

Rewetting England's lowland peat could help meet emissions target, says study

Thinktank suggests projects could deliver one-fifth of savings needed from farming, but agriculture experts cast doubt on idea

Fiona Harvey Environment editor
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Rewetting about half of England's lowland peat would be enough to deliver a fifth of the greenhouse gas emissions savings needed from the country's farming by 2030, research suggests.

Rewetting peat would also help restore habitats for birds, wildlife and plant species. But farming experts strongly dispute the potential for such projects.

Food grown on lowland peat in England has a much higher carbon footprint than imports of soya from Brazil, according to the research, from the Green Alliance thinktank. That is because wet peat sequesters carbon, but when peat is drained and farmed it emits about 19 times as much carbon as non-peat cropland.

The Green Alliance said the findings showed that rewetting peat, through removing drainage or building dams to retain water on the land, should be a government priority. Lowland peat occupies only about 1% of the UK's farmland, so even if half were rewetted it would have little impact on land availability, according to the analysis, but make a substantial contribution to the UK's efforts to reach net zero.

However, farmers said drained peatlands – including the fens of East Anglia – were some of the UK's most productive farmland, so a simple comparison of land area would not reflect their true value.

Farming is one of the biggest sources of greenhouse gas emissions but so far government efforts to reduce agricultural emissions have not produced the changes needed. Farmers could be given stronger incentives to rewet lowland peat on their farms through the government's environmental land management schemes, as current incentives appear ineffective, according to the Green Alliance analysis.

Lydia Collas, the author of the research at Green Alliance, said: "In its natural form, lowland peat can support a huge range of wetland species and absorb significant rainfall, preventing flooding downstream.

"Everyone knows that clearing Brazilian rainforest for soya production is a disaster

for the climate and for nature, but we're sabotaging our own environment by growing grain on lowland peat."

Farmers were unconvinced, however. Aidan Gill, an environment policy adviser at the National Farmers' Union, said the impacts on food of rewetting peat could be substantial, depending on the areas affected.

"The highly productive East Anglian fens produce more than 7% of England's total agricultural production, worth £1.2bn, so rewetting peat soils [there] would be quite a significant land use change and have a big impact on UK food security," he said.

He added that there were many practical obstacles, as fields could not be rewetted in isolation, and there was a risk of flooding to surrounding areas.

Gareth Morgan, the head of farming policy at the Soil Association, also urged caution. "The fens are crucial for rural communities and domestic food production, supplying a third of British-grown vegetables.

"A poorly thought-out change in land management on the fens could increase reliance on imports, weakening the resilience of our local food systems, and contributing to emissions and habitat loss abroad," he told the Guardian.

He said the Soil Association agreed that rewetting peat in some areas was needed but called on the government to "work with local farmers and use their expert knowledge of the land to adopt a mosaic approach that maintains nature-friendly farming in the most suitable areas while rewetting and restoring peatlands in others".

"A one-size-fits-all approach will be inappropriate," he said.

A spokesperson for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said: "We made clear in our plan for water that reducing emissions from peatlands will require rewetting – and are committed to working with farmers and other land managers to halt the degradation of our lowland peat soils.

"Later this year, we will launch a £6.6m lowland peat research and development programme to help us identify the best way to reduce emissions from peatlands."