live our lives. It is also a critical asset for leading us through the nature and climate emergency - experts on the government's Committee on Climate Change have warned we will only meet Scotland's ambitious emissions reduction targets if there are significant changes to the ways we use our land.¹

Land can deliver multiple benefits: from growing our food and producing timber to storing carbon emissions and reducing flooding. Access to land is also vital for maintaining physical and mental health, both for outdoor recreation and inspiring Scotland's rich creative culture. Our land also hosts a wide variety of habitats, being a home for Scotland's many and varied plants and wildlife, and provides the stunning landscapes for which Scotland has world renown and which is integral to our tourism industry. But our land is often managed in ways that perpetuate environmental harm, including intensive crop production and muirburn. Scotland, in fact, has more potential to manage land in ways that can reduce climate emissions and tackle the nature crisis quicker than can be done in other parts of the UK – from a huge expansion in native woodland to agroecological farming practices.

Scotland's exceptionally concentrated pattern of land ownership has made it all the more difficult to ensure that its management pays adequate regard to the very wide range of public interests that it affects, from carbon emissions and sequestration to the wellbeing of local communities and recreational users. Much of the way we currently use the land in Scotland is not sustainable and reform could deliver huge economic, social and environmental benefits.

A new approach to land use is required to realise these benefits in the next five years, guiding us to make better land use choices now and in the future. This briefing sets out 5 key things to know about Scotland's land management and the changes that are needed in this parliamentary session.

1. The way we use and manage our land affects our wellbeing and that of future generations.

The land in which Scotland's people live and spend time – whether urban, rural or coastal – is crucial to their health and wellbeing. Land helps to shape our sense of ourselves, provides space for recreation activity which improves physical health, and access to the outdoors improves mental wellbeing and reduces stress. It underpins Scotland's tourist economy. Scotland's land also provides us with ecosystem services such as cleaner air and water and creates the potential for wildlife and habitats to flourish. However, these benefits our land delivers are under threat from the nature and climate emergency. Scotland needs to manage its land in a way that tackles this emergency as this will ensure our land continues to deliver the best ecosystem services and wellbeing outcomes for our society and future generations.

2. Substantial changes to land management and ownership are key to tackling the nature and climate emergency.

Scotland has under a decade to meet its ambitious 2030 climate target. At the same time 1 in 9 species in Scotland is at risk of extinction, mirroring declines in wildlife and habitats worldwide.² To tackle the

¹ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/land-use-policies-for-a-net-zero-uk/>

² State of Nature Partnership, 2019. *State of Nature 2019 - Scotland*. Available at: https://scotlink.org/files/state-of-nature-Report-Scotland_.pdf



nature and climate emergency we must make large scale and rapid changes in the way we use and manage our land. Current land management and practice is going to have to change radically to reduce our carbon emissions, maximise the opportunities for nature-based solutions to climate change and secure for the long-term the public goods (such as nutritious food and clean water) that society requires. The Scottish Government acknowledged in the recent update to the Climate Change Plan that: “The capacity that our land has to deliver nature-based solutions to climate change, including through increased tree cover and restoration of degraded peatland, is unique within the UK.”³ The aim of future policies on land use, and the associated public funding programmes, must be to bring about the necessary changes and optimise the full spectrum of benefits that our natural resources have to offer - this means that traditional sectoral policies for activities or industries such as agriculture and forestry must be adjusted and geared to achieving net zero and nature recovery goals.

For example, regular burning of Scotland’s upland landscapes is carried out to maintain conditions for intensive grouse moor management. Regular burning degrades the upland habitat and drives out other wildlife. It also causes considerable damage to Scotland’s precious and unique peatland habitats which are vital for storing carbon and aiding efforts to meet our ambitious climate targets. By introducing a ban on burning on peatlands and a licensing regime for muirburn we can manage our uplands more sustainably to work for nature and climate (for more information see this LINK briefing about [sustainable upland use](#) and the pivotal issue of deer management). Similarly, by realising the full potential of trees and native woodlands to draw down carbon and support wildlife-rich habitats, we can tackle the nature and climate emergency hand in hand. By managing our land to support the recovery and expansion of Scotland’s native woodlands we can produce long-term good outcomes for biodiversity and resilience against the effects of climate change (please see the LINK briefing on [woodlands](#) for more detail).

3. Scotland must take a strategic approach to land use change.

The scope of land use policy must be broadened to include the full range of activity taking place on our land - from agriculture to forestry, tourism to nature conservation. Continuing with a sector-by-sector approach to land use policy, without an overarching framework, risks different sectors striving to achieve different outcomes which could be at cross purposes. For example, expanding commercial forestry activities could place pressure on marginal agricultural land which could instead be used to restore wetlands and increase biodiversity on farms. LINK members believe land use and management policy should cover the variety of activities taking place on our land, across different policy sectors, and working to achieve a single overriding objective of the sustainable delivery of the full range of ecosystem services. In early 2021, the Scottish Government published its third Land Use Strategy. LINK members believe the Strategy falls short of its full potential to be used as a mechanism to harmonise policy related to land by focusing solely on the environmental aspects of land management and failing to integrate land use into the wider responsibilities of government. Given this, the Strategy (and its previous iterations) have not gained traction across a broad range of public policies as it was originally intended. Please see this [consultation response](#) which outlines LINK member’s views in more detail

To meet our national aspirations on mitigating and adapting to climate change, and to restore our country’s biodiversity, we will need to take a landscape-scale approach, ensuring our natural resources are used to the best advantage. This will include better management our existing National Parks,

³ Scottish Government, 2020. *Update to the Climate Change Plan 2018-2032*, p.167. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2020/12/securing-green-recovery-path-net-zero-update-climate-change-plan-20182032/documents/update-climate-change-plan-2018-2032-securing-green-recovery-path-net-zero/update-climate-change-plan-2018-2032-securing-green-recovery-path-net-zero/govscot%3Adocument/update-climate-change-plan-2018-2032-securing-green-recovery-path-net-zero.pdf>



National Scenic Areas, Wild Land Areas, Local Landscape Areas, and Green Belts to deliver nature-based solutions, and taking a landscape-scale approach to development elsewhere. This would help address issues of flood management, amenities, access, biodiversity, and sustainable energy and transport. Our approach should also include the creation of a Nature Network for Scotland to better link our greenspaces and areas of high nature value, making Scotland's species and habitats more resilient and able to adapt to change.

4. The successful establishment of Regional Land Use Partnerships is essential to making our land work for the public interest.

Achieving the goal of using Scotland's land sustainably to address the nature and climate crisis, requires an overarching vision for Scotland's land, such as that outlined by the third Land Use Strategy.⁴ The large scale and rapid changes in land use and management need to be approached strategically rather than allowed to happen in a disorganised way. This must happen at all scales, from the national to the local, and be carried out in an open and inclusive way designed to reflect the fact that everyone, especially communities of both place and interest have a stake in the outcome.

The Scottish Government has committed to setting up Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) to bring together the diverse interests involved in managing Scotland's land, with five pilot projects expected to rollout later this year. It is essential that to achieve the pace and scale of land use change required that these pilot projects are treated as trailblazers from which lessons can be learnt on an ongoing basis as permanent RLUPs are established nationwide by 2023. In addition, there are existing landscape scale restoration partnerships in Scotland that provide inspiration and models for Regional Land Use Partnerships to learn from. The RLUPs must include a wide range of stakeholders and be supported to make recommendations on the allocation and targeting of public funds. The resulting Regional Land Use Frameworks should provide the foundation for all public funding for land use.

This response is supported by the following LINK member organisations:

John Muir Trust
Scottish Wild Land Group
Scottish Wildlife Trust
Trees for Life
Woodland Trust Scotland

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

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⁴ Scottish Government, 2021. *Scotland's Third Land Use Strategy 2021-2026*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-third-land-use-strategy-2021-2026-getting-best-land/#:~:text=Scotland's%20Third%20Land%20Use%20Strategy,we%20get%20from%20our%20land.>