Fury as long-awaited UK environment bill is delayed for third time

**[Fiona Harvey](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/fiona-harvey)***Environment correspondent.* Tue 26 Jan 2021 *The Guardian*

The government has delayed the long-awaited environment bill, which [redraws rules after the UK’s departure from the EU](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/25/mps-warn-post-brexit-environment-plans-fall-woefully-short), provoking fury from campaigners who said it would harm action on air pollution and water quality, as well as other key issues. The proposed legislation would be the biggest shake-up of green regulation in decades.

Ministers said the delay, which means the [flagship bill](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jan/30/plastic-waste-exports-targeted-in-new-environment-bill) is unlikely to pass before the autumn, was necessary because dealing with the Covid-19 crisis left too little parliamentary time for debate. Trying to continue with the original timetable would have risked the bill falling and having to return to square one of the parliamentary process.

Rebecca Pow, minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said: “We remain fully committed to the environment bill as a key part of delivering the government’s manifesto commitment to create the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on earth. Carrying over the bill to the next session [of parliament] does not diminish our ambition for our environment in any way.”

Campaigners said this was the third time the bill, work on which began in July 2018, had been severely delayed. Rebecca Newsom, head of politics at Greenpeace UK, said: “Time and time again the government tells us that ‘urgent action’ is needed to restore nature, that it will ‘build back greener’ and that we can’t afford to ‘dither and delay’. What then is it playing at by delaying the most important piece of environmental legislation for decades?”

Green groups warned that the delay could damage the UK’s credibility at key international environmental summits this year, including a biodiversity summit and the UN climate summit Cop26, to be hosted in Glasgow this November.

Ruth Chambers of Greener UK said: “The UK government has consistently claimed environmental leadership, but after four years of delays we are still without crucial laws to restore nature and tackle climate change. Ministers must now use this extra time to improve their plans around upholding green laws.”

The bill sets out a framework by which ministers can impose new targets on vital issues such as[air pollution](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/09/air-pollution-causes-3m-lost-working-days-per-year-in-uk-says-cbi) and water quality, waste, resource use and biodiversity, which were previously regulated under EU directives.

But in the bill, as it stands, these targets would be long-term, risking leaving efforts to cut pollution in limbo in the interim, and campaigners and [many businesses](https://www.aldersgategroup.org.uk/latest#businesses-call-for-binding-interim-targets-in-the-environment-bill) want to see legally binding short-term targets introduced, that would enforce high standards and action on pollution in the next few years.

The bill also includes measures to ensure consumers in the UK no longer contribute to the [destruction of vast swaths of forested land overseas](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/01/uk-imported-1m-tonnes-of-soya-with-deforestation-risk-in-2019#:~:text=A%20joint%20investigation%20by%20the,the%20Brazilian%20Cerrado%2C%20a%20globally), through new rules intended to stop the import of goods to the UK [from areas of illegally deforested land](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/25/uk-sets-out-law-to-curb-illegal-deforestation-and-protect-rainforests). UK businesses will need to show that the products they source that could come from at-risk areas – wood, but also soy, palm oil, beef, leather and other key commodities – are from supply chains free from deforestation. Breaches of the rules will incur fines.

Kate Norgrove, executive director of advocacy and campaigns at WWF, said: “Nature is in freefall, and our climate is in crisis. Protecting and restoring precious forests like the Amazon is critical to tackling this global emergency … WWF is urging our leaders to improve the environment bill by adopting a new legally binding target to make UK supply chains deforestation free by 2023. Only then can we hold our heads high as hosts of the [global [Cop26] climate conference in Glasgow later this year](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/13/uk-lead-global-fight-illegal-logging-deforestation-cop-26).”

Friends of the Earth said the environment bill as it stood represented a reduction in protections. Kierra Box, campaigner at the charity, said: “The government has taken every opportunity to weaken everything about this bill: from giving ministers the power to guide our supposedly independent environmental watchdog, to defending sweeping loopholes that allow huge swaths of government to discount the environment when making decisions. The star of this ‘world-leading’ bill is now a requirement that UK companies simply obey the law on deforestation when producing goods abroad, which shows how low the bar has been set.”