

## **Brexit Position Statement: Future of Environmental Protection in Northern Ireland**

### **1. Opportunities & Challenges for Northern Ireland's environment post-Brexit?**

Leaving the EU will have substantial implications for the environment in Northern Ireland. There are significant risks, but it also creates an opportunity to rethink how we legislate for and govern our relationship with the environment to create a more sustainable future.

Northern Ireland and its surrounding waters are home to over 20,000 different species and support nationally important populations of some species, including pine marten, red squirrel and the cryptic wood white butterfly. In addition, the country hosts globally important populations of species such as the Irish damselfly and white-clawed crayfish. Nevertheless, the environment in Northern Ireland faces a number of threats, including biodiversity loss, water and air pollution, climate change and alien invasive species.

The majority of environmental legislation in Northern Ireland is underpinned by EU legislation. To ensure that, post-Brexit, Northern Ireland continues working towards the goal of halting biodiversity loss, the Government must:

- maintain existing environmental legislation and put an effective system of environmental governance in place;
- maintain and extend the network of protected sites in Northern Ireland; and ensure environmental and conservation projects are adequately funded.

### **2. Legislation**

It remains unclear what will happen to EU-derived environmental legislation once the UK leaves the EU. The EU may require the UK to maintain some European environmental standards as part of a final deal to leave but the UK, ultimately, will not be bound to EU environmental legislation.

As a priority, Northern Ireland should maintain the legal protection for species, habitats, protected areas and the wider environment. This will need to be consistent with international best practice and at least as strong as that currently provided by EU legislation. There also needs to be an improvement in implementation to halt and reverse the ongoing loss of Northern Ireland's biodiversity and to restore healthy and resilient eco-systems.

For this reason we believe that legislation needs to be brought forward that ensures:

- That all environmental EU law is transferred into UK legislation without any dilution
- This must include environmental principles and governance

### **3. Need for Effective Governance**

Once the UK leaves the EU, there will no longer be any oversight from the European Commission or European Court of Justice to monitor the implementation of environmental protection legislation. Nature Matters NI is therefore calling for the development of:

- a strong, accountable and genuinely independent environmental governance framework for Northern Ireland to ensure that we not only have high environmental standards but that these are fully implemented and enforced.
- it is important that this is in place as soon as the UK leaves the EU governance framework to ensure that there is no gap in oversight and accountability.

#### 4. New sources of conservation funding

EU funding supports nature in Northern Ireland both through funding for specific conservation projects (from the LIFE+ and INTERREG programmes) and through agri-environment schemes financed under the CAP. The future of these programmes in the UK is unclear post-Brexit.

As well as potential loss of EU funding, government departments for the environment have seen a significant cut in resources, with the NI environmental budget falling by approximately 20% since 2009/10.

There is a clear risk that without adequate funding, many conservation projects may not go ahead in the future. Nature Matters wishes to see:

- A clear commitment from Government that conservation funding will be maintained or increased after Brexit.

#### 5. Cross-Border Issues

The fact that Northern Ireland will continue to share a land border with the European Union gives added imperative for the need to maintain existing EU standards. The Republic of Ireland will still be operating under the EU framework and if Northern Ireland has a significantly different legislative framework, or lower standards, it will be harder for us to work cooperatively to protect our shared environment. We wish to see:

- areas of environmental north-south co-operation and associated bodies protected.
- the island of Ireland recognised as a single biogeographic unit as environmental issues are dependent on close cross-border cooperation.
- common environmental standards that play a crucial role in providing a level playing field and prevent unfair regulatory competition.
- that cross-border cooperation on environmental matters is recognised as a core part of the Good Friday Agreement and is embedded in the common framework of EU law.

#### 6. Who We Are:

Nature Matters NI is a campaign for a nature friendly Brexit. Led by the NIEL Brexit Coalition we are working for more sustainable land use and fisheries, and better environmental protection for Northern Ireland.

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