

“What on earth is the Great Repeal Bill about anyway?”

What is it and why is it important?

The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, to give it its proper name, is the means by which EU laws will be converted into UK law. They include laws around the protection of important wildlife and wild places, offering the highest level of protection possible in the UK for some of our most amazing and inspiring places; like the Norfolk Broads, Cairngorms, Belfast Lough, Snowdonia and the Peak District.

Once the UK officially leaves the EU, we want to make sure that nature has the protection it needs and deserves.

So what's the problem?

Whilst it is great that these laws are being brought across, there are three serious issues with the Bill itself that pose a risk to the nature you love:

Monitoring and enforcing the laws

It is not enough to have strong laws to protect the environment, you still need the tools to ensure they are applied correctly, and the means to hold law-breakers to account for their actions.

Currently several European Institutions, including the European Commission and the European Court of Justice, play a significant role in governing our environmental laws, as they do for every EU country. Outside of the EU we will need our own structures in place.

An example of this governance in practice can be seen around the burning of blanket bogs within sites that have the highest EU level of protection. For a number of years the UK authorities have allowed the damaging practice to continue on sites that they themselves chose, without the legally-required assessments of the impacts this was having. Burning both damages wildlife and releases huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. Following a complaint by UK nature organisations, the European Commission is now taking steps to require action by the UK authorities to address this. Failure to do so could end in referral to the European Court of Justice.

Unfortunately there is no equivalent accountability in the UK, and the Bill does nothing to address this gap. Although some action can be taken through Parliamentary processes and the Supreme Court, we could end up with world-class nature laws that could be broken with little consequence, and few means to hold anyone to account.

Environmental Principles

Surrounding all of our environmental laws are key principles that provide context and scope. They have guided policy makers to strive for the very highest standards of environmental protection. As part of the EU we did not need to convert these principles directly into UK law, but when we leave we will lose them if they are not converted across at the same time as the laws they support.

This includes the **precautionary principle**, where a policy or activity that is suspected of causing harm to the environment can be suspended until it is proven to be safe, rather than continue to be used until proven harmful (often too late). The use of neonicotinoid pesticides and their impact on pollinators is a good example of this, where lack of comprehensive data did not delay a suspension of their use when negative impacts on honey bees were found.

Another key principle is the **polluter pays principle** where a polluter is required to cover the costs of cleaning up their pollution and for preventing further pollution taking place, instead of imposing the costs on others.

As it stands, the Bill is missing provisions for bringing these guiding principles across.

Transparency Issues

There are clauses in the Bill that would give Ministers 'delegated powers' to make changes to the laws as they convert them across. The reason given for these extra powers is that it will help streamline the process of bringing so many laws across (there is an estimated 12,000 pieces of EU law to be converted) and ensure they are functional and fit for purpose.

The risk is that these powers would allow Ministers to make significant changes, including to vital nature protection laws, without the normal scrutiny and debate. Instead these changes would take place behind closed doors, away from the public eye and without the usual democratic processes.

What needs to be improved in the Bill?

New governance arrangements should be put in place so we can continue to effectively monitor, manage and enforce the environment laws; and maintain the highest standards of protection by holding law-breakers accountable.

The Bill also needs amending to ensure that all environmental principles are converted alongside our environmental laws, to ensure that the UK continues to aim for the very highest standards of protection.

The Bill needs to be amended to place safeguards on the scope of the 'delegated powers' given to Ministers to ensure much greater scrutiny of their use and impacts.

Nature knows no borders. So as environmental policy is largely the responsibility of the individual countries that make up the UK, we need the four governments to work together to ensure the best outcomes for nature.

So what can I do about it?

Having made your concern on the issue known by taking the online action already, the next step is to show your MP that you mean business by going back to them again. This is not something they will generally expect, particularly in this age of easy online actions. It will show how serious you are about this issue

How you choose to go to back to them is entirely up to you. You could write them a personal email, or even a hand-written letter. You could arrange to meet them at their surgery. Or why not invite them to your favourite reserve, protected area or green space, where you can highlight what nature means to you, how it makes you feel and why it is so important.

It is a big ask, but saving the laws that protect the nature you love is a big deal. You don't have to do this alone. As well as friends and family, you could approach local nature groups or 'Friends of groups and you can use the Nature's Heroes Forum to find other people in your constituency who might like to team up on this.

We've also updated our campaigning guide to make sure you have all the tips and tools you might need. However you decide to engage with your MP, do let us know how you get on!