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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

An Action Plan for nature, people and the economy

{SWD(2017) 139 final}

1. Protecting and realising the potential of Europe's natural heritage

While having some of the most densely populated areas in the world, Europe also has a very rich and diverse natural heritage. The Nature Directives[1] aim to ensure healthy nature in the European Union by providing a framework to protect species and natural habitats of conservation interest. The Directives establish the largest coordinated network of biodiversity-rich protected areas in the world, called Natura 2000, which covers 18 % of the land area and 6 % of the sea area of the EU. They protect about 1 500 animal and plant species and some 200 rare habitat types inside and outside these protected areas and combine nature protection with sustainable land use and economic activity.

Under its commitment to Better Regulation, the Commission launched in 2014 a comprehensive evaluation of the Nature Directives, called a "Fitness Check". Upon taking office as European Commissioner for Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Mr Vella was tasked by President Juncker to finalise this evaluation. With this process the Commission has listened to the concerns of citizens and businesses, who sometimes feel that European rules are difficult to understand, apply and enforce.

This Fitness Check has found that, as part of broader EU biodiversity policy, the Nature Directives are fit for purpose but that achieving their objectives and realising their full potential will depend upon substantially improving their implementation[2]. Improvements are needed both in their effectiveness and efficiency and in working in partnership with different stakeholder communities in the Member States and across the EU to deliver practical results on the ground.

Only around half of the birds and a smaller proportion of the other protected species and habitats in the EU have good conservation status today. The Natura 2000 network is now largely in place on land but important gaps remain in the marine environment. Only 50 % of all Natura 2000 sites have management plans with conservation objectives and measures. Key factors behind the shortcomings in implementation include limited resources, weak enforcement, poor integration of nature objectives into other policy areas, insufficient knowledge and access to data, and poor communication and stakeholder involvement. Moreover, those who implement the Directives, particularly at regional and local level, are sometimes not sufficiently aware of their requirements or of the flexibility and opportunities they offer. This can lead to tensions between nature protection and economic activity.

However, the Fitness Check has shown that where targeted action takes place on a sufficient scale, the status of species and habitats improves, sometimes leading to remarkable recoveries. Moreover, there is increasing recognition that our natural environment underpins various sectors of our economy such as tourism. Conserving and using it sustainably are more important today than ever before. Doing so offers ample opportunities to attract and encourage investment in nature protection.

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[1] Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (Habitats Directive) — OJ L 206 of 22.7.1992, p. 7 and Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds (Birds Directive) — OJ L 20 of 26.01.2010. p. 7.

[2] Commission Staff Working Document (2016) 472 final of 16 December 2016 Fitness Check of the EU Nature Legislation (Birds and Habitats Directives) http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/legislation/fitness_check/index_en.htm.

On 7 December 2016 the Commission held an orientation debate on the findings of the Fitness Check and their follow-up. In response, it decided to develop a concrete action plan to improve the implementation of the Directives, their coherence with socio-economic objectives and engagement with national, regional and local authorities, stakeholders and citizens. Given the strong territorial dimension of the Directives and the key role that regional and local authorities play in their implementation, the Committee of the Regions (CoR) has been closely associated in preparing this action plan and will play an essential role as regards engagement with and outreach to regional and local authorities.

This comprehensive action plan aims to rapidly improve practical implementation of the Nature Directives and accelerate progress towards the EU 2020 goal of halting and reversing the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services[3], including in relation to climate resilience and mitigation. This will also benefit people living in Europe and the economy. Actions will be taken at EU level, in particular by the Commission and the Committee of Regions, but Member States and the stakeholders concerned will also need to act, with increased support and assistance from the EU. The action plan offers real opportunities to engage stakeholders and the public and create partnerships across policy areas. This will lay a solid foundation for reconciling and building bridges between nature, people and the economy.

2. The content of the action plan

The action plan covers four priority areas with 15 concrete actions. Most actions will be launched in 2017 so that the Commission can report on their delivery before the end of its current mandate in 2019. The table in this Communication provides an overview of the actions. It is complemented by detailed factsheets providing more information.

Priority A: Improving guidance and knowledge and ensuring better coherence with broader socioeconomic objectives

Member States' different approaches to implementing the Directives can lead to unnecessary conflicts and problems. Inflexible application of the species protection rules, delays and unduly heavy burdens in site permitting procedures, and insufficient stakeholder awareness can create needless tensions between nature protection and socioeconomic activities. The action plan provides practical solutions to these problems and promotes smarter participatory approaches to encourage the full involvement of landowners and users. The Commission will improve its guidance and promote greater understanding of the legislation on the ground to help public authorities apply it better. Member States will need to improve knowledge and access to data necessary for implementation of the Directives. The Commission will support work to improve recognition of how healthy ecosystems contribute to wellbeing and economic development (Actions 1-3).

Measures the Commission is preparing[4] on streamlining monitoring and reporting across EU environmental legislation will also help to improve the efficiency as well as the effectiveness of the Nature Directives.

[3] Communication from the Commission: Our life insurance, our natural capital: an EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020 (COM(2011) 244).

[4] Fitness Check evaluation of the regulatory monitoring and reporting obligations of the EU environment *acquis* and its follow up — see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/legal/reporting/fc_overview_en.htm.

Priority B: Building political ownership and strengthening compliance

While the Member States are ultimately responsible for implementing the Nature Directives on the ground, the Commission will work more closely with them to facilitate and promote the conservation and sustainable use of nature. Together, we must ensure that a fully coherent and functional Natura 2000 network is in place and that species are protected and, where appropriate, used sustainably.

This priority will include bilateral dialogue with Member States and stakeholders aimed at improving the implementation of Natura 2000 and promoting cooperation in its management across the different biogeographical regions of Europe. Habitat and species action plans will be developed and delivered (Actions 4-7).

For strengthening Member States' compliance with the Nature Directives, other measures in the broader area of environment policy, on training of national judges and prosecutors, access to justice, and assuring compliance with EU environmental law, will also be very relevant[5].

Priority C: Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments

The cost of implementing of Natura 2000 has been estimated at EUR 5.8 billion per year, while its annual benefits are estimated at EUR 200-300 billion. However, funding shortages are preventing the network from delivering these benefits in full and are a major factor undermining the effectiveness of the Nature Directives. The action plan therefore aims at making better use of the EU funding available and making nature more attractive for private investment.

The Fitness Check has highlighted the worrying decline in species and habitats associated with agriculture and has pointed to the need for more effective integration of Natura 2000 and wider biodiversity with the common agricultural policy (CAP). The action plan proposes ways, under the current legal framework[6], to improve synergies with the CAP and other key EU policy sectors such as cohesion policy, the common fisheries policy, and research and innovation policy. It proposes an increase in dedicated funding for nature and biodiversity which would allow higher investment in Natura 2000. It also provides for the development of more guidance and planning for the national Natura 2000 financial frameworks that Member States should develop. Finally, it proposes ways to stimulate private investment and to better support connectivity between Natura 2000 areas, including through green infrastructure and nature-based solutions (Actions 8-12).

Priority D: Better communication and outreach, engaging citizens, stakeholders and communities

The action plan seeks to strengthen the involvement of the public, stakeholders, local authorities and communities. Protecting nature and its benefits concerns us all because it is our common heritage. The Commission together with the Committee of Regions will use all available platforms to raise awareness and promote local involvement and exchanges of knowledge. It will give more

[5] See Commission Work Programme 2017 Delivering a Europe that protects, empowers and defends (Commission Communication COM(2016), 710 final).

[6] Further details about the consultation on modernising and simplifying the CAP are available at https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/consultations/cap-modernising/2017_en and https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/simplification_en.

recognition to good management practices in Natura 2000 areas. Through the European Solidarity Corps the Commission will help young people to get directly involved in conserving nature and gain valuable expertise for their professional life (Actions 13-15).

Table of actions

Improving guidance and knowledge and ensuring better coherence with broader socioeconomic objectives

Actions	Timeline	Responsible
1. Update, develop and actively promote, in all EU languages, guidance on (a) site permitting procedures, species protection and management as well as sector-specific guidance (b) integrating ecosystem services into decision-making	2017-2019 2018-2019	**COM / CoR / MS / stakeholders**
2. Establish a support mechanism to help Member State authorities address key challenges in applying the permitting requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives for Natura 2000 and species protection rules	2017-2019	**COM / MS / stakeholders**
3. Improve knowledge, including through enhanced and more efficient monitoring, and ensure public online access to data necessary for implementing the Directives (e.g. satellite imagery from the Copernicus programme)	2017-2019	**COM / EEA / MS**

Building political ownership and strengthening compliance

Actions	Timeline	Responsible
4. Complete the Natura 2000 network, especially filling gaps for the marine environment, and put in place the necessary conservation measures for all sites	ongoing	**MS / stakeholders / COM**
5. Use the new Environmental Implementation Review process for dedicated bilateral meetings with national and regional authorities to develop agreed roadmaps to improve implementation and consult with landowners and other stakeholders on implementation challenges	2017-2019	**COM / MS / stakeholders**
6. Bring together public authorities and stakeholders from different Member States at the biogeographical region level to address common challenges, including on cross-border issues	2017-2019	**COM / CoR / MS / stakeholders**
7. Further develop Species and Habitats Action Plans for the most threatened species and natural habitats as well as stakeholder platforms on the coexistence with conflict species (e.g. large carnivores)	2017-2019	**COM / MS / stakeholders**

Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments

Actions	Timeline	Responsible
8. Strengthen investments in nature (a) Help Member States to improve their multiannual financial planning for Natura 2000 through the update of their prioritised action frameworks (PAFs) (b) Propose a 10% increase in the LIFE budget dedicated to projects supporting the conservation of nature and biodiversity, while keeping the overall budgetary envelope of the LIFE programme unchanged (c) Stimulate private sector investment in nature projects	2017-2019	**COM / EIB/ MS / stakeholders**
9. Promote synergies with funding from the common agricultural policy, including effective use of Natura 2000 payments and agri-environment-climate measures, the development of result-based schemes, support to farmers through Farming Advisory Services, and innovation and knowledge transfer through the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability	2017-2019	**COM / MS / stakeholders**
10. Increase awareness of cohesion policy funding opportunities and improve synergies	2017-2019	**COM / MS / stakeholders**
11. Improve synergies with the common fisheries policy and the integrated maritime policy, including more effective use of the financing opportunities available	2017-2019	**COM / MS / stakeholders**
12. Provide guidance to support the deployment of green infrastructure for better connectivity of Natura 2000 areas; support nature-based solutions projects through EU research and innovation policy and Horizon 2020 funds	2017-2019	**COM / stakeholders**

Better communication and outreach, engaging citizens, stakeholders and communities

Actions	Timeline	Responsible
13. Support knowledge exchange and engagement of local and regional authorities through a joint platform with the Committee of the Regions	2017-2019	**CoR / COM**
14. Support recognition of good management of Natura 2000 sites and awareness-raising of the Nature Directives through relevant fora, availing of new technologies and outreach activities, and strengthen links between natural and cultural heritage, especially in the context of 2018 as European year of cultural heritage	2017-2019	**COM / CoR / MS stakeholders**
15. Involve young people actively in measures dealing with societal needs by giving them the opportunity to get involved in nature protection in Natura 2000 sites (European Solidarity Corps)	2017-2019	**COM / MS / stakeholders**