Irish Consultation on Peat Use in Horticulture

Joint Response of the

Growing Media Association (GMA) and Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) UK

The GMA represents manufacturers and suppliers of Growing Media (GM) into the UK market. This includes both traditional peat suppliers but also has members who are supplying barks, coir, wood-fibre and composted green waste products. The GMA works closely with the UK Government department Defra and has been involved in all supply chain developments towards peat reduction and replacement over the last few years. GMA members along with other suppliers voluntarily supply data on their use of materials which allows tracking of the development and use of materials across the seasons.

The HTA is the trade association for the garden industry in the UK. It helps its members flourish by representing, promoting, supporting, nurturing and developing the garden industry through their key values; - collaboration, integrity, innovation and influence. The HTA's key roles include the provision of advice-based services to members; training, conferences and events; market information and insights; working closely with Government in order to inform and influence policy; and promotions such as the National Garden Gift Voucher and Gift Card schemes.

QUESTION 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?

For both professional crop production and consumer level use the ability for ornamental horticulture to switch to one hundred percent peat free will not be dependent on the supply chain's willingness to switch to peat free, but the supply chain's ability to access sufficient quantities of high quality alternatives to fulfill the demand.

This has been recognised at Government level by both the Irish Government and Defra, the UK's Government Department with responsibility for investigating and setting peat reduction targets.

Wood chip - One of those potential alterative ingredients is wood chip. There is a high level of incentivisation in the UK to burn timber products to generate heat and electricity, and the price of

wood chip has doubled in the last two years, thus pricing it virtually out of reach for use in GM unless utilised in specialist formulations.

Wood chip can be incorporated into GM when having been treated to a variety of processes, such as hammer milling, mechanical extrusion and/or heat and pressure treatment to produce the end fibre. A review of the type of processes is well documented on the website of Dr B Jackson at NC State university.

If the switch to a timber dominated GM were to be realised then a potential solution could be to incentivise the use of wood chip to manufacturers as well as for energy which could provide a more even playing field for the accessibility of the raw materials.

Green waste - The issues with green waste revolve around infrastructure and the inability of the current arrangements to produce enough consistent, clean and uniform green waste compost. A support structure for the introduction and expansion of such infrastructure could be put in place to ensure a consistent supply of green waste is collected from both commercial and domestic sources, professionally and consistently processed and made available to market at a competitive rate.

QUESTION 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)?

In terms of professional growers, the use of alternatives is driven by several factors:

Handleability - Most of the pot filling type equipment on the market to professional growers is of Dutch or Italian make. In these and other European countries there is no such wholesale change towards peat-free growing media, so substrate choices are limited, or peat dominated for use in this machinery. This means that modern machinery has been designed around the concept of a peat-dominated GM and GM with alternatives incorporated becomes harder to handle and even more wasteful when used with this type of machinery. There is also more downtime, breakdowns and the rate of work is slower.

Perception - People often reject new additives because they do not look or feel like the materials they have used before. This is not a reflection on the mix but on our natural prejudice as to perceived performance. This requires careful thought and messaging from industry bodies in order to achieve a change in perception of professional growers and amateurs alike.

Cost of materials – Alternative materials are presently more expensive than peat. Is this a case of paying more for peat (i.e. paying the price of ‘x thousand years in the making) or less for alternatives through subsidies from Government? For example, a manufacturer can pay up to 200% more for barks or coir than for peat.

Change in cultural strategies e.g. in irrigation and/or fertilizer input for professional growers - New component mixes often need to be treated differently to previously used growing media formulations. Professional growers are certainly prepared to learn - a similar problem must have been around when growers moved from John Innes soil-based mixes to ‘Fisons’ peat mixes in the late 1950’ early 1960’s.

For amateur gardeners the issue is often “why does my compost have this strange material in it?” Wood-fibre is mistaken for grass clippings for example. This perception is best served by introducing a robust education campaign aimed at the amateur gardener.

Green credentials of alternatives - Concerns have been raised over the environmental credentials of alternative materials, especially where materials are being transported over long distance or use scarce resources such as water in their processing. This is where the UK development of the ‘Responsible Sourcing Calculator’ allows for the materials to be fully audited and benchmarked against any other material as the calculator assesses all materials against the same set of criteria. The use of the calculator is strongly recommended to all manufacturers and suppliers for the future assessment of materials. (See the GMA website for a download of the Calculator and guidance notes).

There may also be biosecurity risks or risks to human health which need to be continuously monitored. The GMA has been monitoring the potential risk of diseases such as legionella in GM over several years.

Availability - Generally green waste compost from mixed waste streams is not uniform, despite the protocols set out by WRAP in the UK. Some members of the GMA have made considerable steps forward to isolate specific waste streams and produce high quality and consistent compost outputs, which are being used in peat free mixes. However, the volume available of this high quality and consistent material is not enough to fulfill all industry requirements.

The main barriers to more consistent materials being produced relate to the lack of infrastructure ensuring that the waste streams are separated and that contamination with sharps (metals, glass and plastics) and other harmful additives such as persistent herbicides are avoided.

QUESTION 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?

Societal and consumer pressure does influence how we view and use the resources of our world, and despite peat’s significant contribution to the Irish economy, both in the past and today, it is likely that demand for peat-based materials will decline regardless of whether we continue to export/import peat.

This therefore makes the decision of whether to cutback or stop peat export from Ireland a political decision based on the socio-economic impact of taking this step.

Perhaps a limit to the use of peat in horticultural growing media to say, 20% by volume. This would allow other materials to be used whilst maintaining the unique properties peat brings to growing media mixes. It is understood this is the pragmatic position that the Dutch and German authorities might be taking.

The other consideration is that if the extraction of Irish peat was significantly reduced this might just move the issue of peat use to Eastern European countries, and further complicating the associated environmental issues.

QUESTION 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?

The HTA/GMA jointly suggest that an advisory group of GM 'users' from the UK could be asked or interviewed to provide their experiences on trying to tackle the issues around peat replacement or substitution. This could include the growers, major retailers, NGO's and the GM manufacturers who have all been involved in the Defra-led UK task force since 2011.

QUESTION E

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

The HTA / GMA would suggest that the group include representatives from the whole supply chain of GM users as well as representatives from environmental groups, consumer groups and Government, including any agencies responsible for delivering a peatland strategy. The supply chain representatives may include GM manufacturers, major multiple retailers, independent garden centres, NGOs, amateur gardening organisations, trade associations and professional users/growers from both ornamental, forestry and edible production.

QUESTION 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)?

This is very much a commercial decision based on the perceived value of the raw material.

It is difficult to see how the eco-services value of the resource could be valued and paid for.

QUESTION 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?

This really would mean the closure of many of the existing businesses as their geographical location is predicated on location to the raw material. To suggest that they move towards an alternative business model would almost certainly mean relocation or closure.

QUESTION H

What do you consider the value of peatlands to be to (please score out of 100):

- carbon storage (40%)
- nature conservation (20%)
- the provision of ecosystem services (20%)

- the economy (10%)
- social and cultural needs (10%)

QUESTION 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?

In relation to amateur, the GMA continues to make progress on the GM industry road map with action and commitment towards achieving responsibly sourced bagged GM for the consumer market in a manageable timescale.

As part of the road map activity of reducing the use of peat to zero in GM within a manageable timescale, a university research project has been commissioned to look at the socio-economic impact of the use of all materials and the barriers to change. The results of this are expected in 2020.

The road map also includes goals such as improving the quality of green compost so that it can fulfil its potential in the GM market through the widespread adoption of existing protocols.

It is certainly thought that looking at models of reducing peat use to 20% by volume in mixes is a good step in the right direction and may well result in the development of all peat replacements.

For the professional market, it may make more sense, considering the commercial, technical and economic risks of achieving peat-free, that the objective is re-stated as achieving sustainable GM, rather than peat free.

QUESTION J

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

To ensure that growers and consumers are aware that alternative materials also come at an environmental cost, and to show how responsibly sourced amateur GM can potentially be, the HTA/GMA have launched the Responsible Sourcing Guide for GM which will allow all GM ingredients to be consistently labelled.

The scheme uses seven criteria for indicating environmental performance for GM and these are: energy use, water use, social compliance, habitat and biodiversity, pollution, renewability and resource use efficiency.

This unique approach will enable each ingredient to be scored ensuring that environmental performance for all ingredients is taken into account. Once scores are available bags will be able to be labelled using a recognisable traffic light system.

This will enable the consumer to make a direct comparison across any bagged GM available on the retail market, and consumers will be able to understand bag contents at a glance, enabling them to make better informed purchase decisions.

This demonstrates GMA's commitment to improving on-pack labelling with the aim of introducing such an approach on bags for the 2020/21 season.

What the end consumer wants is to be able to purchase a bag of 'x' and have a reasonable certainty that the end result will be successful growth of plants, both amateur and professional, while ensuring the industry has already 'done its bit' and considered the environmental impact of the product they are selling.

Further Information

For further information please contact

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