

Conference on the Fitness Check of EU Nature Legislation

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Dear guests,

As rapporteur for the European Parliament's report on the mid-term review of the EU biodiversity strategy, I would like to thank the European Commission for giving me the opportunity to share my views with you today. It goes without saying that the nature directives and the ongoing fitness check form a crucial part of my report and our discussions in the Parliament.

My message is straightforward and can be summarised into following three key points:

- A broad majority in the European Parliament is convinced that the nature directives should be fully implemented, not revised.
- We find clear support for our stance in the emerging findings of the public consultation.
- The full implementation of the nature directives is an absolute precondition for achieving the 2020 biodiversity targets, which we cannot afford to miss. More political will is essential in this regard.

Please allow me to elaborate on these three points:

I have recently sent a joint letter together with all the shadow rapporteurs across political groups to Commissioner Vella and First Vice President Timmermans, in which we unequivocally voice our stance on the ongoing fitness check.

We oppose a possible revision of the nature directives because we strongly believe that the key problem is not the legislation itself but rather its implementation. Moreover we are convinced that opening the nature directives would jeopardise achieving the biodiversity strategy altogether, would create a long period of legal uncertainty and could potentially weaken the legislation.

We thus share the concern of more than 500.000 EU citizens who have participated in the “Nature Alert Campaign” to raise their voice for nature conservation, making it clear that the nature directives are milestones in the EU environmental legislation and that they do not support any changing or weakening of these laws.

I very much welcome the emerging findings and I am pleased to see that they clearly underpin our calls for better implementation, stricter enforcement and further integration of nature and biodiversity across other policy fields. It is once again demonstrated that the nature directives are effective, efficient and relevant when implemented correctly.

What is also essential to me is that the findings recognise the major contribution of the nature directives to the EU’s biodiversity target, both directly and indirectly. The full implementation of the nature directives is indeed of paramount importance for the biodiversity strategy as a whole. The socioeconomic impact of not implementing the nature directives comes with a huge cost: it is estimated that even a 1% loss of ecosystem services would cause losses of 2-3 billion euro a year, accumulating over time.

Today we are however far from halfway in reaching the 2020 targets: barely 23% of species and 16% of habitats have a favourable status.

How can we genuinely change the tide, prioritise biodiversity and use this fitness check to achieve a full implementation of the nature directives?

In my draft report I have launched a series of concrete proposals, on which there was a broad consensus in the environment committee; such as a call on the Commission to improve the guidelines for facilitating the optimal application of the directives. Furthermore, I genuinely believe that the Commission should give higher priority to dialogue with Member States and to encourage the exchanges of best practices, which can be seized as catalysts for change. Best practices indeed demonstrate that nature and economic development should not be in opposition, that the existing legislation works and that there is still enormous potential for improvement. Coming from Flanders, I can refer to some success stories at the port of Antwerp where nature and economic development go hand in hand.

The port of Antwerp is the second largest sea port in Europe, the third worldwide. Thanks to its unique location, the area is home to numerous protected species. The old opposition between industry and nature was overcome by a new model of dialogue and cooperation. Industry and nature organisations agreed on a joint charter in order to safeguard a 650 hectares network of ecological infrastructure within the port and to create core nature areas around the port.

Another example is the Flemish Sigmaplan, a future-oriented project for the areas surrounding the river Schelde that will make our region safer by better protecting it against floods. The Sigma Plan also has an important nature pillar: it will create no less than 4000 hectares of nature.

These best practices clearly underline the importance of dialogue. In my draft report, I have stressed the overall need for a multi-stakeholder approach with a vital role for regional and local actors. Implementing the nature directives is a joint task, from local to EU level, in which we can only succeed together.

In this regard, we need to get our message better and more widely across. We need to explain the socioeconomic importance of nature and biodiversity better in order to increase public awareness and support for investing in nature. A recent Eurobarometer on biodiversity indeed revealed that while at least eight out of ten EU citizens regard the impact of biodiversity loss as serious, most EU citizens are not familiar with Natura 2000 and wish to receive more information about biodiversity. I think all politicians have an important duty to fulfil here. I have launched a biodiversity infographic on my twitter account this morning; I hope it can contribute to the debate.

This brings me to my conclusion.

More political will is urgently needed to genuinely tackle biodiversity loss as a policy priority.

Better implementation of the nature directives is an absolute precondition in this regard.

Investing in nature and biodiversity should be at the heart of a smart, sustainable and inclusive European Union. This is essential for nature itself, and for the health, wellbeing and welfare of future generations.

Thank you for your attention.

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