Dear Mr Sharma,

As COP26 host, the UK rightly wants to demonstrate global climate change leadership, but to do so credibly, we must put our own house in order.

COP26 is less than 18 months away, yet in October we will see the start of the 2020-21 peat burning season, where we will once again be setting light to some of the UK’s most valuable carbon stores. **In light of this, we are writing to ask you to introduce an immediate ban on the practice of burning England’s upland peatlands.**

England’s upland peatlands are internationally important for nature and vital in the fight against climate change, with all of England’s peatland storing an estimated 500 Mt of carbon.

When properly functioning, these landscapes lock up huge volumes of carbon and provide a home for a variety of wildlife, whilst alleviating flooding downstream and improving water quality. However, the majority of England’s upland peatlands are currently in poor condition, with managed burning damaging this fragile ecosystem. Rather than storing carbon, burnt peatlands are losing an estimated 350,000 tonnes of CO₂ annually.

To tackle the climate and nature crises we need to restore our upland peatlands. The Government’s commitment to restoring 35,000 hectares as part of the Nature For Climate Fund is very welcome, but we must go further and quicker. A key part of this restoration is to immediately end the practice of peat burning. The scientific evidence is conclusive that burning has a profound impact on the functioning of these ecosystems. Due to repeated burning, large areas of specially protected peatland habitat such as blanket bog are in a poor state, with the lower water table associated with loss of peat and carbon released into the atmosphere.

Ending burning over upland peat would be a crucial step towards re-wetting and restoring these landscapes to their natural ‘boggy’ state with greatly increased resistance to wildfire, and thereby make a significant contribution to our fight against climate change.

In May 2020, the Committee on Climate Change recommended banning the burning of peatland as a ‘low-cost, low-regret’ option to help get the UK back on track to meeting our carbon budgets and put us on a path to delivering net zero emissions.Allowing the forthcoming burning season to go ahead would
severely undermine the UK’s ability to reach our emissions reduction target, and would be a significant reputational risk as the UK seeks to call for ambitious climate commitments from countries in the run up to the Presidency of a nature-based solutions-themed COP26. Continuing to burn our upland peat will fatally undermine UK calls to put nature at the heart of our fight for a safe climate.

The voluntary approach to ending burning has not worked – over half the estates have refused to voluntarily give up their right to burn, so continue to damage their peatlands. Furthermore, there were over 550 reported incidents of burning during the 2019-20 burning season, including several major fires that required emergency services to be diverted during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. We recognise the Government’s commitment to phasing out this practice, but we implore you to take immediate action to introduce legislation to permanently end burning. Making this change would be a powerful demonstration of the UK’s global leadership, and one for which we would applaud the Government.

We would be grateful for the opportunity to discuss this issue further and would be delighted to organise a site visit for you to one of the UK’s important upland peat sites.

Yours sincerely,