

Media Release

Tuesday 18 September 2018 **00.01 Embargo**

Major report finds law is failing to control damaging vehicle tracks in Scotland's finest landscapes

Environment charities unite to call for stronger oversight of 'out of control' tracks

A coalition of nine leading Scottish environmental organisations is calling for stronger laws to protect the country's most iconic landscapes from damaging vehicle tracks.

Scottish Environment LINK Hilltracks sub-group has today (Tues 18 Sept) published its *Changing Tracks* report – following three years of gathering evidence into whether planning legislation is effectively managing the development of the highly-visible tracks.

The group argues that the proliferation of controversial upland tracks is 'out of control' and is calling for permitted development rights for 'agricultural' tracks to be withdrawn as part of the new Planning Bill now being considered at Holyrood.

Currently, no planning permission is required if tracks are claimed to be for agricultural purposes, yet *Changing Tracks* finds evidence that many are almost certainly built mainly to support field sports, such as deer stalking and grouse shooting – which aren't classed as agriculture.

Helen Todd, co-convenor of LINK Hilltracks group and Ramblers Scotland's campaigns and policy manager, said: "This major new report makes a compelling case for removing permitted development rights for agricultural tracks – to improve local democracy and help safeguard our most precious landscapes for future generations.

"For too long, landowners have been able to expand tracks further and further into wild landscapes with limited oversight from the public or authorities.

"Right now we've a golden opportunity to tackle this damaging activity, with MSPs considering an amendment that would require full planning permission for any new tracks on land that's used for field sports.

"We're urgently calling on all lovers of Scotland's outdoors to use the online form at ramblers.org.uk/scotland to ask their MSPs, to help change the law to protect our countryside from these ugly, damaging tracks."

Beryl Leatherland, co-convenor of the group and also convenor of the Scottish Wild Land Group added: "The *Changing Tracks* report finds that the current process is confusing, undemocratic and failing to prevent ongoing environmental damage – including within National Parks, Wild Land Areas and Sites of Special Scientific Interest."

The report also includes evidence showing that:

- Tracks have continued to creep further into wilder landscapes

- Permitted development rights can lead to badly-sited and designed tracks, with poor construction techniques, causing a range of adverse environmental impacts
- Some vehicle tracks have been built over the top of existing narrow, low-impact trails, including important historical routes and traditional stalkers' paths.
- Members of the public have little chance to engage with the planning process, despite this being a key focus area for the Scottish Government.

After decades of campaigning from environment and recreation bodies, the Scottish Government launched a new system in 2014 requiring landowners to tell authorities before building agricultural and forestry tracks – but generally full planning permission is not required.

Scottish Environmental LINK's Hilltracks group includes Ramblers Scotland, RSPB Scotland, National Trust for Scotland, Scottish Wild Land Group, Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland, Badenoch and Strathspey Conservation Group, Cairngorms Campaign, North East Mountain Trust, Scottish Campaign for National Parks and Scottish Wild Land Group.

The publication of *Changing Tracks* coincides with Green MSP Andy Wightman proposing an amendment to the new Planning Bill which would prevent vehicle tracks being built without planning permission on land used for field sports, and also would require full permission for any tracks in national parks, sites of special scientific interest or historic battlefields.

Changing Tracks found that while forestry track proposals would benefit from much closer scrutiny, there was not conclusive evidence to show that removing permitted development rights alone would be worthwhile. It recommends further study of forestry tracks in future.

Contact details

For further information please contact Ramblers Scotland communications officer Danny Carden on 07557 527607 / danny.carden@ramblers.org.uk. Alternatively, you can contact Beryl Leatherland on 07762087244 / admin@swlg.org.uk.

Editors' Notes

**There are hilltracks pictures and examples in an attachment to this press release.

Cairngorms National Park Authority last year included a presumption against any new hill tracks in open moorland in its Partnership Plan, signed off by the Scottish Government.

For more information on hilltracks, go to www.ramblers.org.uk/scotland and www.swlg.org.uk/hill-tracks

Andy Wightman MSP's amendment is number 165, on [this list](#).

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 35 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

LINK is a Scottish Charity (SC000296) and a Scottish Company Limited by guarantee (SC250899). LINK is core funded by Membership Subscriptions and by grants from Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Government and Charitable Trusts.

www.scotlink.org/workareas/hill-tracks/

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