



Press Release

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Flows to the Future Project: Field Centre Contract Awarded

The pioneering vision of the Peatlands Partnership to make the dramatic and extensive flow country a centre of European research and innovation excellence has taken a significant step forward. Thurso-based contractor O'Brien Construction Ltd has been awarded a major contract to build a new bespoke field centre at Forsinard in Sutherland.

The £1.9m state-of-the-art field centre will offer accommodation and facilities for research students, long term volunteers and university groups to study the ground-breaking peatland restoration techniques being led by RSPB Scotland, The Forestry Commission Scotland and private partners.

This will contribute significantly to placing Scotland at the heart of science and good practice around peatlands, which are vital carbon stores, as well as being wonderful places for wildlife.

Stuart Housden, Director of RSPB Scotland, said: "We have been working here in the Flows for over 20 years restoring the peatlands, blocking drainage ditches and

felling inappropriately planted trees on a major scale to bring this habitat back to its former glory. But the next phase is the most exciting of all.

"I am very proud of the local team and very grateful indeed to all of the peatland partnership, and particularly to HLF that have really helped us to realise this fantastic idea and bring it to reality."

Also welcoming the news was Professor Stuart Gibb, Director of the Environmental Research Institute at North Highland College, Thurso. Professor Gibb said, "This is excellent news. The peatlands of the 'The Flow Country' of Caithness and Sutherland are globally important from an environmental perspective. The new field centre will transform our ability to deliver learning and training on issues from peatland biodiversity to water quality, and from carbon cycling to rural sustainability. Moreover, the field centre play a pivotal role in establishing the area as a national, and international, focal point for excellence in peatland research and thus in attracting grants and funding that will make a significant contribution to the local economy."

The field centre is part of the Heritage Lottery Fund supported Flows to the Future Project, which RSPB Scotland leads on behalf of the Peatlands Partnership.

When construction is finished the field centre will greatly increase the opportunities for volunteering and research in the Flow Country. It will provide much needed bunkhouse-type accommodation for volunteers, researchers and students, an education/community room, a small field laboratory and offices. The existing facilities at Forsinard are inadequate, but the new building will enable all the organisations working on peatland management and research in the Flows to work more effectively and also to increase the scale of work going on.

Donald Chambers, from O'Brien Construction, said: "We are pleased to have secured this prestigious contract and to be once again working together with the RSPB and the Peatlands Partnership."

The building has been designed by Colin Armstrong Associates in Inverness and gained unanimous support from councillors when presented for approval to the North Planning Applications Committee of the Highland Council. It is being built on land owned by RSPB Scotland between the existing railway line and the A897. To minimise its environmental impact the field centre has been designed following Passivhaus principles, which involve very high insulation specifications. Wood fuel will provide the heating, which will again reduce its carbon footprint.

Caroline Eccles, project manager responsible for the development delivery, said: "This is an exciting time. Forsinard has already become a focal point on a UK level for both practical peatland restoration and associated research looking at the significance of the peatlands for storing carbon. There are already many universities and organisations working at Forsinard, including Thurso's Environmental Research Institute, who are looking forward to using the new facilities. Many local schools and youth groups are also keen to use the building."

Ms Eccles stressed that the field centre will only be providing accommodation for those working on or studying the Flows and will not be operating in the wider tourism market. It is envisaged that the increase in people to the area will bring benefits to local businesses providing services. As part of the project's submission to the Heritage Lottery Fund, an Economic Impact study was carried out, and this highlighted the potential benefits to local businesses not only from the people using the field centre but also those coming to see the recently completed Flows Lookout viewing tower which is predicted to lead to a doubling of tourist numbers coming to Forsinard.

The Flows to the Future project gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Heritage Lottery Fund



LOTTERY FUNDED

PHOTOGRAPHS

1) Artists Impression of the new Field Centre

NOTES TO EDITORS

The Peatlands Partnership includes Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission (Scotland), Highland Council, RSPB Scotland, Plantlife Scotland, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, The Highland Third Sector Interface, The Flow Country Rivers Trust, The Northern Deer Management Group and The Environmental Research Institute. It is independently chaired by John Henderson of Scrabster Farm, Caithness.

RSPB Scotland is the lead partner in The Flows to the Future project, a Peatlands Partnership project, which gratefully acknowledges funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and from the following funders and supporters; Environmental Research Institute, European Regional Development Fund, Forestry Commission (Scotland), Peatland Action, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, The Highland Council, RSPB, WREN, Scotland Rural Development Programme, Scottish Government, Scottish Natural Heritage and The Tubney Trust.

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