# UK impact assessment reveals risks to nature in planning bill fast-track



The UK government’s recent impact assessment of the proposed planning and infrastructure bill is raising red flags about its implications for environmental protections, hinting at a reckless disregard for nature in the rush to fast-track development. This internal analysis undermines the government’s claims that environmental regulations are an obstacle to progress, revealing instead a troubling lack of evidence for their assertions.

For years, the government has attempted to sell this new legislation as a vehicle for accelerating housing and infrastructure developments by allowing developers to sidestep essential environmental obligations in exchange for contributions to a central nature recovery fund (NRF). However, this approach is deeply flawed and has alarmed conservationists and industry experts alike, heightening fears of diminished access to natural spaces and widespread ecological harm.

Critics—ranging from economists to ecologists and former government advisers—have condemned the NRF as a "licence to kill nature." They highlight the absence of any concrete evidence demonstrating the supposed economic benefits of this misguided initiative and are urging a complete reassessment and withdrawal of this troubling aspect of the legislation.

Amplifying the concerns, the Office for Environmental Protection, the governmental watchdog supposed to enforce environmental standards, has issued a stark legal opinion warning that the current bill could dismantle vital protections for nature, jeopardizing designated sites across the country.

The impact assessment awkwardly attempted to examine how one environmental requirement—nutrient neutrality—has led to development delays but admitted, “there is very limited data on how environmental obligations affect development.” This glaring admission raises serious questions about the government’s commitment to responsible policy-making. The report also inexplicably failed to address other fundamental environmental protections, like those for Sites of Special Scientific Interest and threatened species, due to a similar lack of data.

Robert Oates, CEO of the ecological consultancy Arbtech, remarked that the government’s indifference toward the well-being of vulnerable species is deeply concerning. The absence of supporting evidence could pose catastrophic risks to species like barn owls and otters, all under the misguided assumption that nature is an impediment to development.

The assessment further insinuated that integrating nature conservation with development is possible under the current regulatory framework, casting doubt on the bill's very necessity. Concerns regarding the NRF extend to the capability of Natural England—the government’s wildlife watchdog—to effectively manage the fund and implement timely environmental projects, potentially creating further delays in the development process.

Becky Pullinger, head of land use planning at the Wildlife Trusts, called upon ministers to reconsider their approach, asserting that the government’s own evaluation confirms current environmental protections do not inherently obstruct housing projects. Policymakers must align their actions with the evidence and amend the bill to avert dire consequences for biodiversity.

The findings of the impact assessment emerge amidst growing alarm over the government's biodiversity commitments. Toby Perkins, chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, has cautioned that this approach threatens to derail the government’s pledge to protect 30% of land by 2030, as well as enhance community access to natural environments. His committee’s recent report underscores that the NRF risks signaling a retreat from the commitment to biodiversity net gain, which demands developers ensure a net increase in biodiversity.

This evolving situation starkly reveals the complexities of balancing development with environmental protection and underscores the urgent necessity for empirical data to guide legislative action—especially given the recent election results that have shifted the political landscape, paving the way for a government that seems more inclined to compromise ecological integrity in the name of growth.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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