

Time bound targets and restoration actions outside Natura2000

The EU Nature Restoration Law presented today builds on the birds and habitats directives by adding time bound targets and requiring restoration actions across the territory of the Member States, including outside Natura 2000. Ecosystems are the “lungs” and backbone of our rural territories and the landowners are custodians of this rich environment. This responsibility requires us to plead for a robust EU policy and support system. However, we deplore the lack of an effective inclusive action plan and an unfortunate continuity in a top-down approach that proved in the past to be counterproductive.

Miss-opportunity to finally adopt a bottom-up approach

Ignoring the lessons learnt from the Natura2000 designation process is not only a waste of invested capacity, but also a risk to soon face the same pitfalls as we did 30 years ago. The new restoration law requires Member States to enter in a new land designation process and we fear that the voice of community-based conservation would be minor as we see no difference in methods than in previous processes linked to the Nature Directives. We estimate that the complexity and required deadlines are the perfect recipe for a top-down approach as there are no concrete solutions to unlock the capacities to fully implement such demanding efforts at EU, national and local levels. It misses the opportunity of recognizing the huge efforts of the past three decades to stimulate innovative and inclusive new approaches toward nature conservation in all parts of the EU. The ELO believes we need to upscale successful initiatives by providing a set of concrete tools, which proved their success for a sustainable countryside.

Natura2000 was set up within a framework where countryside actors were promised they could further live and work in a sustainable way taking into account social, economic and ecological aspects. It would be good to renew this promise.

Beyond protection and restoration

Climate change is impacting EU ecosystems to such a degree that adaptation measures are urgently needed. If we are serious about having healthy ecosystems we need to move beyond protection and restoration alone and focus **on adaptation and resilience**. This is of crucial importance for the vitality of our ecosystems to be ready to cope with disturbances and to anticipate risks. The ELO proposes to support measures for resilience improvement, with clear justified targets.

Beyond inclusion: a real partnership!

After 30 years of collaboration, land managers and farmers have finally become privileged partners in a long-term commitment with the European institutions. The continuation of this recognition and joint commitment will be key for the successful implementation of this law.

The ELO therefore acknowledges the requirement for Member States, as part of their national restoration plans, to ensure public participation and to define how the needs of landowners and managers affected by the restoration measures will be considered. However, it is clear that acquiring the needed landowners' engagement only goes together with the availability of transparent voluntary private land conservation measures. The ELO welcomes the mention of private land conservation measures in the regulation, but strongly fears the ignorance of 'voluntary' measures and their financial incentives and compensation mechanisms. Great efforts have been invested during the last decade which led to great progress and potential for Europe. We have the input and expertise, and we call on the commission to finally recognize the land managers community as operators just as public authority. We are ready to support the Commission and Member States in providing input and expertise.

Data gaps and action in practice

We regret a lack of scientific justification and clear indicators to guide the practical designation process. The definitions are clear but miss their practical value for setting targets and to justify the top-down framework. Choosing between options for restoration measures and areas and measuring progress towards the targets with the provided framework will be difficult to verify, if not impossible, and will miss the scientific justification. The proposed land designation commitments are feasible in their own right, but as long as quantitative targets remain the main objective, we will miss their significant qualitative improvements.

Pursuing environmental protection without taking into account economic viability and social equity, proved to lead to disappointing results. The ELO stresses the urgent need for a detailed assessment on the financial and administrative impact for the land manager in terms of data collection, data quality and reaching the target values. We call on the Commission to offer the Member States a simple, precise and efficient toolbox for implementation and to recognize that more controls and reinforced application on one hand, without at the same time providing incentives to landowners and land users, on the other hand, have shown to not generate the expected results.

About the ELO

The ELO is the umbrella organization for national rural organizations of businesses managing agricultural, forestry and environmental land all over Europe.