

GENERAL SYNOD

Protecting nature on Church Commissioners' land in line with the scale and urgency of the climate and biodiversity crises

Executive Summary

The UK faces a biodiversity crisis, with ecosystems on the brink of collapse. Recently, our government declared biodiversity loss as a national security threat. As Christians we have a duty to ensure God's creational story has a future.

As one of the UK's largest landowners, owning over 100,000 acres of rural land, the Church Commissioners hold both the responsibility and the opportunity to lead in restoring God's creation. This motion offers a clear, measurable commitment to this task. It builds on the already strong footing of the Church and the Commissioners' commitment to Creation care and will bring their continued progress in line with the UK Government's commitment to Target 3 of the UN's Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 (often referred to as 30by30).

This paper outlines the urgency for action at scale, the progress already made, and financial and fiduciary considerations. Most importantly, it calls the Church to act with the courage and conviction that this moment demands.

Revd Canon Valerie Plumb (Oxford) to move:

'That this Synod, in light of the British government's commitment to meeting the United Nations' goal of protecting 30% of land and seas for nature by 2030, and the Church's responsibility to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth;

- a) Recognise the pivotal role that large landowners such as the Church must play in meeting this target and responding to the escalating nature and climate crises;
- b) Request the Church Commissioners build on their current environmental efforts and act at the scale required to meaningfully respond to the climate and ecological crises, by committing to protecting nature on 30% of its land - in line with the UN's definition - by 2030, or the nearest plausible date to it within the Commissioners' contractual arrangements with its tenants. Specifically:
 - i. That areas to be protected focus on its lower productivity farmland (classified as very poor, poor and moderate agricultural land), restoring all Sites of Special Scientific Interest to favourable condition, and restoring its fenland peat.
 - ii. That the Church Commissioners work to practically and financially support tenant farmers to make full use of the new income streams available to them to take the lead in nature restoration.

The current climate and biodiversity

1. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, ranking in the bottom 10% of countries globally on the Biodiversity Intactness Index. Scientists confirm that biodiversity loss destabilises food systems, worsens climate impacts, and erodes the natural capital that sustains life and economies. The "*People's Emergency Briefing*" reminds us that as well as being a loss of beauty and heritage, this is also a loss of ecosystem function: the pollination of crops, the filtering of water, the regulation of floods and disease.

2. The UN's "*Global Biodiversity Framework*", signed by 196 countries including the UK, calls for 30% of land and sea to be protected for nature by 2030 ("30by30"). The Government's own national security report states that meeting this target would change our current trajectory. The Church must respond to this call with action at scale.
3. Under the UN Framework, protecting land for nature means managing it with the primary objective of achieving positive outcomes for biodiversity. The Government has specified that 30by30 areas should be making progress towards "the management, restoration or creation of wildlife-rich habitat". This includes Protected Sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, as well as other areas managed with the long-term objective of positive biodiversity outcomes.
4. The Church Commissioners, as a member of the National Estate for Nature Group made up of the country's largest landowners, is expected to contribute to the Government's 30by30 target. Other members, including the Crown Estate and National Trust, have set clear nature restoration targets outlining their contributions. While the Commissioners have commendable environmental ambitions, they have not yet outlined a plan for contributing toward 30by30. A measurable commitment to 30by30 would align the Commissioners with the Church's own teaching and with other major landowners.

Building on existing progress

5. The Church of England has made significant progress in its environmental stewardship. Thousands of churches participate in the Eco Church programme, and significant progress has been made towards Net Zero. With such ground level support profound leadership now needs to be shown by the Church, what it does with its land will make a significant difference in the future of our existence.
6. The Church Commissioners have expressed a commitment to supporting nature, acknowledging in the "Spotlight on Nature" report that "biodiversity loss is one of the major crises of our time". In response, they have already taken excellent action:
 - a) 3,600 acres of land managed primarily for biodiversity with regional Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB;
 - b) 585 acres of native woodland created in the past decade; 450 acres more planned in Scotland and Wales;
 - c) Aiming for 20 habitat creation projects of varying scale in collaboration with environmental organisations;
 - d) 35 farm environmental assessments completed or scheduled (15% of farm portfolio);
 - e) Many tenants are focused on nature-friendly farming and emission reductions.
7. This is meaningful progress, and undoubtedly further work will be planned and achieved in this vital area. Faced with ecological collapse we must ask: what more can be done? The 3,600 acres of Church Commissioner land currently managed primarily for nature outcomes represents just 3.5% of the Commissioners total 102,000 acres of rural land. To meet the scale and urgency of the crises, and to align with the UN and the UK Government's own commitments, further ambition is required.
8. The Land and Nature motion, adopted by the General Synod in February 2024, acknowledged the link between climate and ecological crises, and called for the Church Commissioners to enhance biodiversity and act as leaders amongst other landowners. This motion seeks to build on the Land and Nature motion by establishing a concrete, measurable outcome to work towards.

Reaching 30 by 30 on Church Commissioner land

9. The Church Commissioners own approximately 102,000 acres of rural land in the UK, including 80,000 acres of farmland and 22,000 acres of commercial forestry. The Commissioners farmland includes (July 2024 General Synod Question Responses):
 - a) 41% high-grade farmland (Grade 1-2 agricultural land)
 - b) 49% mid-grade farmland (Grade 3 agricultural land)
 - c) 6% low-grade farmland (Grade 4-5 agricultural land)
10. The 3,600 acres already managed for environmental outcomes contributes 3.5% towards the 30% target. Low-grade farmland, and lowland peatlands (significant GHG emitter when farmed, but carbon-sequestering when restored) make up 13.1% of the rural portfolio. Together, these priority areas would contribute almost half of the 30% goal. The remaining 16.9% could come from mid-grade farmland or restoring native woodland within the forestry portfolio.

Financial and fiduciary considerations

11. Protecting 30% of the Church Commissioner's land for nature would have a negligible impact on its finances. The 102,000 acres of rural land owned by the Church Commissioners represents only 5.4% of its £11.1 billion portfolio (Church Commissioners Annual Report 2024). Thus, 30% of this land is just 1.6% of its total assets. No land would need to be sold or given away; it would simply be managed for nature while continuing to provide rental income from tenants or revenue from nature-based funding schemes.
12. The Commissioners and their tenant farmers can access diverse revenue streams for nature restoration, which have boosted incomes and financial resilience. For example, Wild Ken Hill, a 4000 acre family-owned holding in west Norfolk diversified their business by restoring nature on 25% of their estate, increasing its gross margin from £375/ha to £550/ha. Knepp Estate, a 3,500 acre rewilding project in Sussex transformed from a loss-making farm to a £200,000/year profit, creating over 70 jobs.
13. Fiduciary duty demands that trustees act prudently and responsibly in the interest of the Commissioners' financial sustainability and the Church's mission. Charity Law guidance and case law has upheld that considering ethical, environmental, and reputational factors is part of that duty, where it does not risk significant financial detriment. Professor Mark Hill KC concluded in a Legal Opinion sought on the matter that: "The fiduciary duty of the Commissioners qua charity trustees does not inhibit them from implementing the targets recommended in the Global Framework Directive, including but not limited to the 30by30 initiative". The Legal Opinion can be read [here](#).
14. The Commissioners' "*Environment Policy*" recognises the capacity for the Church Commissioners to contribute towards environmental solutions. Likewise, theological reflection provided by the Ethical Investment Advisory Group recognises the ecological crisis as a moral and spiritual issue, as well as practical or technological. They state in the "*Environment Advice 2025*" paper that "scripture indicates that there can be no separation of the gospel and Christian ecological commitment".

Working with tenant farmers

15. The Church Commissioners can work with their tenants to contribute toward protecting nature on 30% of its rural portfolio by:
 - a) Using existing processes like the Farm Letting Environmental Assessment (FLEA) process already adopted by the Commissioners to identify marginal land for nature restoration within current contractual arrangements.

- b) Introducing green leases, such as the Crown Estate's Environmental Farm Business Tenancy ("eFBT") agreements, to drive nature restoration targets while offering farmers long-term security and incentives.
- c) Further incentivising tenants by creating a fund similar to the Crown Estate's £20 million Rural Investment Fund to support tenants to undertake nature restoration and access nature-based revenue sources.

Supporting resilient food systems

- 16. Large-scale nature restoration is essential to protect the critical environmental services that sustain our nation's food security. The Government's 2026 report on ecosystem collapse and national security states that biodiversity loss is among the biggest medium to long term threat to domestic food production.
- 17. Nature restoration is needed alongside nature-friendly farming, it is not replaced by it. While nature-friendly farming focuses on food production, land managed for nature creates vital sanctuaries that safeguard the environmental services essential for climate resilience and food security. The Commissioners can protect 30% of its rural land, while maintaining nature-friendly food production on its high grade agricultural land. Tenants may even be able to harvest high-value, sustainable produce from the areas of land that are managed for nature, such as wild range meats.

Theological and missional implications

- 18. Sooner or later as human beings we are blessed with a deep awareness of being in and surrounded by the absolute magnificence of all creation, a sudden realisation that we are part of something profound, beautiful, and incredibly divine. As Christians we are called as beloved beings to live in and celebrate the goodness of this sacred land that our God has provided, so when such an existence becomes compromised or threatened in anyway, I believe that we as children of God are called to protect this divine space the best we can.
- 19. St. Francis of Assisi had a deep understanding of caring for creation; not just as an environmental stance but a unique profound spiritual, ethical and societal call. For Francis everything from the sun and moon to all animals and their habitats possess an intrinsic value and praise that pointed to our creator, as if nature mirrored God himself.
- 20. It is widely accepted within contemporary theology that our role is to steward creation well and in the Genesis 2: 15-17 creation account God put Adam in the garden to till and keep it. The words 'till' and 'keep' more commonly means to watch or to preserve. The Psalms are full of reference to divine creation revealing God's glory. *Psalm 96: 11-12: Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy,*
- 21. The Bible also reminds us that Jesus himself is embedded within creation and the creative process. According to Colossians 1 1:16-17, he is the one in whom *"all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together"*.
- 22. It is part of our institutional protocol that we are called to fulfil the Fifth Mark of Mission *"To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth."* It is our responsibility to ensure that the Church is seen to be relevant and active to the many communities it serves, and with biodiversity loss a huge concern for so many, this is a great opportunity for the Church to be a national leading light on a critical issue at such a dark time.

Conclusion

23. In this current biodiversity crisis, our very land is crying out for liberation, and I believe it is our Christian and moral duty to respond practically and quickly; becoming the Church that remains committed to God's call of transformation and resurrection. This motion offers an opportunity to build on existing achievements, reaffirm the Church's commitment to creation care, and to set a clear, qualified ambition for the future. The existential nature of these crises demands that we ask - what more can we do? It is our Christian calling for ourselves and generations to come to ensure that God's creational story has a future.

Reverend Canon Valerie Plumb,
Area Dean for Rural Mission and Development

June 2026

Published by the General Synod of the Church of England
© The Archbishops' Council 2026