



**Subject: Biodiversity Strategy for 2030: Guidance to Member States on how to select and prioritise species/habitats for the 30% conservation improvement target under the strategy**

## **1. OBJECTIVE OF THE CURRENT NOTE**

On 20 May 2020 the European Commission adopted a Communication on an “EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 – Bringing nature back into our lives” (subsequently referred to as the Strategy). The Strategy includes the following target for habitats and species under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives:

“The Commission will request and support Member States to raise the level of implementation of existing legislation within clear deadlines. It will in particular request Member States to ensure no deterioration in conservation trends and status of all protected habitats and species by 2030. In addition, Member States will have to ensure that at least 30% of species and habitats not currently in favourable status are in that category or show a strong positive trend. The Commission and the European Environmental Agency will provide guidance to Member States in 2020 on how to select and prioritise species and habitats.”

In line with the requirement of the Strategy for the Commission and EEA to provide guidance to Member States, the current note provides further clarification on the scope of the target, and proposes criteria on how to select and prioritise species and habitats.

The content of the current Guidance has been discussed in two NADEG meetings on 22 October 2020 and 27 April 2021. It incorporates, to the extent possible, comments received from Member States and stakeholders during and after these meetings

The criteria and guidance included in this document do not – and cannot - affect in any way Member States obligations under the relevant EU environmental legislation. The criteria and guidance are non-binding and aim to help Member States fulfilling the political commitment expressed in the Council Conclusions<sup>1</sup> where they welcomed the EU Nature Restoration Plan under the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11829-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

## 2. DEFINING THE TARGET AND MEASURING TARGET ACHIEVEMENT

### 2.1. General scope of the target

The current target is conceived as a national-level target, to be achieved for each of the Member States individually, without any further regional or biogeographical breakdown below the national level. In this respect, it differs from target 1 under the previous Biodiversity Strategy, which was designed as an EU-level target.

The 2030 target covers all species/habitats reported under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive and bird species reported under Article 12 the Birds Directive. Setting the target baseline, reporting on interim progress and measuring the final level of achievement of the target can therefore be derived from the national reports that Member States submit every six years to the Commission, as required under the two EU Nature Directives:

- information on status and trends of habitats and species included in the national reports of 2019 will be used for setting the baseline;
- the national reports of 2025 will be used for measuring interim progress;
- the national reports of 2030/2031 will be used to measure the final level of achievement of the target.

In line with the methodology for assessing **conservation status** and **conservation status trend** of species and habitats under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive, the geographical assessment unit is the national biogeographical region. Consequently, where a species or habitat is being reported for several biogeographical regions of a given Member State, each individual national biogeographical region-level assessment from that Member States will be considered as a separate counting unit for the target.

No breakdown per national biogeographical region is applied in the reporting under Article 12 of the Birds Directive. However, where a given bird species is reported both as a breeding and as a wintering species in a Member State, **population size** and **population size trend** data may be reported separately for both seasons. To avoid any double counting in such cases, it is suggested that by default only the information on national breeding populations (population size and population size trend) is being considered for the target.

Where a bird species is reported as wintering but not as breeding, or where breeding and wintering population might be clearly distinguishable in a Member State, reaching a positive population size trend in the species' wintering population may (also) be counted for the target. However, it is strongly recommended that this additional option should only be used if there is a clear case for conservation or restoration measures with a positive impact on a species' survival rate during the winter season, or where the quality and carrying capacity of the wintering habitat are obviously limiting the national wintering population of a species.

A species or habitat that was reported as present in a given Member States or national biogeographical region in the report of 2019, but not anymore by 2030 due to its (established or presumed) disappearance will be considered as a case of deteriorating trend. Conversely, any species or habitat that is only being reported from the next or the following report onwards, as a result of a re-introduction or natural (re-)colonisation (rather than as a result of better data), will be considered as a case of improving trend.

## **2.2. Sub-target 1: no further deterioration in conservation trends and status by 2030**

This sub-target is meant to incentivise the necessary measures to ensure that for each of the Member States any deterioration/decline of protected habitats and species under both directives **is stopped by 2030 at the latest**. A second objective of the target is to ensure that, by that same period, the quality of the national monitoring has become sufficiently comprehensive in each of the Member States to allow for a complete and up-to-date reporting that provides a reliable assessment of status and trend for all relevant species and habitats.

Any species or habitat showing a trend by 2030 that is neither deteriorating (Habitats Directive: conservation status trend (6 years)) nor declining (Birds Directive: short-term population trend (12 years)) nor unknown shall be counted as contributing to this sub-target.

By 2030, certain species and habitats might see their status deteriorate for reasons that cannot be influenced at national or even at EU level alone (such as climate change, over-exploitation of migratory species outside the EU, deterioration of wintering grounds outside of the EU, etc.). In such cases, the factors putting at risk the achievement of the sub-target by 2030 need to be identified as early as possible so that efforts can be made to address these in the appropriate forum.

## **2.3. Sub-target 2: improving (“strongly positive”) trends for 30% of species and habitats in unfavourable/non-secure status by 2030**

For measuring the achievement of this sub-target at national level, separate approaches will be required for bird species covered by the Birds Directive, as compared to the species and habitats listed in the annexes of the Habitats Directive.

Under the Habitats Directive, any species or habitat that was not reported as being in favourable conservation status (FCS) in 2019 but is either showing a positive conservation status trend by 2030 or is reported as being in FCS by that time shall be counted for the target achievement.<sup>2</sup> Information about the minimum criteria for a positive overall trend in conservation status are available in the relevant guidelines for reporting under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive.<sup>3</sup>

Under the Birds Directive, information on status of bird species is currently only available at EU-level (EU Red List of Birds). Therefore, the absence of a national status assessment of bird species means that, at the national reporting level, only population trend information (short-term population trend) is available as a basis for this sub-target. Information about the minimum criteria for a positive short-term population trend are available in the guidelines for reporting under Article 12 of the Birds Directive.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This also needs to include any reported features for which better information available by 2030 would show that the reporting as FV in 2020 was due to a data deficiency or otherwise turned out to be a mistake in the earlier reporting rounds. Conversely, a feature for which better data would reveal in subsequent reports that it should already have been reported in FCS in 2019 may need to be removed subsequently from the target baseline set of species and habitats.

<sup>3</sup> [http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/birds\\_art12](http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/birds_art12)

<sup>4</sup> [http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/habitats\\_art17](http://cdr.eionet.europa.eu/help/habitats_art17)

For bird species, to ensure consistency with the approach taken for species and habitats under the Habitats Directive, it is therefore proposed to restrict the sub-target for improving trends to those species that are not assessed as “Secure” in the EU-level assessment of 2020<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, any bird species that is not assessed as “Secure” at EU level assessment of 2020, but shows a positive short-term trend by 2030 can be counted for the achievement of the “30% status improvement” sub-target.

In line with the above, Member States are thus recommended to identify “by default” their national priorities for population recovery on the basis of the species’ EU-level status in the EU bird species Red list. However, where on the basis of an existing national bird Red lists or other relevant national assessments, a Member States would consider that additional species should be a priority for population recovery at national level, they are invited to identify such cases as soon as possible, and add these to their national list of priority species for population recovery.

#### **2.4. Reporting on progress and documenting target achievement**

As already indicated above, both interim progress (2025) and final level of achievement of the target (2030/2031) will primarily be documented through the existing national reporting to the EU under Article 17 Habitats Directive and Article 12 Birds Directive.

This will require a timely delivery of all 27 national reports – in line with the detailed schedule (still to be) agreed between the Member States, the Commission and the EEA – and an improvement in the quality, completeness and reliability of some of the national reports, with a view to considerably decrease by 2025 and reduce to zero thereafter :

- the share of national assessments that conclude on “unknown” conservation status or conservation status trend;
- the share of assessments and reported figures that is based on outdated monitoring data, collected prior to the normal monitoring period of the report;
- the share of assessments that is based on “expert opinion”, without any underlying data collection.

Even though measuring the level of target achievement will primarily depend on the 2030/2031 reporting round, Member States are strongly recommended to consider the above requirements as soon as possible, and to remediate any remaining deficiencies during the ongoing monitoring cycle for the 2025 reporting.

#### **2.5. A case for an additional reporting on measures taken?**

Restoration measures may, in some cases, produce measurable positive trends in species and habitats only after several - or many - years.

Hence, some have suggested complementing the current outcome-based reporting under the EU Nature Directives with a reporting on restoration efforts undertaken to achieve the 2030 target.

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<sup>5</sup> In the EU Red list of Birds, the status “Secure” is a sub-category of “Least concern” according to the IUCN Red List criteria; the status “Secure” is therefore the one that comes the closest to the definition of “Favourable” under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive

Whether and how such an effort-based reporting should be implemented is beyond the scope of the current guidance but the issue will be further discussed in the frame of the Working Group on the Reporting under the Nature Directives.

## **2.6. Next steps**

From mid-2021 onwards, the ongoing Natura 2000 biogeographical process is being expanded to include work done under the Strategy, and in particular the pledge and review process for targets for improving conservation trends for protected species and habitats, as well as for the targets on terrestrial protected areas (the latter are covered by a separate Guidance note).

The Commission's tentative planning for undertaking work under this process is divided into three steps for each biogeographical region. In step 1, which is expected to take place in late 2021/early 2022, there will be a virtual introductory meeting, to agree on the time planning for the next steps and clarify what Member States are expected to submit in terms of pledges and how these should be submitted. After that initial meeting, and by the end of 2022 at the latest, each Member State is expected to submit, a first draft of their national pledges including the following:

- a preliminary list of species and habitats for which they intend to achieve a strong positive trend by 2030, covering to at least 30% of all species and habitats not currently in favourable/secure status;
- an explanation on the criteria that have been used for selecting the species and habitats on the list;
- the measures they intend to put in place to ensure the achievement of the strong positive trends for each of the species and habitats on the above list;
- the measures they intend to put in place to avoid deterioration for all other species and habitats not on the list.

In step 2, in late 2022/early 2023, face-to-face biogeographical region-level seminars are expected to take place, to discuss and review the initial pledges made by Member States. National pledges may then be reviewed on the basis of the conclusions of those meetings, for example to ensure that any need for transnational coordination is appropriately covered by the national targets.

In step 3 of the biogeographical process, in late 2023, one virtual meeting will take place to assess implementation in view of an interim evaluation of progress.

The Nature Directives Expert Group (NADEG) will be informed/involved throughout the different steps in the process.

## **3. CRITERIA FOR SELECTING SPECIES AND HABITATS TO BE IMPROVED BY 2030**

### **3.1. General considerations about prioritization**

Amongst the species and habitats protected under the EU nature directives, the overall target as outlined above is not restricted to any sub-set. Maintenance and restoration efforts are likely to be required for most of them, be it to halt their current negative trends by 2030, to maintain current stable or improving trends, or to avoid loss of "favourable conservation

status” in the national reporting (or, in the case of bird species, to avoid the loss of their EU-level status as “Secure”).

Maintenance and restoration measures for achieving the proposed target are therefore likely to cover most species and habitat types, irrespectively of their current status and trend. These measures primarily need to be planned, implemented and coordinated at national or regional levels.

However, the reference in the Biodiversity Strategy to guidance for selecting and prioritizing habitats and species specifically relates to the selection by each of the Member States of a sub-set of 30% of species and habitats not currently in favourable status (or, in the case of birds, not in EU-level “Secure” status) that should either be in that category by 2030 or (at least) show a strong positive trend by that time.

Even though selecting species and habitats to be improved as a priority could be done by each Member State alone, there is a case for some coordination at transnational or transboundary level. What is rare and may be considered as a high priority at national level may have a small impact at EU-level (if the species or habitats is common elsewhere). Conversely, what is common and may be considered as a low priority in a given Member state may represent the main occurrence for a habitat or species EU-wide and thus have a high priority at EU level.

In addition, EU-level coordination or transnational coordinated approaches are deemed useful and therefore strongly encouraged in the following cases:

- for any transboundary populations, the maintenance or improvement of which requires coordinated actions to be taken by more than one Member State;
- for any migratory species, to ensure that efforts taken in one Member State are not imperilled by the lack of measures in another Member State;
- in any cases where the conservation status or trend of a species or habitat is influenced by pressures or threats acting at transboundary levels.

### **3.2. Biodiversity-related criteria for prioritizing species and habitats**

Considering that the overall target requires ensuring that no species and habitats shall have a deteriorating trend by 2030, it is not straightforward to suggest biodiversity-related prioritization or selection criteria that are only specific for those habitats and species that should show a strong positive trend by 2030.

The most obvious prioritization criterion might therefore be to focus status improvement efforts on those habitats and species that have the highest immediate risk of extinction at national or EU level, due to unpredictable (“stochastic”) events that may affect their last remaining populations.

Such species should therefore be top priority candidates for targeted restoration/improvement measures in each of the Member States concerned. They can be rather easily identified by combining information from the reporting under Article 17 with information from the European Red List of species.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> European Red lists [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/redlist/index\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/redlist/index_en.htm)

The same prioritization principles should be applied to Annex I habitat types on the brink of disappearance at national, biogeographical or EU level, by combining information from the reporting under Article 17 with information from the European Red List of habitats.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, species and habitats with the highest risk of disappearance should be considered as national priorities in terms of urgency of restoration measures.

Further prioritization criteria based on conservation needs can be based on the following:

- **National responsibility:** any habitat or species for which a Member State has a higher responsibility compared with other Member States, using country-level indicators such as: “proportion of global or EU occurrence”<sup>8</sup>, “within-species level of genetic diversity”, “within-habitat level of species diversity”, etc.
- **Umbrella effect** on biodiversity: any habitat or species the improvement of which would have positive impacts on other species or habitats (incl. endemic or red-listed species or habitats not covered by the EU nature directives).

To help apply the above criteria, the European Environment Agency could further investigate the development of possible indicators based on the above criteria, or even develop prioritized lists of habitats and species, if Member States so wish and if resources would allow for such work

### 3.3. Synergies with other environment or climate targets

When selecting and prioritizing those species and habitats to be improved by 2030, synergies with other EU and international targets, in particular environmental or climate policy targets, as well other restoration targets under the EU Biodiversity strategy should be considered.

Potential synergies exist for example in the following cases:

- restoring the hydrology of degraded mires and peat bog habitats, increasing the extent of forest and wooded pasture habitats, allowing trees to grow older and bigger and forest to accumulate more senescent trees and larger amounts of deadwood will have positive impacts on the condition of many habitats and their species and will also improve or even restore the capacity of these habitats to capture and store carbon, thereby contributing to **climate change mitigation**;
- restoring river and floodplain habitats through measures such as relocation of flood-dykes and re-dynamising of riverbeds will benefit habitats and species of rivers and alluvial floodplains and will also reduce, through the improved capacity for flood retention, the risk of catastrophic flooding to urban areas located downstream, as a contribution to **climate change adaptation** and **flood prevention**;
- hydrological habitat restoration measures aimed at raising the groundwater table and increasing the quality and extent of wetland habitats will benefit many protected habitats and species and will also help replenish depleted groundwater tables or otherwise limit or reverse the negative impacts of water overexploitation and contribute to **climate change adaptation**;

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<sup>7</sup> European Red List of habitats [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/redlist\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/redlist_en.htm)

<sup>8</sup> For example, Denmark is considering as a national priority for conservation species or habitat that have more than 20% of their global occurrence in the country.

- many rare, threatened or declining species protected by the EU Nature Directives depend on semi-open landscapes with trees (wooded pastures, wooded meadows, dehesas, montados, orchards with large trees, etc.); where restoring such semi-open habitats requires the replanting of trees; this will also contribute to the Biodiversity Strategy target for **planting three billion of new trees in the EU**;
- measures for restoring or improving habitats (in particular grasslands, but also many other Annex I habitats) have significant potential to benefit rare and threatened species of pollinating insects; if properly designed, such measures will therefore contribute to the Biodiversity Strategy target for **reversing the decline of pollinators**;
- Member States should consider the potential of habitat and species improvement in urban and peri-urban settings, as well as any other **Urban Green Planning** measures with a potential for improving the status of species and habitats, taking into account the increasing demand of citizens for urban and peri-urban green recreational spaces;
- measures for improving migratory populations of fish and other freshwater species may also contribute to objectives of good ecological status under the Water Framework Directive, as well as to the EU Biodiversity Strategy target for **restoring 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers**;
- measures for improving marine seabed habitats or reduce bycatch may also contribute to good environmental status of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, as well as to the EU Biodiversity Strategy targets for **reducing the negative impacts of by-catch and improving environmental status of sea-beds**.

This list is certainly not exhaustive.

### 3.4. “Low-hanging” fruits approaches

While the current note primarily recommends prioritizing habitats and species on the basis of a combination of criteria as outlined in the two previous chapters, Member States may also wish to consider additional criteria or methods for prioritization such as the “low-hanging fruits“-approach developed under the EU Biogeographical process<sup>9</sup>, for prioritizing habitats and species based on their higher likelihood to show, on the basis of relevant measures taken, (at least) a strong positive trend by 2030. Such an approach may prioritize, for example, habitats and species with successfully ongoing conservation programs, the continuation of which is likely to lead to further improvements by 2030.

## 4. SUCCESS FACTORS FOR ACHIEVING STRONG POSITIVE TRENDS FOR SPECIES OR HABITAT BY 2030

Key factors for achieving the 2030 target include:

- knowledge related to the technical feasibility, legal requirements and support from landowners and land managers for the necessary measures;
- in the case of land-based restoration measures, the availability of land that is suitable for implementing the necessary measures;
- skilled staff, able to carry out both the preparatory work and the measures themselves;

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<sup>9</sup> Doc NADEG 16-11-03: <https://circabc.europa.eu/sd/a/57a12a14-7752-4a0c-b7a5-efccfa33b590/Doc%20NADEG%2016-11-03%20Low%20Hanging%20Fruits.docx>



- financial resources to carry out all the steps required for preparing and implementing the necessary restoration works and for improving existing management practises.

In addition, the establishment of good transboundary cooperation is important for the preparation of any actions that will require a transnational coordination. In this context, the Commission intends to use, as explained above, the Natura 2000 biogeographical process to support Member States in their efforts for identifying and assessing the feasibility of transnational priorities for improvements, in line with the overall target, and facilitate their implementation through follow-up initiatives. Member States are strongly encouraged to support this approach and make use of this opportunity in the coming years.

Generally speaking, considering in the time lag for species and habitats to respond to restoration measures, there is a strong case for quick progress in the implementation of the necessary improvement measures, if measurable strong positive trends should be achieved by 2030.

Finally, prioritizing, planning, coordinating and implementing the necessary conservation and restoration measures for achieving the target will require additional financial and staff resources and should be based on the Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs) developed by the Member States. If needed, Member States are invited to update their PAFs accordingly. In order to secure the necessary resources, Member States are strongly encouraged to apply as early as possible for EU LIFE support for national or regional *Strategic Nature Action Projects* (SNAPs) in the frame of the LIFE Regulation for 2021-27, and to ensure the best possible use of any other EU funding that is available for the relevant measures including by relying on the upcoming CAP Strategic Plans and Operational programmes for Regional/Cohesion funds, EMFAF, Horizon, etc.