

Loss of biodiversity endangers our livelihood

EESC sounds the alarm and blames Commission and Member States for lack of political will.

The EESC sounds the alarm amid a summer of heavy storms, landslides and other freak weather events. Several EESC proposals for the better protection of nature have been met with no reaction from the Commission or the Member States so far. *“We again call on the Commission and Member States to ensure a swift and consistent implementation of the biodiversity strategy, particularly of the Birds and Habitat Directive and the Water Directive as important means of protecting biodiversity”*, says German EESC member Lutz Ribbe, referring to his [opinion on EU biodiversity policy](#).

Natura 2000 – 20 years overdue: EESC calls for dedicated budget

The Natura 2000 network is mainly based on the Habitat Directive with special protection areas for birds under the Birds Directive. Its purpose is to preserve rare flora and fauna and unique biotopes in designated areas. This network should have been completed back in 1995. Now in 2017, nearly all Natura 2000 sites have finally been designated – comprising around 18% of the EU’s land area – but many of the sites still do not enjoy permanent legal protection and only around half of them have management plans. *“This is evidence of incapacity or just ignorance on the part of the EU and many of its Member States. We understand that the EU is facing many challenges, such as Brexit, unemployment, and terrorism, which we as representatives of civil society are working on side by side with the Commission. **But we must not forget that biodiversity is our livelihood and continued plundering of our nature robs us of this livelihood**”*, warns Mr Ribbe. The EESC believes that one of the main reasons for lagging behind in meeting the original goals lies in the funding for Natura 2000 areas, which almost exclusively comes from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). *“In these two funds, Natura 2000 clashes with many other projects, leaving nature protection in many cases the loser. We have always warned against this conflict of interest and call again on the Commission to swiftly approve an extra Natura 2000 budget with a precise cost calculation as the starting point”*, outlines Mr Ribbe. Experts estimate that around € 10 billion is needed per year, particularly in order to compensate landowners for their losses or to pay for special services. *“Nature protection is a public good and must not be carried out at the expense of the land owners”*, states the EESC.

Biodiversity is a cross-cutting issue: The CAP reform must take it into consideration

Pollinators, decomposers and many other species cannot be protected by

focusing solely on the designation of protected areas. Biodiversity needs to be included in other policies too, particularly in the agricultural sector. It is principally this sector – as indeed the Commission and Council rightly emphasise – that causes the highest degrees of pressure on terrestrial ecosystems. *“We therefore do hope that the mid-term review of the ‘ecological focus areas’ and the upcoming reform of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) will also focus on the achievement of the biodiversity objectives”*, says Mr Ribbe.

Inconsistencies in EU policies are not limited solely to agriculture policy; a lack of implementation and concerted action can be pinpointed in other policy areas as well. In the EESC’s view, biodiversity is comparable to climate protection, which should be addressed across all policies. It is not just about conserving animal or plant species: **it concerns the very conditions of human existence and therefore ought to be a cross-cutting issue.**

As regards the protection of biodiversity, the EESC stresses that there is no shortage of laws, regulations, political declarations and recommendations in the EU. *“The problem is the lack of implementation. This whole judicial framework is not worth the paper on which it is written as long as it is not transformed into real action,”* concludes Mr Ribbe. *“The Commission has the tools and means, not least in the European Semester, to encourage the Member States to stick to their obligations. For us, this failure is a sign of the Commission’s and Member States’ lack of political willingness and cooperation.”*