



Quality of growing media

matters



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National parks & Wildlife Service
Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
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**A review of the use of peat in the horticultural industry
- key issues consultation paper -**

Dear 

At RHP, we appreciate the invitation of the government of Ireland to stakeholders to react on the thoughts and beliefs of the Irish government on the use of peat for growing media. The information in the document with key-issues is clear and concise.

Introduction

Peatlands offer ecosystem services which direct and indirect contribute to human well-being. In this context we mention water holding capacity and -purification, source of unique biodiversity, climate regulation, cultural services and more. Carbon-balance in relation to climate change, is a major issue for peatlands. In current discussions, degraded peatlands are generally regarded as major emitters of carbon.

There are several uses of peatlands in Ireland that have affected the natural state of peatlands. Ranging from afforestation (19%) to cutover peatlands to affected by domestic turf cutting (39%) and from farmland (19%) to industrial cut-away peatlands (4%).

Peat harvesting for growing media has a limited impact on peatlands compared to other uses. In general the peat-industry believes that peat for growing media should only be sourced from already degraded peatlands, with recovery of the ecosystem services. In 2011 the industry organised a multi-stakeholder initiative to define principles and criteria for responsible peat production. This resulted in a peat-certification-scheme, in January 2020 around 50 peat bog are certified with a joint surface of 15.000 ha (further info www.responsiblyproducedpeat.org).

Ending the relatively small-scale peat extraction for GM will only have a limited effect on the total carbon-emission from peatlands. Restoration of peatlands and the restoration of



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Ecosystem services, however, is an aspect where the peat-industry has the capacity and knowledge to achieve rehabilitation.

"Peat extraction for growing media" certainly contributes to a certain extent to carbon-emissions from peatlands, but on the other hand well-managed peat extraction can be part of the solution!

RHP, knowledge organisation for growing media

RHP certified substrates provide an optimal start of a culture. The RHP quality mark secures that the substrate complies with the quality requirements concerning e.g. water uptake, air content, pH, EC and nutrients. It also offers more security that the substrate is pure and clean and that it can be used without risks for the culture. The RHP quality mark monitors the quality of growing media in the chain, from raw materials production until processing and delivery at the grower.

Quality; a balanced approach

A grower defines requirements for the substrate that he uses for his crop. He expects a phytosanitary safe growing medium in order to minimize risks with regard to plant diseases, residues and food-safety for the consumer further in the chain. Those requirements are dictated by the crop and cultivation system, but also the wishes of the retailer with regard to shelf-life, sustainability, price, and more. This is a delicate process in which peat plays a determining role.

A change in the composition of growing media requires an assessment of effects. Sustainability is herewith explicitly related to quality, phytosanitary aspects and safety, which requires a balanced approach. We advise to connect with existing systems for assessment in the field of quality (e.g. RHP), responsible sourcing (P4 and RPP). GME (Growing Media Europe) is currently working on a European LCA-standard for constituents and additives for growing media. It will be useful to look for affiliation with P4 (assessment of sourcing growing media) in order to ultimately generate clear information for the industry and authorities.

Public consultation questions

A. Switch to peat free ...?

We believe Peat-free in itself is not the objective. The focus should be on conservation of peatlands that are untouched and restore peatlands where possible. In the Introduction we explained our view that peat can be produced responsibly, including restoration. Peat-industry can even be a part of the solution to minimise carbon-emissions from peatlands. At some point all degraded peatlands are restored and growing media industry managed to change the portfolio of raw materials.



B. View on alternatives to the use of peat ...?

There is quite some information available about pro's and con's of other organic materials than peat. Often organic sources, especially residual materials from plants, contain phytosanitary risks, including plant diseases and human pathogens. Potential risks can be minimised by sanitation of products. A very 'clean' material however may bring other challenges as the uncontrolled development of fungus and mushrooms. The application of alternative materials will require knowledge-development in the field of substrat-biology.

C. Export of peat ...?

It would be very unfortunate for many growing media producers in Europe if Irish peat would not be available anymore. Irish peat has specific properties such as coarseness and physical-stability and Irish peat fulfils in that respect a certain role in growing media for specific crops.

D. Establishing a advising working group ...?

The establishment of a working group (WG) assumes that certain issues or advise are to be defined and worked on. We understand the actual consultation is an initial step in the process. The result of the consultation can indicate where the development is going to. When it comes to a point of joint policy, then co-operation in implementation is very important

E. When working group, which stakeholders should be represented ...?

Currently premature

F. Compensation for losses arising from cessation of peat-harvesting ...?

In the introduction we explained that we see a possible role for peat-producers in converting degraded areas into restored peatlands. Premature termination of peat harvesting should not be necessary.

G. Guidance towards alternative materials ...?

From our point of view governmental involvement in product-development is not required. The development of materials is an economic activity. The government should however ensure a level playing field. Financial support of the application of e.g. biomass for heating and electricity negatively impacts the availability -and quality- of organic residuals for growing media (possibly through a composting step)

H. table

We are not able to value a peatland for the mentioned aspects. For RPP-certification, peatlands are assessed according to the 8 High Conservation Values; soil, hydrology, vegetation, fauna, local people, climate, landscape and cultural heritage.

I. Phasing out the use of peat within a certain period of time...?

We promote to define objectives from the perspective of product-sustainability. An improved performance of the growing medium should be the objective.

In our vision 'phasing out peat' can be considered in combination with reduction of carbon emission from peatlands (further introduction).

J. Building consumer awareness of peat-free products ...?

We think it makes sense to educate consumers on quality awareness in order to get them involved in sustainability as well as quality aspects.

We are happily available for further explanation.

Kind regards

Director RHP

