

Report highlights environmental dangers of leaving EU

EU membership has been a major factor behind the “marked improvement in environmental quality in the UK” since the 1980s, according to an independent report into the potential impact of a leave vote in the June referendum.

The 60,000-word report, from the group The UK in a Changing Europe, found that the net result on the UK’s environment from EU membership had been positive and that leaving the union would be risky and could damage key green protections. It said that actions taken to fulfil EU obligations, for instance on clean water and wildlife protection, had been beneficial to the UK’s environment, along with EU policies that have helped infrastructure investments, for instance in renewable energy.

Ministers were keen to trumpet the benefits highlighted by the report. Rory Stewart, a minister at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said in a statement released over the weekend: “There are clear benefits of EU membership for our natural environment, both at home and abroad. The UK has led the way in driving up environmental standards across Europe, from tackling harmful chemicals that damage the ozone layer, to cracking down on the black-market ivory trade.”

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The report, entitled *The UK referendum and the environment – an expert review*, published on Monday, found that both an exit vote that resulted in the UK seeking entirely new free trade relations with Europe and other countries, and an exit vote that resulted in the UK taking the “Norwegian option” of adopting EU regulations without fully free trade, were both “risky” because they were not the status quo, while remaining in would be “low risk”.

It said that a Brexit vote could put the UK’s Climate Change Act, which sets out “carbon budgets” more than a decade into the future, in danger.

However, although the report found many more dangers for the environment in leaving the EU, the authors were careful to point out that the 158-page study was independent of either side in the debate. The UK in a Changing Europe, which funded the report, is a non-partisan thinktank and it was written by academics.

Andy Jordan, professor of environmental policy at the University of East Anglia, said: “Thus far, the environmental implications of leaving the EU have mostly been ignored in the referendum debate. This review seeks to inform voters by exploring the environmental risks and opportunities of voting to remain or leave. It does not recommend them to vote one way or the other.”

Stewart, whose interests include the formation of a 25-year plan for the UK’s environment that would encompass Defra and other government departments, said: “We can protect and enhance the environment far more effectively if EU countries continue to work together as part of a reformed European Union, preserving our precious wildlife and natural resources for generations to come. For example, we have led on reform of the common fisheries policy, ending the wasteful practice of throwing fish back, dead, and securing a legal commitment to fish sustainably.”

Rory Stewart: the environment minister was previously thought to be undecided over the EU referendum but has now backed staying in. Photograph: Murdo Macleod for the Guardian

Stewart, who was better known as a diplomat and traveller in Afghanistan, Iraq and other areas of the Middle East, as well as tutor to Princes William and Harry, before he became the Tory MP for Penrith and the Border in 2010, was until recently widely regarded as being in the undecided camp on Brexit.

His Defra ministerial colleague, farming minister George Eustice, has taken a leading role in the Vote Leave movement, while the secretary of state, Liz Truss, went against the expectations of many in endorsing David Cameron's stance. She warned the National Farmers' Union conference in February that Brexit would be "a leap in the dark".

The NFU has declined to advise its members on how to vote, despite producing a report that found farmers could lose out to the tune of tens of thousands a year, or to conduct polling of its members on the issue.

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