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WaterLANDS submission to Public Consultation on the EU Just Transition Fund in Ireland

To whom it may concern

WaterLANDS (<https://waterlands.eu>) is a newly funded large European project which has 32 partners across the EU and is coordinated in Ireland by UCD. Its objective is to demonstrate how the restoration of wetlands, including peatlands, can be upscaled to realise the maximum environmental, social and economic benefits in terms of climate change mitigation and other ecosystem services and benefits such as biodiversity protection, water storage and water quality.

Peatlands are potentially massive stores of carbon that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere and add further to CO₂ concentrations and to climate change. The cessation of peat harvesting for energy in Ireland, and potentially also of large-scale harvesting for horticulture, provides a significant opportunity in this respect. A large proportion of the lands owned by Bord na Mona, and by commercial horticultural companies, has yet to be fully developed and still contains large stores of peat, and therefore of carbon. Other bogs have largely been stripped of this resource, but nevertheless provide an opportunity for re-wetting and restoration that would in time provide for the renewal of sequestration of carbon from the atmosphere. Potentially, peatlands can sequester over 0.8 tonnes of CO₂ per hectare per year, reversing previous losses of over 3 tonnes of CO₂ per hectare per year of bare peat.

These are public good benefits and it is important that the debate over Just Transition is aware of these benefits through natural capital accounting. The contribution that peatlands make to mitigating climate change is realised at a global level of course and by the Irish Government in terms of its Nationally Determined Contribution to halting to climate change. The benefits will be realised by people in the Midlands in just the same way. However, Midland communities will also benefit directly from restoration with improved water quality in its rivers and in its drinking water resources. It would benefit from the water storage capacity of peatlands in terms of their retention of water after heavy rainfall events that would otherwise find its way downstream and present flood risks to Midland communities and farmland.

The WaterLANDS project includes major elements on Just Transition and on engaging with local communities in a process of co-creation of the process of restoration. We recognise that the cessation of peat harvesting has implications for local economies and employment. We acknowledge that this challenge has to be addressed on all fronts, including the attraction of new economic activity and investment to the Midland Region. The potential for employment creation associated with restoration is already being realised through the redeployment of a portion of former BnM workers. Large-scale restoration can attract more such investment and employment. It includes an opportunity to attract international finance to Ireland in return for carbon offsetting as wider industry is encouraged to make the transition to carbon neutrality. Ireland has one of Europe's largest peatland resources and is well-positioned to attract these financial flows which can complement the Government's own financial commitment in this area.

Although restoration works in themselves will not provide employment on a concentrated level comparable to the attraction of an Intel or Apple to the Region, the employment is nevertheless significant given the very considerable area involved and the long time period over which works

would need to continue. The attraction of international finance for the purpose will help sustain this employment. However, equally as important to Just Transition is the opportunity to ensure that local people are part of this transformation. While peatland harvesting brought employment to the region in the past, local people were never consulted on the massive change to the landscape in which they lived, landscape that in places is now barren and devoid of people and wildlife. We should not repeat this mistake in the modern era. Restoration will have a positive landscape impact, but it is not incompatible with solar or wind energy development so long as this is sensitively designed and subjected to public engagement. However, there is already a risk of inadequate community engagement in that restoration is primarily being pursued through State support to established interests who, in principle, were already obliged to accumulate reserves for rehabilitation, and who, moreover, do not have a formal Just Transition Strategy. Local community wetland initiatives deserve this same level of support for restoration. WaterLANDS includes stakeholders such as the Community Wetland Forum which is also contributing to the Just Transition project 'Connecting Communities with Peatlands' amongst its participants. However, it is also financially supporting the restoration of peatlands in the Cuilcagh Anieran uplands of Counties Leitrim, Sligo and Cavan, part of the EU LIFE Wild Atlantic Nature project, where farmers are being rewarded through results-based payments schemes for pro-actively restoring peatland on their farms.

There are multiple opportunities to do the same in the Midland Region. It is important that local communities are recognised as stakeholders in the restoration of peatlands, including also former Bord na Mona workers, turbary rights holders and farmers. The values that local community stakeholders attach to the environment and the future scenarios they prefer must be taken fully into account through informed social dialogue. Just transition must be based on fairness, equity and procedural and distributive justice. WaterLANDS aims to demonstrate how all stakeholders can contribute to the co-creation of peatland restoration, to feel a sense of shared ownership and engagement in a process that will contribute significantly to their children's and communities' future.

That future should include one of restored peatlands able to provide employment through amenity and tourism and compatible development, where the former quality of rivers is restored and people are reunited with a living and beautiful natural environment that preceded the exploitation of the peatland resource.

Yours faithfully

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