

# Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

Rural – Scotland – February 2026

## Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

### Introduction

The passing of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill represents the most significant reform of Scotland's environmental governance in more than a decade. First introduced in February 2025 and approved by the Scottish Parliament on 29 January 2026, with a vote of 90 to 26, the Bill aims to improve biodiversity and regenerate the natural environment.

The Bill has four main parts:

- Part 1: Introduces targets to improve biodiversity.
- Part 2: Allows the government to make and change laws relating to the Environmental Impact Assessments regime and the Habitats Regulations.
- Part 3: Updates the aims of National Parks.
- Part 4: Proposes a new deer management approach.

Once it receives royal assent, the Bill will form the statutory foundation for Scotland's long-term response to biodiversity decline and climate change.

Scotland's natural environment is central to its economy, identity and wellbeing. It underpins rural livelihoods, supports tourism and recreation, protects water resources and plays a critical role in meeting Scotland's climate ambitions. Despite this, long-term data show sustained declines in many habitats and species. Scotland has already committed to halting biodiversity loss by 2030, a target that is now fast approaching. Against this backdrop, the new legislation is designed to move nature restoration from aspiration to statutory obligation, reinforced by independent oversight.

The Bill is closely aligned with Scotland's wider environmental policy framework, including the Climate Change (Scotland) Act, the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and the Land Use Strategy. It responds to calls from the public, the scientific community, and environmental organisations for clearer accountability, credible action, and measurable progress. The reforms are significant for land managers, local authorities, developers, and regulators, and will influence policy, resourcing, and decision-making across the next decade.

At its core, the Bill establishes a national direction for restoring nature and introduces mechanisms that bring government, regulators, landowners, environmental groups and communities into a shared delivery effort. It complements ongoing reforms in agriculture, forestry, planning and environmental monitoring and brings these into a more coherent statutory system.

### Background

The debate around the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill revealed a landscape of both ambition and longstanding structural weaknesses. Parliamentarians and stakeholders consistently returned to the point that Scotland's environmental governance has struggled to deliver change at the pace required. Voluntary

initiatives have produced pockets of progress but have not been able to counteract ongoing declines in habitat quality and species numbers. Biodiversity Net Gain is coming to Scotland through the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). It will not be a mandatory 10% target like in England, but NPF4 will require development to secure "significant" biodiversity enhancements, and a Scottish Planning Biodiversity Metric is due to be developed by 2027. The need for a more consistent, durable framework emerged as one of the clearest messages from evidence sessions.

Another theme running through the debate was the tension between ecological recovery and the operational pressures faced by rural businesses. Concerns expressed about deer management proposals illustrated how even well-intentioned reforms can generate anxiety if the practicalities of implementation are unclear. Issues around training standards, cost implications and the capacity of small businesses were raised not as objections to improving environmental outcomes, but as reminders that workable policy must account for the realities of day-to-day land management.

Environmental Standards Scotland (ESS) added a further dimension, emphasising the scale of the governance challenge ahead. The organisation supported the Bill's direction but underscored the difficulty of designing nature targets that reflect complex ecological systems. ESS also highlighted the need for robust data, clear accountability and sustained effort across multiple sectors if the legislation is to translate into improvement on the ground.

The debate around biodiversity in the built environment highlighted a different set of pressures. The swift-brick measure, a legal requirement for swift-nesting bricks in all new buildings, was welcomed by many, but it demonstrated how even simple ecological requirements can raise broader questions about regulation, design standards and consistency across the UK. It also showed how expectations are shifting, with nature increasingly viewed as integral to decisions that were once seen as purely technical and it could help normalise the expectation that biodiversity should be considered at the design stage. This could act as an early step towards more comprehensive nature-positive standards in the built environment and may influence planning guidance in future years.

Overall, the parliamentary process made clear that while the Bill has broad support, its effectiveness will depend heavily on coherent delivery, clear responsibilities, and alignment with Scotland's wider land-use, planning, and rural policy landscape.

### Key provisions and their implications

The measures introduced through the Bill have the potential to redirect how Scotland thinks about and delivers nature recovery. Rather than introducing isolated new obligations, the reforms signal

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a shift towards embedding ecological outcomes into decision-making across land, planning and governance systems.

A major feature of the legislation is the commitment to statutory nature restoration targets. These are not yet defined, but their introduction could create a long-term, cross-government anchor for environmental action. If the targets are ambitious and accompanied by clear monitoring, they could help move the system away from short-term initiatives and towards a more predictable, outcome-focused approach. This could provide greater certainty for local authorities, regulators and land managers, particularly when making investment decisions or designing long-term plans.

The strengthened role for National Parks sits alongside this, but offers a different kind of shift. The expanded duties could enable Parks to operate less as protected areas in isolation and more as platforms for large-scale ecological recovery. In practice, this could encourage more collective land management, stronger community-led initiatives and a clearer sense of how Parks contribute to national objectives. The scale of this opportunity will depend on resources and partnership working, not simply on statutory wording.

Changes to deer management add another layer of potential but also conflict. If implemented in a fair, proportionate and sensitive way to local contexts, the reforms could help reduce grazing pressures that have long constrained woodland expansion and peatland restoration. However, with wider rights for farm tenants to control deer across all land types (not just improved land) it is inevitable that unless landlords and tenants work together this has the potential for some serious safety concerns with multiple parties operating independently of each other. Thus, the real impact of the new arrangements is likely to hinge on how well they address capacity within the sector and how effectively training, transition support and guidance are delivered.

Collectively, these measures point to a future in which nature recovery is more fully integrated into mainstream policy and operational decisions. They could support greater consistency, strengthen local-national alignment, and create opportunities for collaboration across landownership, planning, and regulatory systems. Their success, however, will depend on detailed secondary legislation and the capacity of public bodies, industry and communities to respond.

### Summary

The Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill provides a new level of clarity and accountability in nature policy. It signals a move from voluntary environmental effort to statutory outcomes. For regulators, developers, land managers, and local authorities, the

legislation sets clear expectations and will shape decision-making throughout the next decade.

The Bill also creates new opportunities. Clear targets may stimulate investment in nature markets, support innovation in environmental monitoring and strengthen partnerships between public, private and community groups. However, the scale of action required is significant. Meeting Scotland's 2030 commitments will require coordination, sustained funding and consistent political leadership.



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