



Submission on the use of  
Peat in the Horticultural  
Industry

COMPANY  
WALSH GROUP Ballyminaun Hill, Gorey, Co. Wexford

Contact:



## Introduction

Walsh Mushrooms Group is the second largest mushroom supplier to the UK market place. The Group is based in Gorey Co. Wexford and have operations in compost manufacture, mushroom growing, marketing and distribution in Ireland & UK. Walsh Mushrooms Group currently markets over 26,000 tonnes of mushrooms per annum accounting for over 15% of the total UK mushroom market and directly employs 380 people.

All of our operations fully depend on the production of mushrooms and hence the use of Peat which is an essential raw material for the production of mushrooms.

The Walsh Mushrooms Group is committed funding of R & D into better and more sustainable peat use & investigation of alternatives to peat both internally and in collaboration with other industry stakeholders.

Our recent multimillion-euro investment in our compost facility has increased the biological efficiency of our compost resulting in the output of mushrooms per M<sup>2</sup> of production bed area increasing by 15%. **This in turn reduced the amount of peat required to produce a kilogram of mushrooms by 15%**

Post production the peat used in the process is land spread after use with SMC and is a valuable soil conditioner and substitute to industrially produced synthetic fertiliser. These materials could also be potentially used as peat replacements for other areas of Horticulture.

### Mushroom production

Our mushroom producing company, Walsh Mushroom Golden, is a user of Peat in the production process. Unlike other horticultural crops, the mushroom crop by nature is a very exacting and precise in its requirements of a growing medium. The mushroom crop has very specific requirements and will not grow if these are not met.

The raw ingredients for the mushroom crop are as follows:

1. A very selective & tailor-made compost which in effect recycles the by-products of Agriculture in the form of straw and poultry manure. The Walsh Mushroom Group manufactures this compost.
2. A thin layer of Peat is placed over the compost which provides the unique biological and physical properties which allows the mushrooms to grow. Without this the crop will not grow.

Walsh Mushrooms Golden employs 130 people in the production facility in Tipperary. The farm gate export value of the company is € 8 million per annum with over 40% of this income going directly to the local community in the form of wages.

### Compost manufacture

The compost facility has gone through a 5-year building & facility improvement programme which commenced in 2013 and has improved the productivity of compost and reduced the environmental impact of the facility on its surroundings. This has resulted in less peat and compost required to produce a kilogramme of mushrooms by 15%.

It is estimated that Custom Compost is worth about €7m p.a. to Wexford-based employees & suppliers. The facility's' contribution to the Irish economy includes:

1. Direct employment of 50 staff supplying mushroom growers who in turn employ over 1,000 full-time direct employees.
2. We have 59 straw suppliers representing the farming community.
3. We have almost 100 general suppliers

## Responses to Consultation Questions

### **A. What are your views on what more could be done to support and enable the switch to peat free horticulture at professional crop production level and consumer level?**

*It is our position that unlike some other areas of horticulture where alternatives to are available to substitute peat the mushroom industry has no alternative to peat for mushroom production. Funding towards R& D to alternatives to peat for the mushroom industry would be positive. Also funding for R&D to explore alternatives to peat in other areas of Horticulture where peat replacement is more straightforward, for example, the spent mushroom substrate (SMS) and peat may be possible peat replacements for other areas of horticulture.*

### **B. What are your views on alternatives to the use of peat in the Horticultural Industry (from, for example, the perspective of the professional grower or consumer/amateur gardener)?**

*We would welcome the use of alternatives to peat in all areas of horticulture but as yet there is no alternative to peat for mushroom production.*

### **C. What are your views on whether Ireland should cut back or cease the export of peat for use outside of Ireland even if this would result in job losses in Ireland?**

*We are led to believe that the export market for peat suppliers is essential to maintain their viability to supply the Irish Mushroom Industry.*

### **D. Do you consider that a working group should be established to advise on how best to overcome the barriers to reducing peat use in professional horticultural crop production and in the amateur horticultural market?**

*Yes*

### **E. If you are in favour of the establishment of a working group, which stakeholder groups do you think should be represented on it?**

*Mushroom Growers*

### **F. How do you think that those involved in harvesting peat for horticulture could be compensated for any loss arising from a cessation of this activity (for example, on the basis of the profit loss arising or related to the value in ecosystem services retained/provided)?**

*We believe that harvesting of peat should continue for industries like the mushroom industry where there are no alternatives to peat*

### **G. How do you think that those involved in harvesting peat for horticulture could be guided towards alternative activities, for example, developing an environmentally suitable alternative material that could replace peat in professional horticultural crop production?**

*No opinion*

**H. What do you consider the value of peatlands to be to (please score out of 100): carbon storage 60 nature conservation 60 the provision of ecosystem 60 services the economy 80 social and cultural needs 60**

**I. In your opinion should the use of peat within**

**(i) the amateur horticultural market and**

**(ii) the professional horticultural industry be phased out over the next 3, 5, 10, 15 or 20 years and if so, how should this be done bearing in mind the potential job losses and the difficulties with alternative growing media?**

*We don't believe it should be phased out until an alternative to peat is found for the mushroom industry. The maximum amount of time is required to find an alternative to peat.*

**J. Does more need to be done to educate and build consumer awareness of peat free products which are available at retail level?**

No

#### In Conclusion

We hope you take the above points into consideration when deciding policy on the use of peat in horticulture.

Our business and Industry are a significant contributors to the Irish economy and are totally reliant on peat in its current form to be able to operate. We use peat in a responsible manner and are continuing to improve the efficiency of that peat. We continue to strive to look for alternatives to peat but, as yet, no replacement has been found despite decades of research both nationally and internationally.

**20 January 2019**