

Press Release

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SCOTTISH HILLTRACKS STILL OUT OF CONTROL **Government misses opportunity to protect our wild land and fragile uplands**

Scottish Environment LINK is surprised and seriously disappointed to hear the announcement that the Scottish Government has decided not to remove permitted development rights for agricultural and forestry tracks. This is despite the government's earlier statement that it had received 'compelling evidence' of the damage that uncontrolled development of these tracks has caused, and therefore was convinced of the need to amend the legislation and bring the construction of hilltracks into the planning system.

Deborah Long, Chair of Scottish Environment LINK said: "It is extremely disappointing that the Scottish Government is backtracking on its previous intention to finally bring this unrestrained development into the planning system, a position supported by research from Heriot Watt University. Our fragile upland habitats are now opened up to ever greater proliferation of these tracks and potential long-term damage.

"This relentless attrition of our precious wild land areas from bulldozed hilltracks has been an issue of great concern to LINK members for many years, and has contributed to the shrinking of the extent of land unaffected by visual intrusion in Scotland from 41% to 28% between 2002 and 2009."

Ms Long added: "While new hilltracks in National Scenic Areas already require planning permission, the majority of land, in our National Parks and elsewhere, continues as fair game for landowners. The proposed amendment to planning legislation would have brought some measure of protection to these areas. Some of these tracks are simply bulldozed through fragile habitats with erosion scars spreading across the landscape, but even well-constructed tracks could be in the wrong place. If these tracks are for legitimate land management purposes then landowners have nothing to fear from bringing them under proper public scrutiny through the planning system.

"While we are disappointed to lose out on this decision, it is Scotland's natural environment which is the real loser. Responsible landowners should not be using the tired excuse of "an extra bureaucratic burden being added". They should be acting as custodians of Scotland's world-famous landscapes for all our benefits.

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Notes

1. Research by Heriot Watt University in 2007 for the Scottish Government identified the need for greater control of the construction of hilltracks through tighter restrictions on permitted development rights.
2. On 9th June 2010 the Scottish Parliament debated the issue of hilltracks following a petition put forward by Peter Peacock MSP and Sarah Boyack MSP with the support of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, and members of Scottish Environment LINK. Following this debate, in July 2011, the Scottish Government held a consultation on a review of General Permitted Development Orders which included the use of Permitted Development Rights for the construction of hilltracks for agricultural or forestry purposes.
3. As a result of the compelling evidence gathered from this consultation, the Scottish Government then held a further consultation from March 2012 on an amendment to GPDO which stated: "Whilst there was a strong desire from landowners to retain existing PDR, there was also compelling evidence presented of the damage caused by some tracks. On balance, it is therefore considered that the removal of Permitted Development Rights for formation of access tracks is the appropriate option."
4. Scottish Natural Heritage's indicators of the intrusion caused by built developments shows that land unaffected by any visual intrusion shrank from 41% in 2002 to 28% in 2009 - <http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/B551051.pdf>
5. Scottish Environment LINK is the network for Scotland's voluntary sector environmental organizations. LINK has over 30 member organizations spanning interests across the natural environment and associated cultural heritage and supported by around 500,000 people. Further information on LINK is available at www.scotlink.org.