

## Sustainable Growing Media Task Force

### Programme of work to 30 June 2012

Twelve projects have been identified to deliver the information required by the Task Force for its June 2012 output and roadmap. These are:

- P1: Defining and agreeing the ‘environmental’ problem we are trying to solve
- P2: What are the non-market methods for protecting and restoring peat bogs?
- P3: Clarifying the greenhouse gas emissions (carbon footprint) associated with different growing media
- P4: What does a sustainable growing media look like?
- P5: Sustainable growing media stewardship principles and certification
- P6: What is the role of public policy (England, UK, and EU) in achieving the solutions to the “non-bog” problems?
- P7: Performance standard for amateur products
- P8: What are the ‘cost issues’ for growers and what is left (other unique issues)?
- P9: Consumer messages and green claims
- P10: How to measure success and progress
- P11: Engagement and Commitment
- P12: What will the horticultural sector look like in 2030?

### Timetable of key activities

The Gantt chart at Annex A sets out the timetable for the programme.

Key activities include:

- **15 December** 2011 - Chairman’s initial thoughts on key issues and way forward (this document)
- **1 March** – Full Task Force meeting
- By **31 March** 2012 - Interim Task Force report
- **25 April** 2012 – wider stakeholder event (including non Task Force members)
- **16 May** 2012 – Full Task Force meeting
- **20 June** 2012 – Full Task Force meeting
- By **30 June** 2012 - Task Force final report<sup>1</sup> and roadmap

### Projects:

#### **P1: Defining and agreeing the ‘environmental’ problem we are trying to solve**

The debate and world has changed since the issue of protecting English peat bogs came to prominence in the 1990s. The reasons for protecting peat have increased and the narrative has become much more complex. However, the solutions to the environmental problem are dependent on exactly which environmental problem we are trying to solve, e.g. whether it is protection of surviving English peat bogs or phasing out of products with high carbon footprints. We need to define and agree the environmental problem we are currently trying to solve. Any changes to the substrates used in horticulture must at least solve our agreed environmental problem and should not create new ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Including plans for the Task Force or some other body beyond June 2012.

Project Lead: Craig Bennett (Friends of the Earth)

Dependencies: None

Deadline: Top line thinking presented to Task Force Steering Group meeting on 29 November 2011, more detailed narrative developed with other NGOs by early January 2012.

Key questions (identified so far):

- What is the problem we are now trying to solve that the phasing out of peat use in the answer?
- How will the phasing out of peat use solve this problem (totally or in part)?
- Is it an England, UK or International issue?
- Do the benefits of restoration after extraction outweigh the harm caused during extraction?

## **P2: What are the non-market methods for protecting and restoring peat bogs?**

There is a need to decouple the phasing out of peat use in horticulture from the protection and restoration of English peat bogs. Whilst on active extraction sites ceasing of extraction is a necessary first step to restoration, the ceasing of extraction will not protect/restore either these sites or the many others not being used for peat extraction. Likewise ending the sales of peat in the UK does not automatically restore peat bogs. What is the Government planning on doing to actually achieve the protection and restoration of English peat bogs? What is the Government's position on the protection and restoration of peat bogs in other parts of the UK and overseas? What can it do to protect them from harm?

Project Lead: Defra

Dependencies: None (although if P1 does not decouple the issue this will need to be rethought)

Deadline: As part of the decoupling exercise this does not fit within the remit of the Task Force and will be dealt with outside of the Task Force. However, Defra will report to the Task Force on progress.

Key questions (identified so far):

- What is the Government planning on doing to actually achieve the protection and restoration of English peat bogs whether or not they are being used for the extraction of peat?
- What is the Government's position on the protection and restoration of peat bogs in other parts of the UK and overseas?
- What can it do to protect them from harm?
- Are there any unintended consequences arising from phasing out peat use on the protection and restoration of English peat bogs?
- Do the benefits of restoration after extraction outweigh the harm caused during extraction?

- Should the Government have targets on the size and quality of peat bogs it wishes to see in England by 2015, 2020 and 2030 (i.e. targets for peat bogs that mirrors the targets for phasing out peat use in gardening and horticulture)?

### **P3: Clarifying the greenhouse gas emissions (carbon footprint) associated with different growing media**

Defra has funded initial exploratory research on this topic which raised more questions than it answered. These were particularly in relation to the methodology which can be used to determine the carbon footprint of organic materials that changes bulk density during their lifetimes, are a mixture of virgin materials, bi-products and waste materials, and are not the final end product (which would be the plant grown). Further research is required to produce more robust data (and Defra has some resources allocated to fund this), however, the previous research identified a range of methodological issues that need an agreement on the approach for the future. Therefore, before any new research can be commissioned the Task Force first needs to address and agree methodological points and boundary issues for this research.

Project Lead: Judith Stuart (Defra)

Dependencies: P1 – if greenhouse gas emissions are not identified, in the first instance, as part of the problem then this work is not required. Although this project will also contribute to determining if greenhouse gases are, ultimately, part of the issue of concern.

Deadline: This is a longer term project.

Key questions (identified so far):

- What choices do we have to measure the carbon footprint of peat and peat-free products?
- What is the carbon footprint of peat (different types and sources) and how does this compare to the alternatives?
- Whose responsibility is it to collect new (primary) data on greenhouse gas emissions arising overseas on imported materials?
- Do we treat previously sequestered carbon (removed from the atmosphere over thousands of years) differently from geogenic carbon sources?

### **P3a: Agreement of principles and design of new research**

Before any new research can be commissioned the Task Force first needs to address and agree methodological points and boundary issues for this research. Defra will prepare a discussion paper based on the previous research identifying questions that need to be addressed and agreed with the Task Force.

Project Lead: Alan Knight

Dependencies: None

Deadline: A meeting with subset of Task Force to be held in January to discuss Defra paper on questions that need to be addressed and agreed with the Task Force.

### **P3b: Research – steering group**

Once the Task Force has reached agreement on these issues and has considered what research is required Defra will put in place new research with input from the Task Force (in-kind contributions and Task Force members time, e.g. for Steering Group).

Project Lead: David Devaney (Defra)

Dependencies: P3a – to set the boundaries for the new research

Deadline: This is a longer term project.

### **P4: What does a sustainable growing media look like?**

There are two stages to this, firstly to identify the sustainability criteria to be used and secondly to assess different growing media ingredients against these criteria. The growing media ingredients to be assessed are neither an exhaustive list nor an approved list of ingredients identified by the Task Force. However, the baseline consideration for materials assessed is that they are capable of delivering the required performance as an ingredient in growing media.

Project Lead: Paul Alexander (RHS)

#### **P4a: Sustainability criteria**

Excluding carbon and greenhouse gases which are being covered in project P3, what are the sustainability criteria that all materials should be judged against? We do not want to replace one 'unsustainable' material with another and be in the same position again in a few years needing to replace another material. What are the sustainability opportunities and threats going forward? What is the potential supply of different materials and the competition threat from other industries?

Project Lead: Paul Alexander (RHS)

Dependencies: P1 – we need to be clear on the environmental problem being addressed so that the criteria can determine if alternatives solve the original problem/s and/or do they create their own new problems. P3 – there is no need for this project to duplicate the work on carbon footprinting being carried out in P3, and it will not be able to complete this part of the sustainability criteria until after the completion of the longer term research under P3. Therefore, in the short to medium term it should focus on all criteria apart from the carbon footprint. The outputs will need to be revisited once P3 is completed.

Deadline: Meeting on 12 January 2012 to determine sustainability criteria and a key set of questions against which all of the current growing media ingredients (including peat) should be assessed.

Key questions (identified so far):

- What are the key sustainability issues which should influence the choices of alternatives used to replace peat?
- Where does an assessment of the water footprint and land footprint of materials fit within this?
- How does increasing competition for materials affect their sustainability?

- How commercial will imported materials be in future?
- How to balance the three pillars of sustainability (economic, social and environmental)?
- How do we measure and benchmark raw materials?
- How do various materials compare against these criteria?
- How much of the life cycle of each material needs to be judged against these criteria?
- How can we improve the performance of particular materials against these criteria?
- What are the deal breakers – for example would we reject a peat free product with the same carbon footprint as peat?
- What is used in other countries and how sustainable is that in an England context?
- What volume of alternatives is required to replace peat (in 2020 and 2030) and what is the shortfall in alternatives to meet this requirement?
- What are the unique advantages of different materials?
- What is the ability to use materials in relation to existing production systems and to meet retailer requirements?

#### **P4b-4j: Assessment of materials**

This project then splits into a number of work streams assessing each ingredient. The project lead will be those with the most experience with the material; however, the outputs will be peer reviewed by the Task Force. There may be Defra resource to fund small pieces of research to assist in the assessment for a small number of materials (e.g. on coir and biochar). It should be noted that the majority of the materials being assessed are not used singly but in combination with each other. This will affect the sustainability of products made by combining different ingredients.

The growing media ingredients to be assessed are neither an exhaustive list nor an approved list of ingredients identified by the Task Force. The list is also not static and we would expect other materials in future to be tested against the same set of criteria. However, the baseline consideration for materials assessed is that they are capable of delivering the required performance as an ingredient in growing media.

		Project Leads
P4b	Peat	TBD
P4c	Coir	Tom de Vesci (Horticultural Coir)
P4d	Bark	Catherine Dawson (Melcourt)
P4e	Green compost (PAS100/QP compliant or better)	Steve Harper (Vital Earth)
P4f	Green waste oversize	Project lead identified, waiting for confirmation
P4g	Wood fibre	Elaine Gotts (Scotts)
P4h	Spent mushroom compost	Ben Malin (Somerset Peat Producers Association)
P4i	Biochar	Paul Alexander (RHS)
P4j	Hydroponics	John Hall (West Sussex Growers Association)

Deadline: Completion of assessment of as many materials as possible (apart from greenhouse gas emissions) by 31 May 2012.

The outputs will need to be revisited once P3 completes. (P4k)

## **P5: Sustainable growing media stewardship principles and certification**

If the materials assessed in project P4 are sustainable or are sustainable under certain conditions we need a mechanism for ensuring that the conditions are met and the materials used continue to meet our sustainability criteria. Do we need an FSC for sustainable growing media or can all of the individual materials be dealt with under existing schemes such as FSC for the wood products and Fairtrade for concerns over labour issues with coir in India and Sri Lanka?

Project Lead: TBD

Dependencies: P4 – materials need to be determined to be sustainable under particular criteria. It will also be dependent on the revisit of the outputs of P4 (P4k) once P3 completes.

Deadline: This is a longer project. By June 2012 to have explored what is being used in other countries.

Key questions (identified so far):

- Can this be done using existing schemes or is a new purpose designed scheme required?
- Who would own and manage any new scheme?
- How does this relate to the scheme developed under P7?

## **P6: What is the role of public policy (England, UK, and EU) in achieving the solutions to the “non-bog” problems?**

The current public policy is a voluntary approach. This was supported by many respondents to the public consultation, but a significant minority called for regulation or other forms of policy intervention. The Minister has asked the Task Force to explore the options and in particular to focus on what Government should be doing to take forward action at the EU level and how. Having decoupled the use of peat in horticulture from the protection of English peat bogs, this project will focus on the policy interventions required to achieve the other environmental and sustainability aims (i.e. not those covered in project P2), and where public policy can be used to unblock identified barriers.

Project Lead: Judith Stuart (Defra)

Dependencies: P1 – need to ensure it is focused on addressing the correct environmental issue. P4 – need to ensure that it is focused on addressing the correct sustainability criteria and does not lead to negative unintended consequences.

Deadline: Defra to present paper on work to date (updated based on the outcome of P1 and initial outputs from P4 (P4a)) to the Task Force at its meeting on 1 March 2012. The group will then brainstorm a further set of policy options to be assessed and potential options for achieving EU action.

Key questions (identified so far):

- What contribution can public policy make to help the transition to peat alternatives?
- How can public policy be used to unblock identified barriers?
- What opportunities exist at the EU level and what action should Government be doing to take this forward?

A few subprojects have already been identified and more may arise.

### **P6b: Delivering peat alternatives within the waste regime**

Under the Waste Framework Directive many potential peat alternatives are classified as waste. Manufacturers must have a waste management licence to use these materials and mixing these materials with virgin materials makes the final product a waste. Working with the Environment Agency and Task Force members we want to achieve a position by which the manufacture of a 'quality' growing media can be viewed as an approved recovery operation for specific waste materials such as spent mushroom compost. Under such a position the end product would no longer be regarded as a waste and would, therefore, be free of all waste regulatory controls. However, the manufacturer would still require a waste management licence to store and handle the waste input materials.

Project Lead: TBD

Dependencies: P7 – to provide an agreed performance standard for quality growing media to meet.

Deadline: This is a long term project.

### **P6c: Improving confidence in the use of green compost**

Green compost will not be the solution to peat replacement either in terms of complete replacement or its suitability for certain uses. However, it does have an important role to play. A number of issues have been raised with Defra over the use of green compost ranging from potential contamination with herbicides to bio-security risks (plant diseases) to insufficient controls on physical contaminants. How can public policy be used to resolve these issues?

Project Lead: David Tompkins (WRAP)

Dependencies: None

Deadline: TBD

Key questions (identified so far):

- What are the barriers to using green compost that have the potential to be resolved through the use of public policy?
- How significant are these issues and what sectors do they impact on?
- Are they live issues or issues that have already been overcome and need better communication that this has been done?
- Is the occurrence of these issues constant or periodic?
- What policy tools can be used to resolve these issues?

## **P6d: The role of public policy in achieving the 2015 Public Sector phase out target**

There is a clear relationship between the need to resolve challenges for the professional sector and the delivery of the public sector target. However, resolving these alone will not achieve the public sector target by 2015. What are the other issues that need to be resolved and what is the role of public policy in achieving the 2015 target?

Project Lead: Phil Earl (Defra)

Dependencies: None, although this is related to P8 – overcoming barriers for the professional sector, and P11 – a mechanism for making commitments

Deadline: TBD

Key questions (identified so far):

- What is the level of procurement of peat grown plants by the public sector?
- What are the public policy levers that can be used to achieve this target?
- What is the grower experience of local authority procurement of plants?

## **P7: Performance standard for amateur products**

The Task Force agreed that there was a need for a performance standard. This needs to be developed and the ownership, methodology of verification and enforcement needs to be determined.

Project Lead: Tim Briercliffe (Horticultural Trades Association)

Dependencies: None

Deadline: TBD

Key questions (identified so far):

- What are the criteria for a safe, right quality and reliable growing media (or other products that currently contain peat)?
- How do we measure performance?
- How do various materials compare against these criteria (including issues of bio-security)?
- Who will own and enforce the standard?

## **P8: What are the 'cost issues' for growers and what is left (other unique issues)?**

How much of the issue for the professional sector is cost and how much is it technical or other challenges that need to be addressed? I.e. if we can solve the cost issue what is left. Where cost is the only issue, just how large is the cost differential between a plant or food grown in peat and one grown in alternatives? Where cost is not the only issue how do we overcome the technical barriers to reducing peat use? What research is needed to address these challenges? How do the performance requirements for the professional grower differ from that of amateur products? How do we measure progress given that some of the solutions lie outside conventional growing media, e.g. hydroponics?

Project Lead: Wayne Brough (HDC)/Chris Hartfield (NFU)

### **P8a: How significant is the cost differential?**

The cost that retailers are willing to pay for plants and food has been identified as a barrier to using higher cost alternatives. How big a cost differential are we talking about?

Project Lead: Wayne Brough (HDC)/Chris Hartfield (NFU)

Dependencies: None

Deadline: Assessment of the cost differential for plants and food that can already be grown peat free (i.e. where it is technically possible, whether or not they are being grown peat free at the moment) by March 2012.

Key questions (identified so far):

- What are the plants and food crops that can already be grown peat free that are not being grown peat free due to cost alone?
- How big a cost differential is there between plants or food grown in peat and different alternative mixtures and how can this be overcome?

### **P8b: If cost was no longer an issue what are the other challenges that need to be overcome?**

Taking cost out of the equation what are the remaining technical and other barriers to peat replacement? How could these be overcome? What are the non R&D actions that can be taken to overcome these barriers?

Project Lead: Wayne Brough (HDC)/Chris Hartfield (NFU)

Dependencies: None

Deadline: Assessment of the non cost issues by March 2012.

Key questions (identified so far):

- What are the specific barriers that need to be overcome for different groups of plants and crops?
- Apart from R&D what could be done to overcome these barriers?

### **P8c: What is the role of R&D in overcoming the technical challenges?**

Given the current economic climate we all have limited resources for funding R&D. What are the priorities for research to overcome identified barriers over the next 5 years? What is the best mechanism for getting greatest value out of individual budgets?

Project Lead: Wayne Brough (HDC)/Chris Hartfield (NFU)

Dependencies: P8b – identification of the specific technical barriers which need to be overcome.

Deadline: Technical panel convened by January 2012, draft plans for a 5 year R&D programme developed by May 2012.

Key questions (identified so far):

- Where can the research effort deliver the greatest benefits?
- What should be the priority plants, crops, problems for research?
- Who has resources that could be used to fund this research?
- What can a 5 year research programme deliver?
- How can we make better use of existing research results generated in the UK or overseas?

## **P9: Consumer messages and green claims**

Are we confusing the consumers with the messaging being used on packaging and at point of sale? What can we do to improve consumer messaging now and in the future?

The baseline assumption is that the product performs correctly – which links with P7.

This will need be done in 2 phases, a) identifying what we should stop including on packaging now, b) updating the Green Claims guidance for growing media.

### **P9a: Current confusing messaging**

Undertake an assessment of the current messages on packaging for consumers.

Project Lead: Alan Knight

Dependencies: None

Deadline: Manufacturers to provide project lead with the art work for their current packaging and messaging for initial analysis. This will be presented to the Task Force at the 1 March meeting, where the group will reach a consensus over confusing messaging.

### **P9b: Green claims guidance for growing media**

Update the guidance on environmental claims for growing media based on the assessments made in other projects particularly P4. The existing guidance, produced in 2003 by Defra, the GMA and BIS (then the DTI), is available at:

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/business/marketing/glc/documents/growingmediaguide.pdf>

Project Lead: TBD

Dependencies: P4 – need to have completed assessment of sustainability criteria.

Deadline: This is a longer term project and may need to wait for the reassessment of the outcomes of P4 (P4I) based on the completion of P3.

## **P10: How to measure success and progress**

The policy is due to be reviewed in 2015, at which time an assessment will need to be made of whether the voluntary approach is working. What does success look like up to 2015? Is it simply a measure of the amount of peat used or does it need to be more sophisticated focusing on changes in the supply chain that will lead to reductions of peat use in the future? Are separate measures of success needed for products sold to the amateur market, for professional growers and for retailers? How can we continue to measure progress beyond 2015? What milestones should be used?

Project Lead: TBD

Dependencies: If a measure of success is the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions this is dependent on P3.

Deadline: TBD

Key questions (identified so far):

- How will we track pace and effectiveness of the voluntary approach by 2014?
- Is there anything other than progress in achieving the various milestones in the roadmap itself that can be used as an objective measure of progress in the short term?
- What tools do we have to independently track and verify the peat content of individual products?

## **P11: Engagement and Commitment**

The policy uses a voluntary approach, but we need stakeholders to 'volunteer' to reduce their peat use or to buy-in to the approach. One way of doing this would be to get stakeholders (including Local Authorities and the public sector) to sign up to achieving the peat reduction they would be willing to volunteer for (although this may not be 100% by 2020 or 2030). We could also get them to sign up to other actions or key principles. However, we may want to use a different approach focusing on 'buy-in' rather than 'sign-up'.

Project Lead: Alan Knight

Dependencies: None

Deadline: TBD

## **P12: What will the horticultural sector look like in 2030?**

The world will be very different in 2030 compared to today, whether horticulture is peat free or not. What are the other meta trends that will shape the industry and to what extent will these contribute or add to the current challenges facing growing media?

Project Lead: Alan Knight

Dependencies: None

Deadline: June 2012

Key questions (identified so far):

- What are the other meta trends that will shape the industry and to what extent will these contribute or add to the current challenges facing growing media?
- How much of the sector will be based on hydroponics?
- What other innovations are on the horizon?

Sustainable Growing Media Task Force  
16 December 2011

# Annex A: Gantt chart

