



Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee: priorities and objectives for the sixth Senedd

September 2021

Introduction

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of 32 environmental NGOs. Our key areas of interest within the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee's remit are, sustainable agriculture and fisheries policy and legislation, and the opportunities available for investment to achieve a green recovery from Covid-19 and serious investment to tackle the climate and nature emergencies. We highlight some of the key priorities that we would like the Committee to focus on during the sixth Senedd.

Development of Sustainable Farming Scheme and underpinning regulatory baseline for Wales

The Legislative Programme confirmed that the Government plans to bring an agriculture bill to the Senedd in this Senedd year. This critical piece of legislation will shape our landscapes, ecosystems and rural communities for many years to come, and will have a critical role in tackling the nature and climate emergency. The proposals for the Agriculture Bill were set out in the recent Welsh Government White Paper, and WEL's response to the White Paper is [on our website](#). WEL strongly recommends that the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee not only make scrutiny of the Agriculture Bill a priority for 2021/22 but consider joint scrutiny of the Bill with the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee.

We also expect secondary legislation to set a strong regulatory baseline that will underpin a new Sustainable Farming Scheme for Wales. WEL's position on the Sustainable Farming Scheme is set out in [these briefings](#) and we see this as an opportunity to introduce a clear and effective regulatory baseline, which will underpin the new Scheme. Further priority areas for scrutiny include:

- The Act maintains the core principle of ‘public money for public goods’. This is essential to secure value for public money and the reforms required for agriculture to meet a range of environmental and animal welfare commitments;
- Sustainable Farming Scheme is designed to deliver real benefits for nature, including via its interaction with woodland creation and forestry management, reduces greenhouse gas emissions from farming and reduces air and water pollution from farming;
- Sustainable Farming Scheme to provide real benefits for public access, including creating new and better access and ensuring enforcement against those who block access;
- Sustainable Farming Scheme rewards solutions and interventions that work with and enhance the local character of the landscape;
- the development of a strong set of National Minimum Standards for agriculture;

In terms of longer-term objectives, once the Agriculture Bill is passed and the Sustainable Farming Scheme is launched (we expect by year 3 of the sixth Senedd) we believe ongoing scrutiny of the Scheme will be required to ensure that it is delivering on its objectives to ensure sustainable management of natural resources and farm in ways that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect and restore nature.

Marine Fisheries

Wales's recent departure from the European Union creates both opportunities and significant uncertainty around how we manage our seas and fisheries. Without swift action to bridge the gap and set meaningful policies, the future of our fishing communities and our fragile marine ecosystems in Wales are at risk. During this next Senedd term, we need real and lasting change to sea fisheries policy, that delivers both sustainable fishing and recovers ocean health. We recommend that, over the next 6 months:

- The Committee investigate why there is still delay to public consultation on fisheries management within marine protected areas (the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities project), as a matter of urgency, particularly for high-risk

activities such as bottom-trawling on sensitive species and habitats. The longer this work continues to be held up by Government, the greater the chance of marine protected areas being damaged, perhaps irrevocably;

- The Committee scrutinise the development of the Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) and Wales's input into the joint working of the four UK countries, to ensure the objectives of the Fisheries Act (2020) are delivered and compatible with Wales specific legislation & objectives. (e.g. Environment Act Wales/ Wellbeing of Future Generations Act Wales). Within this, the Committee should revisit commitments made by the previous Environment Minister to the Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee in the fifth Senedd. These relate to inclusion of actions, targets and timescales within the JFS, and approaches/policies for inclusion in Fisheries Management Plans;
- The Committee investigate how best to support future production for sustainable shellfish aquaculture in Wales, in light of recent Brexit complications; and
- The Committee investigate the Welsh Government's method of prioritisation of the implementation of new Fisheries Management Plans and encourage them to produce a time-bound strategy for these. These should include long-term management strategies for non-quota stocks.

Over the longer term, the Committee should scrutinise the development of a Fisheries Bill for Wales, to ensure that environmental sustainability is at the heart of any new legislation. Previous commitments made by the Environment Minister in the fifth Senedd, in relation to duties for inclusion in a Welsh Fisheries Bill, should also be revisited. A new Act must build on the UK's shared ambition to:

- deliver environmentally sustainable and fully documented fisheries by using (or including use of) Remote Electronic Monitoring with cameras;
- ensure fisheries and aquaculture play their part in reaching net zero; and
- create new opportunities for low carbon aquaculture.

Freshwater pollution

Recent months have provided evidence of ongoing agricultural and water company pollution in Wales' rivers. River Basin Management Plans for Wales highlight "diffuse

pollution as a key reason for failure to meet good ecological status in a number of rivers". The 2020 State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) states that:

- 66% of river water bodies fail to achieve good ecological status under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) classification;
- no freshwater ecosystem type achieves a high score for all four resilience attributes;
- three species associated with rivers, white-clawed crayfish, freshwater pearl mussel and southern damselfly - are at risk of extinction in Wales;
- the latest salmon and sea trout stock assessments show a continuing decline; and
- one of the major causes is continued widespread agricultural diffuse pollution, resulting in elevated nutrient (such as nitrogen and phosphorous) and sediment loadings into freshwaters.

Natural Resources Wales recently stated that over 60% of protected rivers in Wales exceed phosphate pollution limits – this includes the Rivers Cleddau, Eden, Gwyrfai, Teifi, Tywi, Glaslyn, Dee, Usk and Wye. These rivers support some of Wales' most special wildlife like Atlantic salmon, freshwater pearl mussel, white-clawed crayfish and floating water-plantain. Recent documentaries such as Panorama and Riverside have provided evidence of the contribution of water company pollution to the degradation of our rivers and NRW has not been able to identify the relative contributions of agricultural pollution and water company pollution.

What much of the recent evidence shows, however, is that there are deficiencies in monitoring and regulation of water pollution from a range of sources. There are also deficiencies within the planning approval system and a responsibility gap in terms of monitoring planning conditions. All of these issues merit scrutiny from both the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee and the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee, as the issues cross the remits of both.

Embedding the Environment into Economic Decision Making

WEL members would like to see an inquiry on embedding the environment into economic decision making, to include evidence on how the Welsh Government are implementing the recommendations from the [Dasgupta Review](#). The

recommendations of this review cover trade and infrastructure and therefore are also relevant to the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee. There may also be cross-over with the remit of the Finance Committee. One of the biggest challenges in tackling the nature and climate emergencies is investment in systemic change. An inquiry that focuses on this would be timely and could provide some key recommendations for investing in tackling our biggest environmental challenges.

National Nature Service for Wales

A linked subject is the proposal to establish a National Nature Service for Wales, which has been developed through a collaborative co-design process involving a wide range of people, organisations and networks from all sectors. The co-design group describes the purpose and aims of a National Nature Service for Wales as:

- support for the creation of thousands of new, good quality livelihoods, boosting the economy, tackling unemployment, and contribute to Wales' long-term economic wellbeing;
- directly tackling the ongoing nature and climate emergencies by investing our people power in restoring and protecting the natural environment; and
- ensuring that in future everyone in Wales understands, and knows how to be good custodians of, the natural systems that make life on earth possible – eco-literacy.

WEL members support the creation of a National Nature Service for Wales as a way of investing in the restoration of nature whilst providing new jobs and skills that will contribute to a green recovery from Covid-19. We believe an inquiry into how such a scheme could be designed, funded and implemented, would provide further evidence for the development of a scheme that could be important environmentally, socially and economically in Wales. This inquiry could potentially be run as a joint inquiry with the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee.

National Parks' Contribution to Welsh Government Priorities

WEL members are recommending that the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee should hold an inquiry into how National Parks can

contribute to delivering Welsh Government's priorities, particularly their role in helping to tackle the climate and nature emergencies. We think this could be a potential candidate for a joint inquiry with the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee.

The Welsh Government has previously emphasised the role of National Parks in mitigating and adapting to climate change in its priorities for designated landscapes (see, for example the Valued and Resilient policy statement). In the letter which accompanied the most recent funding settlement for National Park Authorities, Welsh Government highlights the importance of the next few years as a time to take action on the climate and acknowledges that a lack of capacity is holding back NPAs' ability to undertake various work including biodiversity and climate change mitigation projects. We believe it would be timely for the Committees to look at whether NPAs have the right tools and resources and what needs to change to enable them to do more in this area.

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environmental, countryside and heritage Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales. WEL is a respected intermediary body connecting the government and the environmental NGO sector. Our vision is a thriving Welsh environment for future generations.

This paper represents the consensus view of a group of WEL members working in this specialist area. Members may also produce information individually in order to raise more detailed issues that are important to their particular organisation.



Swyddfa Caerdydd
 Tramshed Tech
 Uned D, Stryd Pendyris Caerdydd CF11 6BH
 F: 07498 228066 | E: enquiry@waleslink.org
 Trydar: @WalesLink

Cardiff Office
 Tramshed Tech
 Unit D, Pendyris Street, Cardiff CF11 6BH
 T: 07498 228066 | E: enquiry@waleslink.org
 Twitter: @WalesLink

www.waleslink.org