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Brexit Briefing: The Implications for UK Environmental Law

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Brexit Briefing: The Implications for UK Environmental Law

Executive Summary

- The majority of environmental law in the UK derives from the EU; much of it is expected to be transposed into UK law via the Great Repeal Bill but for some law this will not be straightforward or possible; a third of environmental laws may not be transposed.
- The UK government has not widely discussed its intentions in relation to environmental policy and is not commenting on potential areas for change.
- There is potential for UK law to get “left behind” due to the speed at which much environmental law evolves.
- International commitments are an important driver of UK environmental law, but these will also need to be adjusted to reflect the UK’s new status.



UK and EU environmental law

The EU is the driver for much of the UK's environmental policy: up to 80% of environmental regulation derives from the EU and up to 25% of all EU legislation relates to the environment. This means that untangling UK legislation from EU legislation will be a long and complex process.

EU law takes two main forms: directives which need to be enacted by the Member States into their own national law, in the UK by way of a primary Act of Parliament or a secondary statutory instrument, and Regulations which are "directly applicable" in the Member States, that is, they apply as written and the Member State does not need to enact a national law to make them effective. In the field of environmental law, both directives and Regulations are used.

Many UK implementations of EU environmental directives are statutory instruments enacted under the authority of the European Communities Act 1972. The Government has announced its intention to repeal this key piece of legislation via the "Great Repeal Bill". The bill must also therefore re-enact the statutory instruments based on the European Communities Act, which would otherwise also lose effect when the Act is repealed. UK law will become a snapshot of EU law as it exists on the day of the UK leaving the EU, though with the ambiguous caveat that EU legislation will be transposed into UK law "wherever practical".

Secretary of State for the Environment, Andrea Leadsom, has said that around a third of all environmental legislation may not simply be "rolled forward" with just technical changes. It is not yet clear what will happen to this significant body of law in the short term. Mostly it will be after the exit that the UK government will conduct its substantive analysis of EU-derived legislation to determine what "fits" the new UK landscape and is aligned to national priorities, and it is at this point that the possibility of divergence from EU policy increases. Areas where the UK has previously opposed stricter European controls such as renewable energy, where it has fallen behind EU targets such as air pollution, or where it currently acts under a European umbrella, such as emissions reductions, could all be put on a different track from that mandated by the EU.

Policy indicators

Discussion of environmental policy was notable by its absence in the Referendum campaign and subsequently. Some of the most important comments have been drawn out by oral evidence provided to Parliamentary committees. The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) launched a major enquiry into "The Future of the Natural Environment After the EU Referendum" less than a month after the referendum decision. The inquiry focused on terrestrial biodiversity and environmental issues linked with land management and agriculture, but comments of wider interest were made by those contributing to the inquiry and the report itself, published in January 2017.

In September 2016, as part of that inquiry, representatives of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Brexit Department were questioned about the Government's environmental policy intentions but resisted any commitment on areas for change or the likelihood of the contentious air quality standards being upheld. While this is not too surprising given the Prime Minister's intention not to "reveal her hand" ahead of the formal opening of the negotiations with Brussels, it provides little comfort to those fearful of a return for the UK to being the "dirty man of Europe".



DEFRA has consistently repeated the Conservative party manifesto pledge, that it intends to “leave the environment in a better state than we found it”. What this means in practice is expected to be revealed when DEFRA publishes its 25 year plan on the Natural Environment which has been delayed since July 2016 and is not now expected until the second half of 2017.

Major speeches by the Prime Minister have not addressed environmental policy. In November 2016, Government Minister, Robin Walker, said during a speech that “We will use the unique opportunity exiting the EU affords to design the most effective framework in the UK for driving environmental improvement - delivering on our goal to put Britain at the vanguard of tackling global environmental challenges, from conservation to climate change”. On the other hand, some commentators have interpreted the Prime Minister’s statement that she wants to “remove as many barriers to trade as possible” as signalling that environmental and product safety standards could be some of the first to be culled.

In line with the Prime Minister’s comments, during a House of Lords Energy and Environment Sub-Committee hearing in November 2016, a Government representative from the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said that there are “no plans to set nationally binding targets in key areas such as renewable energy and energy efficiency”. Historically, UK national legislation and the UK’s preference expressed during EU law-making has been against the setting of legally binding targets (the Climate Change Act being the notable example where national legislation does set targets), preferring flexible means of achieving objectives on economic grounds.

In December 2016, Greener UK, a group of major environmental NGOs with a combined membership of almost 8 million launched the “MP’s Pledge for the Environment”. It offers some specific benchmarks for maintaining or improving the environment in the UK, in contrast to the general comments mostly made by the Government. At the time of writing, 210 MPs have signed the pledge, representing a little under a third of all UK MPs. Though clearly not legally binding, this level of support is a sign that Parliament will not have free rein to strip back environmental laws, even if it wanted to.

The EAC inquiry’s final report calls for the enactment of a new Environmental Protection Act, to guarantee the same or better environmental protections and to ensure that legislation which cannot be “cut and pasted” is captured effectively. It should also guard against the creation of “zombie legislation” – laws which exist in principle but in practice have little or no governance structure or enforcement mechanisms since these exist only at EU level. The report further cautions against the trading away of environmental protections, food safety standards and animal welfare as part of the Brexit negotiations or subsequent trade deals.

The Government’s Brexit White Paper published on 2 February 2017 makes only brief reference to environmental policy, and did not reveal anything new about the Government’s intentions for this policy.



Keeping pace with EU environmental protections

Environmental protection is an area of law that moves more quickly than most, due to evolving policies, scientific and technical advancements, and the need to reflect international arrangements. For these reasons, it is not ideally suited to the Great Repeal Bill mechanism which results in a snapshot of EU law as it exists on the day of the UK leaving the EU.

As an example, the European Institutions have been debating a resource-efficiency proposal, the Circular Economy Package, since 2014. The European Parliament would like the Circular Economy Package, and specifically the Directive on Waste, to be the legal basis for EU ecodesign regulations to include mandatory resource-efficiency requirements beyond the energy efficiency requirements to which they are currently confined. If this happens, EU product legislation could rapidly overtake UK legislation; the UK Green Alliance has described this as the UK becoming “a museum for EU law”. UK products will not be able to access the EU marketplace unless they adhere to these advancing EU standards, regardless of whether the UK stays in the single market or not (with “not” being the more likely option).

Differing standards between the UK and the EU act as non-tariff barriers for UK exporters to the EU, for all types of product from meat to televisions, and may encourage new market entrants to the UK, from nations with higher standards, raising competition further. On the other hand, if UK standards are lowered, it will make the EU less inclined to enter into any kind of mutual recognition agreement with the UK whereby products compliant with UK rules may be deemed compliant with EU rules and vice versa. The EU is also likely to concern itself with any other mutual recognition arrangements the UK might conclude, in order to prevent products not compliant with EU standards from entering the EU via the “back door”.

International arrangements

Via its EU membership, the UK is party to several international agreements on environmental matters, notably around climate change (such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its associated protocols and agreements) but also, for example, on the right to information and access to justice in environmental matters (the Aarhus Convention), hazardous substances (the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants and the Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides) and waste (Basel Convention on Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Waste). The two main issues here are how the UK will honour its commitments under these agreements, and how it will manage its participation post-Brexit.

Most of these international commitments are implemented in the UK via legislation derived from the EU. This will need to be copied across to the UK statute book via the Great Repeal Bill, and even where this “cut and paste” is deemed not “practical”, logically these regulations would need to be prioritised for transposition as the UK’s international obligations will not fall away at the moment of Brexit. At a minimum, adjustments will be needed in cases where UK reporting responsibility as the EU currently reports on behalf of its Member States and in future the UK will need to report on its own behalf; similarly, some agreements (such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change) require a financial contribution that is currently paid by Member States through the EU, and the UK will need to negotiate a new national contribution. The question of governance and accountability



Specific aspects of environmental policy

for international obligations is inextricable from the same question for EU obligations – it is yet to be determined how the UK will replace the EU mechanisms.

Certain agreements are “mixed” in that the UK is a signatory both via its EU membership and also as a country in its own right. These apply where the agreement in question covers matters both of EU and national competence, and the process of unravelling these agreements in a post-EU UK is expected to be particularly complex.

It was often said by “Remainers” during the Brexit campaign that Britain would lose its influence in the negotiation of international agreements if it left the EU. This might be viewed as a particular risk in climate change or environmental matters where the UK has traditionally been a strong voice. How the UK handles its national environmental policy is likely to have a strong bearing on how far it can continue to assert itself as a leader on the global stage.

Climate change

Independent of the EU, the UK has its own, legally binding, ambitious commitments to reduce carbon emissions via the Climate Change Act 2008, and its Fifth Carbon Budget will reduce emissions to 57% of 1990 levels by 2030. EU programmes to reduce carbon emissions - such as the EU Emissions Trading Scheme - will be impacted by Brexit. The Government may need to introduce new requirements, schemes or incentives for emissions reduction in order to stay on track to meet its reduction targets.

Theresa May’s cabinet has organised itself to lower the priority of climate change. This is a significant change from previous governments as the UK has traditionally been a loud voice in favour of tackling climate change. The responsibilities of the “Department for Energy and Climate Change” have been rolled into the new “Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy”, said to indicate the cross-cutting rather than stand-alone nature of energy and climate policy though sceptics may not be convinced by this explanation.

By contrast, in November 2016 the UK delivered on a commitment to ratify the Paris Agreement by the end of 2016, following on from the EU’s ratification in October.

Energy

The EU is in the advanced stages of establishing a single market for gas and electricity, aimed at ensuring low-cost and reliable supply for consumers across the EU by enabling supply from other countries. EU legislation in the field regulates access to this single market and includes safeguards against distortion of the energy market from a competitive perspective as well as protection measures for energy consumers.

Renewable energy is one area where the UK has not always agreed with EU policy and has acted to prevent further increases to renewables targets set by the Renewable Energy Directive, and indeed looks likely to miss existing 2020 targets. Exit from the EU should be



complete by that time, and therefore the UK ceases to be answerable to the EU if it fails to meet the target.

The withdrawal of the UK may actually stimulate renewables markets in other EU countries - the UK will no longer contribute to the EU-wide renewables targets, meaning that the remaining 27 countries can expect their “burden-sharing” targets to be revised upwards to take account of the reduced number of countries contributing to the overall target.

The European Commission is proposing higher targets for renewable energy. The timetabled date for entry into force of the revised Directive across EU Member States is 30 June 2021. The UK expects to have definitively left the EU by that time, and a directive not yet on the EU statute books is unlikely to be copied across to UK national legislation via the Great Repeal Bill. If the UK wants access to the EU internal energy market, of which this new directive will be an important driver, it may have to accept the terms in any event.

On the other hand, the UK Government looks set to evolve its energy policy to drive industrial growth, particularly by minimising business energy costs, according to the industrial strategy green paper released in January 2017. Energy storage is likely to play a significant role, and is an area where the UK could potentially pull ahead of the EU, with neither yet having an established plan for promoting or regulating this energy storage technology. A roadmap is likely to provide more detail, later in 2017.

Chemicals

On completing its major inquiry into the future of the natural environment after Brexit, the EAC almost immediately launched an inquiry into “the Future of Chemicals Regulation After the EU Referendum”. In 2006, the EU put in place a comprehensive chemicals management regime, known as “REACH”. The cost of compliance for the chemicals industry has been estimated at up to €5bn, with much of this already having been expended in the earlier stages of implementation of the law. Legislation is in the form of a large number of directly applicable Regulations which do not need national legislation in order to be effective and which will almost certainly fall into the category of EU legislation which cannot easily be cut and pasted into UK law.

The structure of the legislation itself is complex, with one major regulation amended with alarming regularity, several supporting regulations on matters such as fees and testing, and a very large number of guidance documents. REACH is administered via a European body and only EU companies can participate in certain aspects of it. Any person wishing to import chemicals or chemical-containing products into the EU must however comply with its provisions, where necessary incurring the cost of engaging specialist EU service providers to undertake the necessary procedural steps.

The chemicals industry is estimated to be the UK’s largest manufacturing exporter and loss of the European market, said to be worth €673bn, could have serious consequences for the UK economy. Despite this, the UK Government is keeping its options open, not ruling out a divergent policy on chemicals regulation post-Brexit.



Next steps

As the anticipated Government White Paper on Brexit gave few signs about environmental policy going forward, there is no immediate prospect of the Government revealing its strategy or negotiating position on this subject.

In general, the Government is now free to trigger Article 50, signifying the formal start to the Brexit procedure and the running of the 2 year period, as the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act was passed on 14 March. Notification is expected to be given towards the end of March. We do not yet know how much information will be made available about the progress of negotiations once this formal step has been taken.

In the short term, the on-going Parliamentary environmental committee work in both Houses, and the Government's official responses, are most likely to give clues as to what shape environmental law is likely to take after Brexit.



Advocacy and lobbying

- Both Houses of Parliament have committees considering the impact of Brexit on the environment. The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee is (as of 14 March) still accepting submissions from experts and industry on “The Future of Chemicals Regulation after the EU Referendum”; the Public Accounts Committee is closing its call for evidence on carbon capture and storage. We can expect further inquiries to be launched which will actively seek written and oral submissions, but the subjects of these are not published in advance.
- As the Government turns its attention to the Great Repeal Bill, DEFRA and BEIS may each consult on replacement legislation where an EU law “cut and paste” is not practical. It is difficult to predict when this might start; there is no evidence yet that this is occurring.
- Environmental NGOs are highly active and regularly joining together to undertake Brexit activities, for example Greener UK recently held a Parliamentary event setting out the policy goals of the coalition and its supporters.



What should companies be doing now?

- With so many question marks remaining over the shape of the UK's relationship with the EU, things are largely business-as-usual.
- Considering recent Government indications that the UK is unlikely to remain in either the Single Market or the Customs Union, companies may wish to consider how this will impact their supply chain.
- It is worth remembering that although the exit will be achieved within 2 years, a lasting trade arrangement may take many years more, leading to uncertainty and potentially a difficult trading period between 2019 and conclusion of an agreement. On the other hand, the UK Government will be seeking favourable trading agreements with other non-EU countries, potentially opening up opportunities for UK companies to target new markets. Rules on trade in services, rather than products, may not be so clearly defined.
- It is too early to say whether Brexit will lead to an overall reduction in environmental protections in the UK; the Government has given some assurances that the bar will not be lowered. If legal standards are reduced in the name of removing trade barriers and encouraging competitiveness, companies may wish to consider how this will impact their CSR priorities.
- For now, the best defence against negative repercussions of Brexit on a company's business is to stay abreast of developments and be prepared to respond appropriately. The Government has said repeatedly that it will not provide a running commentary on the negotiations, but it is possible to determine the general direction of travel, at least.



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