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Biodiversity offsetting: miracle or disaster?

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Mills & Reeve LLP

Richard Bogue and Lauren Jones

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Two divergent goals urgently need reconciling: economic growth and environmental protection. The government says the solution is biodiversity offsetting.

The concept of biodiversity offsetting is that if a development reduces biodiversity, the developer must compensate for the reduction by creating an offset-site which replaces as much, or more, biodiversity than it destroyed.

The claimed benefits are that through biodiversity offsetting, developers would have a quicker, cheaper and more certain means of securing planning permission. From an environmental perspective development would cease to cause a net loss to England's biodiversity; it might even generate a gain.

Plans to introduce offsetting are intended to mimic the purported success of Australian schemes. Over 20 countries including Germany, India and America are already offsetting. The government decides in 2015 whether England will join them.

DEFRA has recommended that a number of factors are taken into account in calculating the level of compensation including the distinctiveness, quality and extent of habitats that would be reduced by a development.

Planning permission would be conditional upon developers implementing biodiversity offset management plans. It is envisaged developers would often commission third-party suppliers called offset-providers.

The Law Commission proposes 'conservation covenants' be given by offset-site landowners so that, wherever possible, biodiversity gains would exist in perpetuity.

Many questions remain unanswered. Would the scheme be partially or fully permissive? How closely must offset-sites resemble the originals? Would expert independent assessors be required? Would offset-providers need a public sector trust-fund or insurance pool to secure long-term compliance? And crucially, would the scheme truly prevent net loss?

The proposals are divisive, with several environmental groups condemning them. Many fear that biodiversity offsetting commoditises biodiversity and legitimises environmental destruction. Others worry that displaced, artificial habitats would mean loss to communities, rendering England's landscape banal and bleak.

The green jury is still out.



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