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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

SOIL CONSERVATION – PROPOSED CHANGE FROM A LEAD AGENCY TO A LEAD CO-ORDINATION NETWORK

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1. Background

- 1.1 At its December 1998 meeting, the Joint Committee agreed to establish a Lead Agency for soils to promote and co-ordinate a common approach to national soil conservation issues in the UK. The Joint Committee agreed that SNH should take on this role. The Soils Lead Agency (SLA) has reported regularly to the Joint Committee and to the Chief Scientists on the progress of work, both in terms of detailed work programmes and strategic objectives. To assist in developing long term strategy, and to better identify issues relevant to agency work, a seminar was held in September 2000, involving members of the Chief Scientist Group, Joint Committee and country agency representatives.
- 1.2 It was agreed at the seminar that soil is an important component of terrestrial ecosystems, supporting habitats and biodiversity, and hence qualifies as a valid and significant concern of the country agencies. In particular, four key areas of scientific relevance were identified:
 - i. *soil processes and ecosystem functions*, particularly in relation to ecosystem management and restoration
 - ii. *soil biodiversity*, both in relation to sustaining habitats and its intrinsic value;
 - iii. the development of *soil quality indicators* as a means of measuring and evaluating changes in nature conservation interests;
 - iv. *an inventory* of the nature conservation interests of soils in GB.

2. Summary of progress to date

- 2.1 This paper is not intended to provide a detailed report on progress of work to date but a summary is presented here. It was agreed that the above four areas would form the framework for developing a strategy for soil conservation work and the strategy is being implemented through three broad areas of work:

The provision of advice to DEFRA and government agencies

2.2 Work undertaken here includes:

- i. contributing to the Environment Agency soil indicators programme;
- ii. maintaining contact with the NERC soil biodiversity research project;
- iii. responding to the DEFRA consultation on the English soil strategy;
- iv. contributing to the National Assembly for Wales soil scoping study;
- v. providing a ministerial briefing on the UK conservation agency views of the EU Soils Thematic Strategy in advance of the informal meeting of Environment ministers in May 2002.

Initiating soil research projects

2.3 The limited ability of JNCC to fund project work has restricted work undertaken under the SLA umbrella, and a proposed project in Snowdonia, designed to further develop the soil inventory approach adopted in Scotland, could not be funded. Key work undertaken or initiated includes:

- i. a pilot inventory project on 'Soils and Nature Conservation' has been completed in the Moray Firth area, funded by SNH;
- ii. a three year research project at Reading University on soil functionality in an English upland area has been initiated, supported by JNCC and commencing in September 2002.

Raising awareness of soil conservation issues

2.4 This includes awareness raising within and outside the conservation agencies, and alerting conservation officers and soil scientists to ongoing agency sponsored work. In part, this aspect is achieved by direct contribution to other agency or DEFRA programmes. SLA contributions establish links into appropriate working groups/departments and through this process clearly indicate conservation agency interest and expertise in soil nature conservation issues. This is particularly important given that soils have in the past been seen as primarily of agricultural significance.

2.5 The soil component of natural and semi-natural ecosystems has had a relatively low profile in the past but the role of soils in maintaining biodiversity and biological communities is now considered as very important to nature conservation. The work cuts across all areas of terrestrial conservation, particularly in respect of site/habitat management and habitat restoration. It is important that other agency working groups recognise how the soils work is developing and its relevance to their own programmes. It is also important for the SLA to gather appropriate information concerning soil-related research currently being undertaken both within the agencies and externally. Work on

overgrazing, upland erosion, heather burning, habitat restoration etc. may not explicitly involve soil science work but involve important soil-related issues.

- 2.6 This particular work area will become more important over the next two years as we further refine our strategy and define specific areas of interest.

3. Proposed change from a Lead Agency to a Lead Co-ordination Network

3.1 Inter-agency soils work is relatively new at a UK level and it has taken time to establish both its value and the priority issues in which the agencies can justify involvement. From a 'standing start' in 1999, SNH as Lead Agency has very effectively projected agency views into a range of government and government agency consultations. The nature of the conservation agency interest, and our relevant expertise, in soil conservation has now been clearly established in the minds of a wide range of government and non-government organisations, and our involvement has been recognised at ministerial level.

3.2 The situation is now changing within the agencies. CCW now employs a soil scientist/policy advisor and English Nature have recently instituted a programme of seminars and field trips to raise the profile of soil conservation issues, particularly in an upland context. This programme was interrupted by the foot and mouth outbreak (taking up staff time and preventing field trips) but will now be revived. With the balance of soil expertise in the agencies changing, and expertise emerging within all three country agencies rather than being concentrated solely in SNH, there is now a case for changing to a Lead Co-ordination Network (LCN) status.

3.3 The soils work is seen as supportive and relevant to a very wide range of terrestrial conservation programmes. Identifying these cross-cutting areas and promoting the importance and value of soil science through the LCNs will bring closer integration of soils with existing agency programmes. Currently LCNs exist for the following work areas:

- Freshwater
- Woodland
- Lowland wetland
- Upland
- Lowland grassland
- Coastal
- Air pollution

3.4 The EU has adopted a 'thematic' approach to soil issues, seeking to encourage a wide range of existing programmes (including the Water Framework Directive and Habitats Directive) to recognise the importance of soils rather than setting up an entirely separate soils programme. We are adopting the same strategy in the UK context.

- 3.5 The rationale for the proposed change to LCN status is therefore based on:
- i. a greater level of current soil expertise across the three agencies than at the time the SLA was established;
 - ii. a greater level of involvement in soils work across the three agencies;
 - iii. the opportunity offered by LCN status to integrate soils work into other LCN programmes;
 - iv. the opportunity to relieve the Lead Agency of responsibility for co-ordinating, or becoming too closely involved in, responses to purely national initiatives (such as the National Assembly for Wales soils scoping study).

4. Responsibilities of the new LCN

- 4.1 The change in the process of working proposed will not change the nature of the fundamental work involved, rather it will rationalise the current situation, allowing individual agencies to undertake work that is best done by them and allowing SNH, who will chair the LCN, to focus on generic issues that are relevant to all the agencies.
- 4.2 Specifically, the responsibilities of the new LCN are envisaged as:
- i. *Co-ordination of advice to DEFRA and government agencies in respect of UK and international soil issues* including continued involvement in the Environment Agency soil indicators programme, maintaining contact with the NERC soil biodiversity research project and maintaining the link to DEFRA departments involved with the EU Thematic Strategy on soils.
 - ii. *Initiating soil research projects* and providing a mechanism for sharing results from projects undertaken by individual agencies. New LCN-supported research will be limited (by available funding) to the continued development of key soil conservation concepts using outside experts where necessary. Significant work remains to be done in this area.
 - iii. *Raising awareness of soil conservation issues* both within and outside the conservation agencies. The Soils LCN, as part of the established LCN group, will be well placed to begin the process of awareness raising with the other networks. Soil conservation science is relevant to the work of all of the existing LCNs and important early roles for the new LCN will be to inform the existing groups of ongoing soil work and to establish what individual agency work is soil related.
- 4.3 Between now and the Spring of 2003 when the new LCN would become officially established, work will continue as normal, although SNH's new soil

scientist is unlikely to be in place before late October or November. Once the post is filled, we expect the SLA work programme to reflect the priorities outlined above, and to anticipate the change to an LCN.

5. Finances and staffing

- 5.1 JNCC has provided financial support for Lead Agency staff based within SNH at the level of approximately £12,000 per year. In addition, a consultancy contract exists with Professor Mike Hornung of CEH to provide ongoing advice to the Lead Agency. For the current year, total JNCC support for these, and other non-project elements of the SLA work, will be approximately £15,000. It is proposed that funding will continue at this level if the SLA converts to an LCN and this is reflected in the Corporate Plan. The standard level of support for individual LCNs is half of a support officer post. Based on the proposed level of financial support, the new Soils LCN will receive the same level of support, provided through SNH staff time.
- 5.2 Support for project work directly funded by the LCN will be modest. With the exception of the Reading research centred on Moor House NNR, and directly funded by JNCC, soils project work is likely to be largely funded by the country agencies themselves according to their own priorities. Where opportunities allow, the LCN will seek to 'buy into' larger projects initiated by other agencies (as in the case of the Environment Agency soil indicators study), or through other programmes such as the SNIFFER Land Quality Programme.
- 5.3 The Committee is **invited** to agree the proposed change from a Lead Agency to a Lead Co-ordination Network chaired by SNH.