

News Release

Immediate Release

13 August 2025

**Action by Environmental Standards Scotland leads to improved protection for Scotland's wetlands**

Environmental Standards Scotland (ESS) has today welcomed the move by the Scottish Government to update its policy on protecting Scotland's most important wetland areas.

The change in policy will now mean that all Ramsar sites in Scotland will be treated as if they are European sites for the purposes of land use change decision-making. This means that any proposed development (plan or project) affecting a Ramsar site must now undergo a Habitats Regulations Appraisal as outlined in the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994.

The Scottish Government's change to the official Ramsar policy follows ESS investigative work to close a gap that created a two-tiered system of protection for sites in Scotland. ESS has published a report today outlining the formal conclusion of this case.

Ramsar sites are wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty focused on the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands, named after the city in Iran where the treaty was signed.

These sites are recognised for their ecological significance, particularly as vital habitats for waterfowl and other biodiversity. There are 51 Ramsar sites in Scotland, covering around 4% of Scotland's land area, including at Loch Lomond and on Rannoch Moor.

## **The perceived gap**

Following the submission of a representation by a member of the public, ESS identified a gap in law and policy that theoretically allowed for the removal of protected Ramsar areas despite international obligations to safeguard these areas.

There is no dedicated legislation in Scotland for the protection of Ramsar sites. Instead, these are protected by being additionally designated as European sites (the collective term for both Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation) and/or Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The protections afforded to European sites are more comprehensive and more closely aligned with Ramsar Convention requirements than those afforded to SSSIs. Under the Scottish Government's previous policy, each Ramsar feature was assigned either European site or SSSI protections, creating a two-tier system which resulted in some Ramsar features receiving weaker protection than others.

## **The resolution**

Following extensive ESS engagement with the Scottish Government, the Ramsar policy has now been updated to ensure that all features of Ramsar sites in Scotland must now be treated as if they were European sites - Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation - for the purposes of land use change decision-making.

As a result, a Habitats Regulations Appraisal must be undertaken prior to any proposed plan or development on the land. ESS considers these protections to be better aligned with the requirements of the Ramsar Convention.

Mark Roberts, Chief Executive of ESS said: "I welcome the revised Ramsar policy from the Scottish Government which will help ensure the preservation of Scotland's wetlands and sustain our natural habitats and water quality.

"This case has been longstanding and our team has worked hard and constructively with the Scottish Government to secure this positive and meaningful change."

**ENDS**

**Notes to editors:**

- i) You can read the ESS closure report on the Ramsar case here: [Ramsar Site Protection - Case Closure Report - Environmental Standards Scotland](#)
- ii) You can read the Scottish Government updated Scottish Government policy on protecting Ramsar sites here: [Wetlands - protecting Ramsar sites: updated Scottish Government policy - gov.scot](#)
- iii) For more information, please contact [press@environmentalstandards.scot](mailto:press@environmentalstandards.scot)