

Scotland's Flow to the Future to tackle climate change

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A £9.6million pound project that will make one of the most significant contributions to the UK's climate change targets has today been given full grant approval of more than £4million from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Flow to the Future project, co-ordinated by the Peatlands Partnership, is a hugely ambitious plan to protect and restore seven square miles of one of Europe's largest expanses of blanket bog in Caithness and Sutherland.

Rare plants and animals

It will also develop a visitor and education facility close to the RSPB's Forsinard Flows nature reserve, allowing the public and research students to see and monitor the improvements to the blanket bog that will benefit from the restoration work. The bog repair aims to bring back the sphagnum mosses that create the peat, in turn helping many rare plants and animals such as sundew, butterwort, otters, hen harriers and golden plovers which make this area their home.

Additional funding from multiple partnership sources will inject a total of £9.6million of investment into the project, bringing many additional benefits to local businesses in the area.

Capturing carbon

One of the last remaining extensive areas of wild land in the country, the ancient environment of the Flow Country is a repository for vast amounts of carbon locked into the peat, and stores an estimated 400million tonnes – more than double the amount of carbon in all the UK's forests.

After remaining largely untouched for millennia, the area underwent a massive change in the 1970s and 1980s with the planting of thousands of hectares of non-native conifer trees and deep forestry ploughing. As a result huge areas of blanket bog were damaged and began eroding, with damaging consequences, including a loss of bog plants, a decline in birds and carbon being emitted rather than stored.

The UK is a world leader in peatland restoration – with some of the pioneering techniques developed in the Flows – and this expertise will be used during the five year landscape scale project to restore the globally important blanket bog. A new field centre will be located at the RSPB's Forsinard Flows nature reserve, a focus of peatland restoration for the past 16 years.

A first for the UK

This will be a first for the UK, and we hope it will bring volunteers, PhD, MSc and BSc students from across the UK and further afield, to work alongside RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) staff. Such visitors will have the opportunity to train in restoration and monitoring techniques and contribute to this emerging centre of excellence in peatland ecology, hydrology and carbon capture, collaborating with the Environmental Research Institute and other academic institutions in the UK.

John Henderson, Chairman of the Peatland Partnership, said: "We are absolutely delighted at the successful outcome of this bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund, one of the largest they have ever approved.

"It is great that the HLF share our vision of what can be achieved in this magnificent living landscape, which is as important to our future as it is to our heritage. Using local contractors and bringing jobs to the area, we now have the ability to restore seven square miles of peatland, protecting this valuable carbon sink and reducing the devastating impacts of climate change. It will also enhance its value as a refuge for all the special birds, animals, plants and insects to which it is a home."

He added: "This project commands widespread support across the North Highlands, and we believe it will bring multiple benefits to this economically fragile area, and we now look forward to delivering it for the people of Caithness and Sutherland."

Stuart Housden, director of RSPB Scotland, said: "I am thrilled at this very significant award, which confirms the international importance of the Flow Country and our collective duty to conserve it.

HLF's approval of this grant will allow Scotland to become a showcase for the techniques of peatland restoration – at a time when many countries are waking up to the fact that the loss of wildlife and carbon from peatlands is an urgent crisis that needs to be addressed. A new generation of scientists with the practical knowledge to help face up to this challenge will be trained here in the Flows.”

Helping to hit climate change targets

The project will also lead to a step change in communicating the importance of this globally threatened landscape of the Flow Country, so that it becomes a symbol of public engagement. It will achieve this through a travelling exhibition and online resources, using tools such as innovative digital modelling and linking to the arts. The current RSPB visitor centre at Forsinard Railway Station will be improved to provide an interpretative gateway with engaging and interactive interpretation, encouraging people to enjoy the landscape and its wildlife.

Colin McLean, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund Scotland, said: “In terms of contribution to the UK’s climate change targets, this is the most important project that HLF has funded. The Flow Country is an area of exceptional natural heritage which, with its ability to store carbon, is as important to our future as it is to our past. With our support, the Peatlands Partnership can now restore this threatened, ancient landscape, protecting its native species while playing a critical role in the fight against climate change.”

The Peatlands Partnership comprises RSPB Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Forestry Commission Scotland, Highland Council, The Environmental Research Institute (ERI), The University of the Highland and Islands, as well as key stakeholders and individuals from the local community.