

## Petition: P-05-741 Natural Resources Wales needs tighter restriction

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 14 Chwefror 2017  
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### Research Briefing:

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Petition number: P-05-741

Petition title: **Natural Resources Wales needs tighter restriction**

Petition text:

Natural Resources Wales (Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru) need tighter governance and scrutiny. Stop turning profitable agricultural land into habitat & SSSI areas where the farmer has to comply with even more restrictions in order attempt to make a living!

NRW (Environmental side) are currently an organization made up of officers not willing to listen to local knowledge, and will only advise in accordance with what they can read from books! They have only one aim in life, and that is to turn our countryside into a massive unprofitable nature reserve at the expense of the taxpayer and rural communities at large! They need closer scrutiny from our elected representatives!

Therefore, we call on the Assembly to review the current practices and policies of NRW in respect of the way that it administers land subject to, or annexed into habitat or SSSI areas. The body is currently making more damage to the countryside than good! A balance needs to be struck that will benefit all.

### Background

#### Natural Resources Wales

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) was established by the Welsh Government in April 2013, replacing three bodies: the Countryside Council for Wales; Environment Agency Wales and Forestry Commission Wales. It also incorporated some of the Welsh Government's own responsibilities. Later, in April 2015, the Welsh Government transferred the functions of the three Internal Drainage Boards operating wholly or partly in Wales into NRW.

NRW has a broad range of roles and responsibilities, which are set out on its website: [NRW: What we do](#). These include

- **Regulator:** protecting people and the environment including marine, forest and waste industries, and prosecuting those who breach the regulations that we are responsible for; and
- **Designator:** for Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – areas of particular value for their wildlife or geology, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), and National Parks, as well as declaring National Nature Reserves

*The Environment (Wales) Act 2016* defines NRW's statutory purpose as pursuing the 'sustainable management of natural resources' in Wales. Amongst other things, the Act also gives NRW powers to enter into land management agreements with land owners to promote the achievement of any objective within its functions. These agreements will replace existing land management agreements in relation to SSSIs (commonly referred to as 'triple SIs') and broader nature conservation goals.

NRW receives a [Remit Letter](#) at the start of each financial year setting out what the Welsh Ministers want it to achieve during that year. The 2016–17 remit letter stresses that the sustainable management of natural resources should be implemented 'as quickly as possible' across NRW's functions 'within the framework and powers provided by the Environment (Wales) Act'.

### Sites of Scientific Interest

A SSSI is an area protected under the *Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981* because it contains wildlife or geological or land features that are of special importance. There are over 1,000 SSSIs in Wales covering almost 12% of the country. SSSIs provide statutory protection for areas which are assessed as being the best examples of the UK's flora, fauna, geological or physiographical features and often underpin other national and international nature conservation designations. NRW works in partnership with land managers (owner/occupiers) to secure management agreements that further protect sites.

NRW is required to select sites based on scientific criteria (published by the UK Joint Nature Conservation Committee). NRW must notify the Welsh Ministers (and other interests, including affected landowners and occupiers) of their opinion that an area is of special interest. This is then followed by a formal consultation process. The owner or occupier then has three months to make any objections to the SSSI notification.

Land managers must apply to NRW for permission if they wish to carry out operations that are likely to damage the scientific interest of part or all of a SSSI, such as tree felling, ploughing grassland, draining a wetland or making major changes to the way the land is grazed.

## Welsh Government action

Lesley Griffiths AM, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, wrote to the Committee on 17 January 2017. The letter contains a detailed explanation of NRW's role in relation to SSSIs.

## National Assembly for Wales action

The Assembly's Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs (CCERA) Committee undertook [scrutiny of NRW on 2 November 2016](#). While the CCERA Committee did not consider NRW's role in designating new SSSIs, it did challenge NRW on the condition of existing protected areas in Wales.

Following the session, the CCERA Committee wrote to NRW on 2 December 2016 stating that it 'expect[ed] to see considerable improvement in this area evidenced by progress toward NRW's corporate target of 95% of international sites (SACs, SPAs and Ramsar) to achieve favourable condition'. SACs (Special Areas of Conservation), SPAs (Special Protection Areas) and Ramsar sites are examples of international designations that are often underpinned by existing UK SSSI designations.

[NRW responded on 3 January 2017 \(PDF 183KB\)](#) stating that:

Achieving or maintaining appropriate conservation management in the longer term, on sites owned and managed by a diverse range of owners, occupiers and organisations, requires consultation and ongoing dialogue with NRW on proposed operations. NRW officers from our locally based teams visit sites to assess condition and to discuss management practices and sources of funding with owners and occupiers. In some circumstances we can offer to enter into a management agreement where a management plan for the site is developed and agreed. Owners and occupiers can also enter into Glastir which provides financial support to carry out management which is compatible with protection and/or restoration.

NRW is developing a programme focused on embedding sustainable natural resource management into all of its work, including reviewing the contribution of protected sites to the ecosystem approach and natural resource management.

The Special Sites Programme is NRW's high level 'plan'. It identifies the conservation management issues and actions required on all management units across all SSSIs in Wales, including land directly managed by NRW (Welsh Government Woodland Estate and National Nature Reserves) and sites managed by all other owners and occupiers. This data is used to prioritise how the NRW budgets are spent, to inform NRW annual work programmes, and to inform forward planning. We work with individual landowners and land owning organisations to share information on conservation management issues advising, and guiding their priorities.

Glasir is the Welsh Government's agri-environment scheme funded through the Rural Development Programme for Wales 2014-2020.

The CCERA Committee intends to undertake scrutiny of NRW on an annual basis during the Fifth Assembly.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.