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Country Fact Sheet Austria //
ALFAwetlands Policy Brief

Distribution and condition of peatlands

According to the Austrian Peatland Strategy 2030+, the extent of peatland ecosystems in Austria is estimated to be around 30,000 hectares and that of peat soils at least 50,000 hectares. [1] The western parts of the country, which are rich in precipitation, have an above-average distribution of peatlands, while in the east and south-east, with a few exceptions and apart from the extensive reed belts of Lake Neusiedl, peatlands are less abundant. The distribution of peatlands in Austria also follows an altitudinal gradient: peatlands occur in climatically more favourable lowlands and in submontane and montane altitudes in the northern foothills of the Alps.

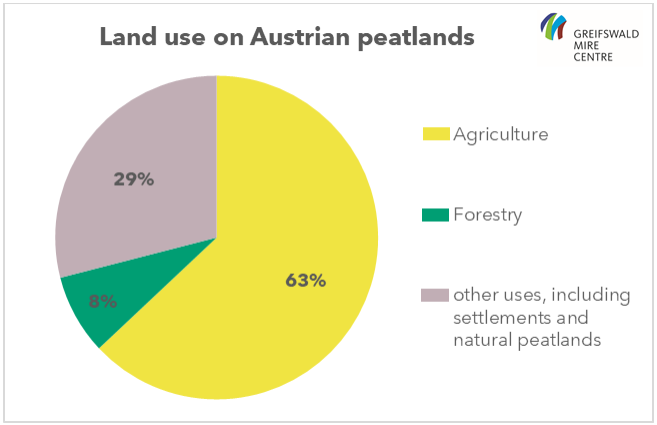

Figure 1: Map of peatland use in Austria, showing proportions of different land use categories. Data: Global Peatland Database 2022, © Greifswald Mire Centre

A recent study by Paternoster et al. (2021) [2] states that over 90 % of these peatlands are in need of restoration. Over the past centuries, peatlands have been under intense land-use pressure - the drainage of peatlands for agricultural and forestry purposes is the greatest cause of loss. Today, more than two thirds of Austria's peatlands are under land use: 63 % are used for agriculture and 8 % for forestry (see fig. 1). The remaining 29 % constitute other uses like settlements and –to small extend- natural peatlands.

Political Agenda to restore Austrian Peatlands

Adopted in 2022, the **Austrian 2030+ peatland strategy** [3] is part of Austria's obligations under the Ramsar Convention, which mandates the protection and responsible use of wetlands. To set the peatland strategy in motion, is the aim of the EU-funded LIFE project AMooRe. With a funding budget of 44 million euros over 10 years it gives a unique opportunity to protect, restore, and monitor the country's peatlands. An extraordinary committee consisting of all nine Austrian federal states and the two responsible ministries, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management and the Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, has joined forces for this project to promote peatland protection in Austria. [4]

Peatlands are not only the responsibility of the Austrian federal states, but also affect water management, agriculture and forestry, which in turn play an important role in climate policies. Therefore, this topic is considered in an integrative and interdisciplinary manner in politics. The peatland strategy is preceded already by 10 different national programmes and strategies in which peatlands and organic soils are considered. At the same time, peatlands are not yet included in several strategies, including the national energy and climate strategy. [1] A selection of strategies including peatlands will be explained in more detail here.

The **National CAP Strategic Plan 2023-27** calls under GAEC 2 for protection for designated wetlands and organic soils under agricultural use via conditionality, i.e. compliance with minimum standards. In the current CAP period, paludicultures are eligible for funding as an agricultural activity only as permanent grassland, in particular litter meadows. These are extensive, low-yielding grassland that is mown once a year and whose biomass can generally only be used for livestock bedding. [5]

The **EU Soil Protection Strategy** for 2030 aims to limit the drainage of wetlands and organic soils and restore drained and managed peatlands to increase carbon stocks and minimise flood and drought risks. [6]

The **Austrian Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change** emphasises the protection of wetland habitats, their ecosystem services and biodiversity. One specific field of action is to ensure sufficient water quality and quantity under climate change and to increase water storage and retention capacity in the landscape. [7]

Looking at the **Nature Restoration Law** and the obligations of Austria to restore peatlands, clear area targets set out in Article 11.4 can be derived from the total area of organic soils in agricultural use. Based on the data from the Global Peatland Database, these organic soils in agricultural use cover 75,680 ha in Austria, from which the following obligations can be calculated:

- 22,704 ha of peatland should be restored, and 5,676 ha rewetted by 2030,
- 30,272 ha of peatland should be restored, and 10,091 ha rewetted by 2040 and
- by 2050, 37,840 ha of peatlands should be restored, and 12,613 ha rewetted.

Fig. 2 shows a schematic visualisation of the extent to which agriculturally used organic soils need to be restored or rewetted.

Case example from the ALFAwetlands Living Lab: Lake Fertő, Hungary & Neusiedler See- Seewinkel National Park, Austria

Located directly at the Austrian-Hungarian border, the westernmost steppe lake in Europe can be found, Lake Neusiedl. The vast reed belt surrounding the shallow endorheic lake (around 180 km² in total, 100 km² are located on the Austrian side), represents the second largest contiguous reed belt in Europe and provides a habitat especially for invertebrates, amphibians and birds. [8] One third of the reed belt belongs to the Austrian National Park, where no human activities take place in accordance with the wilderness concept. For the remaining parts of the reed belt, it is according to the action plan of the federal state Burgenland foreseen to implement conservation- compatible reed harvesting and management methods for sustainable reed use in collaboration with local reed farmers and landowners. [9] This form of paludiculture already has a long history in the region.

In the recent years, the death of old reed stands ("reed dieback") was observed. Its reasons are likely manifold: less pronounced water fluctuations, aging of reed stocks, damages of rhizomes from harvesting, climate change (e.g. warm winters). The reed mortality is likely to have contributed to the massive population declines of many reed bird species. [10] Extreme dry periods in 2020-22 caused the drying out of large parts of the reed belt. This also made it highly flammable and led to reed fires.

The increasingly drastic problem of dieback of old reed stands interlinked with droughts and wildfires was addressed in research projects. After six years of research and monitoring Nemeth et al. (2022) concluded that to regenerate the reed population and secure habitats not only reed mowing but also burning must be considered as a management measure. [11]

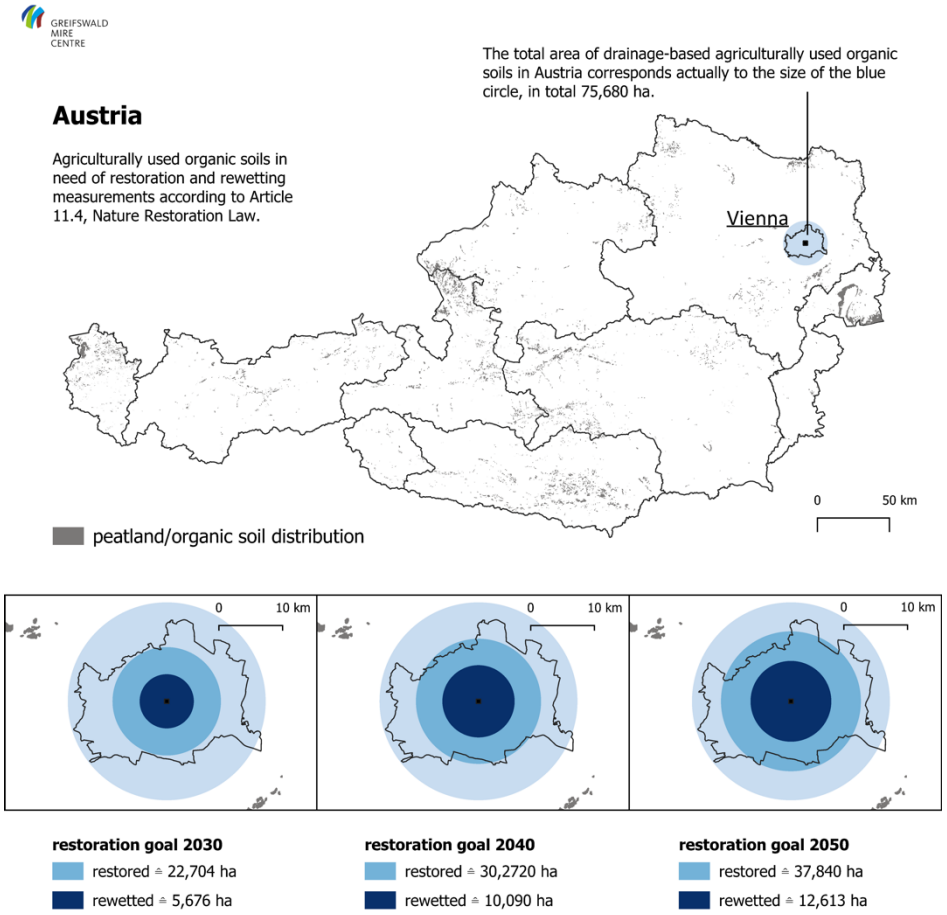

Figure 2: Distribution of peatlands in Austria and schematic illustration of the size of peatland area affected by NRL goals in Austria, compared to the size of Vienna (own compilation, based on Global Peatland Database, September 2024)

References:

(1) Bundesministerium für Landwirtschaft, Regionen und Tourismus (2022): Moorstrategie Österreich 2030+

(2) Paternoster D, Danzinger F, Koukal T, Kudrnovsk, H, Lackner S, Berger A, Schadauer K, Wrbka T, Stejskal-Tiefenbach M & Ellmauer T (2021) Strategischer Rahmen für eine Priorisierung zur Wiederherstellung von Ökosystemen auf nationalem und subnationalem Niveau. Endbericht, Umweltbundesamt Wien, Reports, Band 0741, ISBN 978-3-99004-561-9, 147

(3) Austrian 2030+ peatland strategy

(4) LIFE AMooRe

(5) CAP Austria

(6) EU Soil Protection Strategy

(7) Austrian Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change

(8) Nationalpark Neusiedler See – Seewinkel

(9) Nemeth, E. et al. (2014): Managementplan für den Neusiedler See als Teil des Europaschutzgebiets Neusiedler See – Nordöstliches Leithagebirge. Studie im Auftrag des Vereins BERTA. BirdLife Österreich, Wien. 245 pp.

(10) ALFAwetlands Living Lab in Austria: Fire Management of reed belts at Lake Neusiedl

(11) Nemeth, E. et al. (2022): Entwicklung nachhaltiger Schilferntetechniken und Monitoring Schilfgürtel Neusiedler See. Projektendbericht an das Amt der Burgenländischen Landesregierung Abt. 4, Hauptreferat Naturschutz und Landschaftspflege, 251 pp.

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