

# Title: Delivery of 30x30

**Date: 15 May 2025**

| Purpose: | For decision. |
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| **Which of the current Business or Corporate Plan priorities does this topic drive forward and in what way?:** | This covers our 30x30 Corporate Plan Objective and supports a key outcome of the Global Biodiversity Framework. |
| **Summary:** | This paper provides an update on progress with and a forward look to delivery of 30x30 in Scotland. |
| **Actions:** | We ask the Board to consider the proposed approach, and:  * Confirm the information in this paper provides sufficient clarity and update on approaches to delivery of 30x30. * Identify actions that the NatureScot Board and Protected Areas Committee can undertake to help support this work. * Provide any further comments on this work, opportunities or risks. |
| **Recommendations:** | We recommend the Board approves the approach to delivery of this work presented in this paper. |
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| **Sponsor:** | Stuart MacQuarrie |

## Purpose

1. This paper provides an update on progress on 30x30 terrestrially.

## Background

1. The 30x30 commitment, Target 3 of the [Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)](https://www.cbd.int/article/cop15-final-text-kunming-montreal-gbf-221222), seeks to ensure that at least 30% of land and sea is effectively conserved and managed for nature by the year 2030. Achieving 30x30 requires the identification, either as Protected Areas (PAs) or *other effective area-based conservation measures* (OECMs), of just under a million hectares of land in Scotland that is *important for biodiversity* and *effectively managed* in the long-term[[1]](#footnote-2). This would shift the current coverage of 18% to 30%.
2. NatureScot has a key role, working with Scottish Government, in delivering 30x30. The first phase, setting out broad principles and approach to delivery, is complete. The co-designed [30x30 Framework](https://www.nature.scot/doc/framework-30-30-scotland-draft) was published alongside the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS) in November 2024. The second phase, translating those principles into criteria, policy and processes, is almost complete (although will continue to develop on an iterative basis) and we are about to enter the third phase, implementation.
3. In the June 2024 Board paper, we provided detail on key elements of the work, risks and challenges. It outlined next steps and emerging workstreams for NatureScot and Scottish Government, which are listed below. This paper provides an update on implementation and key issues for certain workstreams, as well as opportunities and risks to delivery.
4. The table below provides a summary of the 30x30 workstreams together with an indicative RAG rating on progress to date compared to last year.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Workstream**  (+ responsible body) | **June 2024** | **April 2025** |
| Governance Structures (SG, NatureScot) |  |  |
| Natural Environment Bill – Protected Area reform (SG) |  | NA |
| Site selection criteria & safeguard mechanisms (NatureScot led) |  |  |
| Communications and engagement (shared) |  |  |
| Mainstreaming and Policy alignment (SG) |  |  |
| Funding and Finance mechanisms (SG, NatureScot) |  |  |
| Monitoring approaches (NatureScot) |  |  |
| Spatial data analysis (NatureScot) |  |  |
| Approaches to management (NatureScot with SG approval) |  |  |

## Implementation

1. Delivery of 30x30 will largely be delivered through the bottom-up OECM approach, but the designation of new protected areas will also play a role. 30x30 will also be a catalyst for reform and improvement to protected areas to ensure the existing suite is managed effectively, resilient and delivering maximum value for nature, people and climate. The following sections summarise implementation work for OECMs and Protected Areas.

### OECMs

1. Draft OECM criteria have been [published](https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/protected-areas-and-species/30-30-and-nature-networks/developing-oecms-other-effective-area-based-conservation-measures#:~:text=Being%20recognised%20as%20an%20OECM,to%20meet%20all%20the%20criteria.) following development with stakeholders in the *OECM Working Group*. These follow IUCN Criteria. A pilot programme is underway to test and refine the draft criteria and processes for recognition of new sites. We have adopted a sectoral approach to selecting pilots, engaging with public bodies, community groups and trusts, the renewables sector, the Wildlife Estates Scotland initiative, eNGOs and individual landowners.
2. We currently have 11 pilot sites, covering around 30,000 Ha, and a further c.20 sites where initial discussions have been undertaken about participation. Once we have worked through the pilots, we hope to be able to formally recognise new sites and roll out the approach (on an iterative basis) from late mid-summer 2025 onwards.
3. The formal recognition of new OECMs may involve the establishment of a cross-sector group to support the validation of new sites and development and refinement of criteria associated with recognition. This is currently being discussed with Scottish Government.

### Protected Areas: New sites

1. The majority of the 30x30 shortfall is hoped to be delivered as OECMs. However, there will be circumstances where designation as Protected Areas may be favoured or necessary. Examples may include situations where landowners actively seek designation, instances where rare or vulnerable species or habitats are threatened with loss and there are no other options or following formal reviews or processes (e.g. the recent SPA review). In line with work about a future *Vision* for 30x30 we propose to revisit our policy on designation of new sites, using the Protected Areas Committee to develop and endorse our approach later in the year.

### Protected Areas: Existing sites

1. There are two key challenges around management of existing protected areas: ensuring that they are *effectively managed*and ensuring they are resilient and delivering maximum value for nature, people and climate.
2. 25% of protected area features are in unfavourable condition and this figure is increasing. There are many reasons for this, including difficulty in controlling landscape-or-wider pressures, legislation, resourcing and how we assess and report on success.
3. Our new approach to monitoring, *Delivering Healthy Ecosystems* (DHE), endorsed by our Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), willreplace our existing Site Condition Monitoring. It will better inform action to improve condition. The transition to the new approach should be complete by 2028.
4. Ensuring our protected areas can be more resilient and deliver greater benefits requires much more adaptive and flexible approaches to management. However, strict interpretations of the legislation, particularly of the Habitats and Birds Directives make this very difficult. This centres on a general principle of maintaining the make-up of sites (in terms of area of notified habitats or population size of focal species) as they were at the time of designation. Not only does this mean that the make-up of the suite of protected areas is heavily skewed to certain ecosystem types, but it also means that it can be very difficult to increase diversity and resilience through positive interventions because they can technically come at the expense of an existing notified feature.
5. There are multiple examples of these challenges in existing casework. These include the planting of riparian or montane woodland on SACs where these do not feature on the original citation or where their establishment would have a trade-off, albeit minor, with the extent of an existing notified habitat. Whilst the benefits of such interventions would be manifold, the strict interpretation of the legislation prohibits this on account of damaging the integrity of the existing site.
6. We have presented to Scottish Government the case for a more flexible approach to management, where this is producing clear biodiversity benefits. This challenges existing interpretations of the legislation but argues that it still aligns with the overarching intent of the Directives and will help us to deliver resilience and wider benefits. Whilst we are confident of the need and logic, Scottish Government are concerned about adherence to the Directives. We are currently considering options to mitigate these risks in light of this feedback.
7. In the face of these challenges, and a warming and more chaotic climate, we consider that a more holistic and strategic approach to our suite of protected and safeguarded areas is required (see below). This would aid decision-making and action at not just site level (the current approach), but also at regional, suite and national levels. This should enable a forward-looking approach in the face of change and the integration of 30x30 objectives with those of broader species and habitat conservation objectives.
8. Finally, we are undertaking a review of existing designations and sub-categories against 30x30 criteria. This will provide transparency as to how, if and when they will be considered as contributing to the target. These will be published this year. One significant implication is that unfavourable protected areas, unless remedial action is undertaken, will ultimately not count towards 30x30. This could be a very significant area of land and highlights the need to enable effective management of these sites.

## Delivery

1. Until now the bulk of this work has been delivered and developed by the Protected Areas, Innovation and Data Activity (PAID). However, as approaches are refined, delivery will gradually shift to National Operations teams with PAID providing strategic support.
2. 30x30 is a very ambitious target. Pace of delivery, and therefore likelihood of success, will depend on addressing challenges and seizing opportunities discussed in the following sections.

## Challenges and opportunities

1. NatureScot resourcing and approach – Current allocated and projected staff resourcing levels and projections make the likelihood of achieving 30x30 extremely challenging. SLT are currently considering 30x30 resourcing and approaches to delivery. This includes an option of working with a consultancy to catalyse existing resource by treating the work differently to business as usual.
2. Communication and engagement – Effective communications and engagement is crucial to support delivery of 30x30. This is particularly important to facilitate participation by landowners in OECMs and avoid negative perceptions associated with protected areas.
3. A communications plan has been developed by Scottish Government, with input from NatureScot. This works on three main pillars: raising general awareness, influencing influencers and stakeholders and on-the-ground engagement. This should commence this spring/early summer, likely using the OECM pilot work as a hook.
4. Culture – To deliver 30x30 efficiently and effectively we need systematic change, including to our culture. We need to ensure that we can be more empowering, both internally and externally, and build on the *trusted partner* concept. This can be achieved through simplifying regulatory mechanisms (where appropriate) but also through empowerment and trust and adopting more principled rather than rules/process-based approaches.
5. Legislation – As described earlier, there is a significant challenge associated with our strict interpretation of the legislation around European sites. Enabling legislation allowing amendment of the Habitats Regulations is proposed through the Natural Environment Bill that could facilitate this. However, even if passed, this will take time (requiring secondary legislation) when action is needed urgently. In the meantime, we will continue to work with Scottish Government to explore ways by which we can enable more flexible approaches.
6. Strategic Vision – To date our approach to management of our protected areas tends to focus at site-level and maintaining sites as they were at the time of designation. In the face of the climate and biodiversity emergencies, this backwards-looking approach needs to change. We need to ensure sites fully support the ambition for nature restoration, including ensuring resilience and maximum value for nature.
7. We propose to develop a Vision for our protected and safeguarded areas (i.e. all of 30x30) to enable a holistic, forward-looking and dynamic approach that can inform decision-making, including site selection, at not just site-level but regionally, at suite-level and with recognition of what is happening beyond protected areas. This will support a more cohesive and adaptable approach, building on the existing value of our protected areas and integrating this with wider objectives for habitat and species conservation and other benefits. This would also support arguments around new interpretations to legislation. We propose to produce a draft Vision by the end of September 2025 and to work with the Protected Areas Committee to refine this.
8. Incentives – The development of incentive mechanisms, public and private, will be crucial to take-up of OECMs and management of existing sites. From a public finance perspective, reforms to agricultural and forestry support will be important, and NatureScot will be engaged in their development, but these may take some time to be rolled out.
9. The accreditation of sites meeting 30x30 criteria, a globally and nationally recognised initiative, is an opportunity to attract private investment. Furthermore, their ability to contribute to multiple policy objectives and nature-based solutions such as flood alleviation and water quality offers potential for support (see mainstreaming below). Additionally, existing mechanisms, including carbon codes and, hopefully, through the development of the [*Ecosystem Restoration Code*](https://www.gov.scot/publications/investing-nature-plan-support-investment-biodiversity-climate-adaptation-scotland/pages/5/) and Biodiversity Investment Plan, should present a pathway to support, but again this is not fully formed. As such there will in effect be a need for a *leap of faith* from early adopters in this respect.
10. Mainstreaming – Both 30x30 and Nature Networks will be crucial to improve resilience of ecosystems and species populations, and in delivering vital ecosystem services in a warming and increasingly chaotic climate. This means that they cut across multiple policy objectives and Ministerial portfolios and potentially deliver stacked benefits in this respect. Scottish Government are leading on this challenging area of work.
11. Leadership and innovation – The hugely ambitious target of 30x30 and the need to address the twin crises means that we must be much more innovative and fleet-of-foot. We need to challenge existing approaches and thinking, look for synergies in our work, and be bold and adaptive. This includes interpretation of legislation, transforming our monitoring, our culture, ways of working and relationships. This requires not just new approaches but greater risk appetite. We will work with the Protected Areas Committee and Scientific Advisory Committee to help shape and check these new approaches. UK Country agencies are facing similar challenges, and we will continue to work with them through the associated interagency groups and Chief Scientists Group to not only share our learning but to ensure that we are appropriately, but not necessarily perfectly, aligned with the rest of the UK.

## Next steps

1. Over the next 12 months, we will be taking forward the workstreams highlighted, build on our learning from the OECM pilots and roll out the recognition of the first OECMs. This includes working on streamlined routes to accreditation via appropriate land-use models or schemes (e.g. Peatland Action, Renewables, Wildlife Estates Scotland). As we refine these processes, we will work with the National Operations teams, using their local knowledge and contacts together with new data such as the Big Biodiversity Layer, to identify and support conversations on the ground with potential participants.

## Action

1. We ask the Board to consider the proposed approach, and:

* Confirm the information in this paper provides sufficient clarity and update on approaches to delivery of 30x30.
* Identify actions that the NatureScot Board and Protected Areas Committee can undertake to help support this work.
* Provide any further comments on this work, opportunities or risks.

## Recommendation

1. We recommend the Board approves the approach to delivery of this work as presented in this paper.

1. Italicised terms drawn from the Target 3 text of the GBF. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)