

# Reclamation experiences in Finland - challenges and opportunities

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# After-use of peat extraction sites ("cut-over areas") in Finland

## Some background facts and typical features of "Case Finland":

1. Peat extraction sites are mainly private properties rented out for the peat producer → land-owner determines what to do with the extracted area after peat extraction license has expired.
2. Among land-owners the most important driver in decision making between different alternatives for after-use is still generation of income; more than 80% of those who have leased their land for peat extraction prioritize economic aspects over the others. There should be concrete and competitive incentives in place for doing e.g. restoration methods only without benefitting economically.
3. Cut-over areas offer more possibilities than the same area before peat extraction, also from biodiversity and climate point of view; former peat extraction areas are not a problem, but a facilitating resource for the future!





# The extent of current after-use activity in Finland

- There has been some 130 000 – 140 000 ha (from 9,08 Mha of the total current peatland area) used for peat extraction purposes throughout the history → 70 000 – 90 000 ha already "reclaimed/recultivated"
- The rapid decline of energy peat demand (due to high ETS CO2 prices) has resulted in decrease of licensed areas to drop from 62000 ha (2018) to less than 35 000 ha (2023) → release of 27 000 ha in just five years! During the coming five years the downward trend slows down a bit before stabilizing in the 2030's
- The most common next land-use is **forestry** i.e. reforestation (not *afforestation*, because the areas were predominantly drained forestlands before peat extraction took place). It is estimated that roughly 2/3 of the sites are being reforested nowadays, in the last decade even  $\frac{3}{4}$ .
- After forestry comes still **agricultural use**, i.e. reclamation / recultivation for crops and pastures. Historically agriculture corresponded for 1/5 of the cut-over areas, but now converting cut-over sites for fields has almost completely stopped because of recent EU policy.
- **Solar energy development**, i.e. PV panel installations & announced future project on extracted sites have been skyrocketing in just 2 – 3 years comprising of some 6000 ha.
- "Pure" **restoration** back to peat forming ecosystem (rewetting, paludification) is also increasing from 5% in last decade towards 10% for the moment, but lags well behind the "solar boom".

# The choice of after-use form (recultivation/reclamation)

- The property owner determines what to do with the property after peat extraction within the framework of natural site characteristics and economical constraints & possible incentives for various the future land-use
- The owner appreciates subsidies or other concrete incentives like carbon credits, but those should be available and easy to apply at the point of decision
- Market orientation and freedom of trade to properties is dictating the near future development
- Finland (luckily) can rely on constitutional rights to protect the private property and ownership, no one wants set aside areas without a hefty compensation.
- As to “the side effects of current trends related to climate policy and nature protection” one can ask what consequences there are for the rural areas – restoration without longer-term just and fair plan is socially not sustainable; ideology is just not giving bread to rural communities and lead to abandoning the countryside.

# Reforestation & LULUCF regulation in the context of peatlands

- Forestry on peatlands (more than 3 Mha) takes the worst hit in Finland, the most forested country of the EU. Peat extraction sector is not so much in focus as in the Baltics, because it has a limited impact and already gone down so much in a short time
- Reforestation of cut-over peatlands and peaty agricultural fields are nationally acknowledged to achieve the carbon neutrality by 2035 in Finland
- Rewetting, as such, is problematical in many ways; gradual paludification is more favourable in the context of national climate neutrality goal, if there would be incentives in place
- In Finland 1/3 of the land area is covered by peaty soils and more 1/3 that by lakes, rivers and other watercourses → we must have different approach in fighting against biodiversity loss and climate change
- National flexibilities in implementation of EU Nature Restoration Law and climate legislation will be fully utilized in agricultural and forestry practices on peatlands. If that would not be the case, it may lead to political polarization and sense of unfairness that will eventually hamper the goals of regulation.





Restoration ... yes, but how far back to the history of succession?

- Open water wetland?
- Shallow peat-forming mire ecosystem
- Peatland forest (back to 5000 yrs, see the stump on the left!)



**Thank you for your attention!**

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