Exposure of systemic Department of Culture Heritage and Gaeltacht policy failure on climate action and peatland protection, in light of the climate and biodiversity loss emergencies following An Baord Pleanála’s refusal of peat cutting site relocation in Turf Cutters cessation scheme

Dear Minister,

We refer to the decision of 4th September 2019 by An Bord Pleanála refusing permission for turf cutting and peat extraction at Coolree and Blackwood Bog, Robertstown, Co Kildare from a raised bog area of 4.6ha lodged in your name as Minister with the advice of RPS Consultants. (Kildare Co Co reference 18/1280, An Board Pleanala reference 303503).

The application was for cutting of domestic peat on a 4.6 hectare area at Coolree Bog, Blackwood, Robertstown, Co Kildare, as part of a programme of new peat cutting sites under the DCHG Cessation of Turf Cutting Scheme for ecologically designated raised bogs. This scheme was introduced after the initiation of legal proceedings by the European Commission to secure the end of destructive domestic peat extraction in the small land area of internationally important raised bogs remaining in Ireland and designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the EU Habitats Directive.

Since the scheme was proposed and initiated, An Taisce has consistently argued, including through our representation on the Peatlands Council, that the appropriate compensation for peat fuel-dependent households required to cease use of their peat supply cutting plots in SACs was deep insulation retrofitting with renewably sourced electric heat pumps. Instead, the Department initiated an ill-advised financial compensation scheme and the provision of new peat cutting plots for those not accepting the payment.

An Taisce has consistently advised the Department against creating new turf cutting plots, as to do so conflicts with Ireland’s climate action obligations.
This has been confirmed by An Bord Pleanála this month in refusing the Co Kildare relocation plan as contravening both climate legislation and planning policy. The Board’s states as grounds for refusal:

"the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (underpinned by the National Mitigation Plan (July 2017) and the National Planning Framework (February 2018) with an overarching national objective to achieve transition to a low-carbon energy system."

The Board also state that the application was contrary to your own Department’s National Peatlands Strategy (2015):

"...which seeks to guide the Government’s approach to peatlands management and conservation and the subsequent National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation Management Plan, 2017-2022 which seeks to achieve a sustainable balance between traditional turf-cutting rights and legally binding conservation objectives."

These considerations apply to all current and proposed new or reactivated peat cutting plots proposed by your Department. We would advise the complete abandonment of the relocation scheme.

In addition, your application was refused on the basis that it contravenes the policies of the Kildare County Development Plan 2017-2023 for ensuring the protection and conservation of bogland habitats and bog landscapes. The development plan states:

"Future development should seek to conserve cutaway bogs and maximise their potential for wildlife, biodiversity, conservation and amenity in the first instance."

The decision comes after the refusal by the Board for the continuation of peat extraction for electricity generation at the Shannonbridge, Co Offaly power Plant in July 2019. It also comes after the August 2017 publication of the Article 6 report on the status of protected habitats and species in Ireland.

We submit that this refusal exposes the multiple failures of the Heritage section of your Department in climate action, in its own published policy for peatlands, and in its core remit for biodiversity protection.

We would appreciate the opportunity to arrange a meeting with you to review:

• The function and competence of the advice provided to you by the Heritage section of your Department on climate action and biodiversity protection;
• The entire Heritage section of your Department’s legal, technical, and professional advise, both internal and in the use of external consultants; and
• The adequacy of the DCHG Peatlands Strategy in integrating climate action with peatland protection and biodiversity loss reversal on a national basis.

Kind regards,
Ian Lumley

Advocacy Officer
An Taisce – The National Trust for Ireland