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Phasing out the use of peat as part of growing media in commercial horticulture

Defra Secretary of State and the EPAP ([England Peat Action Plan](#)) outlined the government ambition in May 2021 to consult on banning the sale of peat and peat containing products by the end of 2028 and examine the feasibility of certain measures, to end the use of horticultural peat in both the amateur and professional sectors. This consultation opened on 18 December 2021 and will close on 18 March 2022.

The NFU has been working across industry to gather evidence on the impacts this will have on grower members, working collectively with a cross-industry task force to ensure the industry is aligned in its response.

This cross-industry taskforce has set voluntary-based targets for phasing out the use of peat as a growing media within the amateur and professional sectors, with a number of clear Governmental and industry caveats. The taskforce's industry statement, found [here](#), was published in mid-2021 setting out this voluntary ambition, with the following target;

“Depending on the level of support from government for the plan, on the availability of alternatives, and on the principle of exceptions, we estimate that this plan can remove peat from amateur horticulture between 2025 and the end of 2028, and from professional horticulture between 2028 and the end of 2030”.

The horticulture industry extracts peat from approximately 0.04%¹ of the UK's peatlands. Peat as a growing media is used in ornamental production and propagation, amateur use (eg, compost), and in edible horticulture such as mushroom production and vegetable & salad propagation. Recognising the important role peat plays in the environment, the horticulture industry has already made substantial efforts to reduce its use of peat. The HTA reports that peat as a proportion of growing media fell from 48% in 2019 to 41% of total volume in 2020. It was 62% in 2011. Whilst many growers want to ensure their entire business operation is as sustainable as possible, there are some key challenges faced by many growers, particularly regarding the sourcing of alternative peat products and the required investment and infrastructure changes needed in transitioning to more suitable, and commercially viable, alternatives.

Peatlands are critical for preserving and promoting biodiversity as well as storing carbon and water. British farmers and growers are already working to better manage and protect peatland. Actions taken by businesses to reduce the use of peat in horticultural use, must be supported by Government. This includes sufficient and affordable access to alternative growing media and time for the sector to invest in transitioning away from peat.

The industry is working hard to find consistent and reliable alternative growing materials, and it is estimated that one million cubic metres of alternative growing media were used in 2020¹. However, where alternative materials are not available or do not offer the same biological benefits for sufficient crop production, the NFU is asking Government to grant exemptions for specialist areas of production. For example, the thin layer of peat used in mushroom production provides a unique set of characteristics required for establishing a successful crop yield such as water holding capacity, pH, texture and workability. It also holds a diverse population of bacteria which is important for simulating mycelium into the formation of mushroom. This delicate balance of important factors is not easily replicated in other forms of growing media, and the industry must be given sufficient resource and time to find solutions to phasing out peat use. To date, despite continual investment of large sums of capital into finding a suitable alternative, there has been a lack of success in finding an environmentally sustainable alternative with the same biological traits as peat. It is

¹ [HTA | Growing media taskforce announces horticulture's commitment to responsible sourcing](#)

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proving extremely difficult for this relatively small sector to replace peat usage and therefore we believe that the requirement and scale of each sub-sector of horticulture should be individually considered.

Alternative sources:

The horticulture sector has had a long-term focus on sustainability, with both levy money and private businesses funding research and development to find more sustainable alternatives to peat. Much of this research and development will need to continue in order to bring new products to market, as well as overcome any technical challenges associated with embedding new growing media.

For instance, in young plug and plant production, the size of the cell in which plants are produced presents difficulties in getting the growing media to bind adequately. Lettuce propagators using the peat block system depends on a very specific type of peat which binds together into a firm cube when it is wetted and compressed. There is only one peat bog in the UK which produces this type of peat. None of the peat alternatives on the market today have this binding property, despite attempts to replicate using polymers or other binding materials. Trials have shown that peat use can be reduced by approximately 20% using other binding materials, though the mechanical properties of the peat block are lost; becoming too loose and crumbly to be transplanted into the field using automated machinery.

Exemptions will therefore be needed until these challenges are addressed. Without exemptions, UK production will fall, and buyers of finished product (mushrooms/lettuce etc) would import from countries where the use of peat remains standard practice. The UK would therefore be exporting its environmental footprint and responsibility to the rest of the world.

The horticulture industry is committed to moving away from the use of peat as a growing media to more sustainable alternatives and is currently working up an industry-wide plan which will include meaningful and realistic peat removal targets. However, this is not an easy process and will take time, therefore there are a number of asks the NFU, along with other key industry stakeholders, have identified where government support is needed.

NFU Asks:

Support is required from Government to ensure that growers have sufficient time to adjust. We do not believe that the current targets are achievable without financial help or incentives to encourage the use of, and the production of, sustainable alternative growing media.

- Sufficient and affordable access to consistent and reliable alternative growing media for the whole of the horticulture industry and to allow the industry to make timely investments needed to transition away from peat.
- Where commercial alternatives are not currently available, and/or where the biological or production benefits of peat are not easily replicated by alternative growing media sources, there needs to be exemptions for specialist areas of professional production of ornamental or edible crops.
- Active government support such as capital grants, knowledge exchange funding and/or other types of support² to underpin R&D into commercially viable alternative materials, adoption of non-peat-based production systems and business adaption across the industry. Alternatives to peat can require a complete overhaul of apparatus and infrastructure e.g. irrigation and handling equipment. This is a huge business investment.
- A level playing field, ensuring that imports meet the same standards as domestic producers and domestic production is not undercut

Key information for members to be aware of:

- Growing Media Taskforce, a newly established cross industry taskforce including NFU, [HTA](#), [GMA](#), [GCA](#) & [RHS](#).
- An industry plan on how these targets will be achieved is due to be published soon
- Responsible Sourcing Scheme for Growing Media standard, [click here](#) to view

² As part of the Farming Innovation Program to look at the future of farming, Defra have a third fund called “Projects to Accelerate Adoption Fund” which is due to launch later in 2022 to support farmer-led projects to trial the viability of new innovations on farm. This would be of interest to farmers in the context of transitioning away from peat.