

Safeguarding Europe's Biodiversity Legislation: A Summary for policy makers

Why this white paper ?

In 2026, the European Commission is conducting a stress test of the Birds and Habitats Directives as part of its broader agenda on regulatory simplification and competitiveness. The exercise aims to assess whether the Directives remain effective, proportionate and fit for purpose, while identifying opportunities to reduce administrative burdens.

The stress test has raised concerns among BiodivRestore Knowledge Hub members that revisiting core elements of the EU's biodiversity legislation could create legal uncertainty at a time when Member States are implementing the Nature Restoration Regulation and preparing National Restoration Plans.

To inform this discussion, [Biodiversa+](#) prepared this summary based on the evidence reviewed in the [white paper Safeguarding Europe's Biodiversity Legislation](#).

The review concludes that the Birds and Habitats Directives remain fundamentally fit for purpose. While implementation outcomes vary across Member States, the main challenges relate to funding, governance, administrative capacity, data availability, monitoring, policy coherence and cross-border coordination rather than shortcomings in the Directives themselves.

The evidence suggests that the stress test should focus on improving implementation, policy coherence and legal certainty, rather than revising the foundations of the EU's biodiversity framework.

Key takeaways

1. Scientific evidence indicates that the Birds and Habitats Directives remain fundamentally fit for their conservation objectives, but their implementation varies widely.
2. The benefits are greater than the implementation costs. Socio-economic benefits associated with the Natura 2000 network appear substantial (**€200–300 billion annually**) and exceed the estimated costs of its management and restoration (**€10.2 billion per year**).
3. The main challenges lie in funding, governance, data availability and quality, administrative capacity, transboundary management, and policy coherence. Many of the principal drivers of biodiversity loss originate outside the Directives; addressing them requires stronger integration of biodiversity objectives into sectoral policies, including agricultural, forestry, energy, transport, and spatial planning policies.
4. **Strengthening implementation—not weakening legislation—is the most effective pathway to improving conservation outcomes.** The stress test should prioritise better data, monitoring, governance, financing and policy coherence rather than revising the foundations of the existing legal framework.

The directives deliver significant ecological and socio-economic benefits

The Birds and Habitats Directives have enabled the creation of the EU-wide Natura 2000 network, which now covers approximately 18% of the EU's terrestrial territory and constitutes one of the largest coordinated protected-area networks in the world.

The studies reviewed in the white paper conclude that where properly implemented, the Directives have slowed the decline of many species and habitat types and, in some cases, have enabled measurable recovery trends. These outcomes nevertheless vary across regions, species groups, and national implementation contexts.

The Natura 2000 network provides substantial socio-economic benefits that far outweigh its costs, including:

- climate regulation;
- flood protection;
- water purification;
- food production;
- forest resources;
- tourism and recreation.

Avoiding environmental damage and maintaining functional ecosystems cut maintenance costs (e.g., fewer water treatment plants, flood barriers). At the same time, Natura 2000's strong legal protection secures long-term investments and reduces the need for ad-hoc legal or emergency repairs. These benefits are estimated at **€200–300 billion annually**, while the annual costs of managing, restoring, and protecting the network are estimated at approximately **€10.2 billion per year**.

The studies cited in the white paper further estimate that every euro invested in conservation and restoration can generate between **€4 and €38 in societal benefits**. While costs exist, they are justified by their benefits and offset by long-term savings.

Expected benefits remain constrained by persistent implementation gaps and shortfalls

- Despite the progress achieved, the conservation status of many habitats and species is limited by systemic challenges: **81% of protected habitats remain in poor or bad conservation status; 35% continue to deteriorate.**

The analyses examined suggest that this situation results primarily from inconsistent enforcement.

Among the main factors identified are:

- insufficient funding;
- uneven administrative capacity and burdens;
- monitoring and data systems deficiencies;
- limited transboundary coordination;
- low stakeholder participation;
- persistent inconsistencies between biodiversity objectives and certain sectoral policies.

According to estimates, biodiversity loss and insufficient implementation capacity of environmental legislation may cost the EU approximately **€180 billion per year** through environmental damage, loss of ecosystem services, and health impacts.

More effective implementation represents one of the main opportunities for simplification

The white paper acknowledges that some procedures may be perceived as complex and may generate high administrative costs. However, it also highlights that these mechanisms help anticipate environmental risks, reduce conflicts, and provide greater legal certainty for both public and private decision-makers.

The paper identifies several areas for improvement, including:

- improving the quality and accessibility of data;
- harmonising monitoring systems;
- strengthening administrative capacity;
- clarifying certain procedures;
- improving transboundary coordination;
- developing more effective governance systems.

From this perspective, simplification is less about reducing environmental safeguards and more about modernising and harmonising implementation tools and processes. This would help reduce delays and costs.

Policy coherence is a critical challenge

Agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy production, transport, urban development, and industrial activities continue to exert significant pressure on habitats and species. Aligning sectoral policies with biodiversity goals is essential to address some of the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss while enhancing the effectiveness of the existing framework.

The directives are a pillar of ecological restoration and climate adaptation

The Birds and Habitats Directives currently provide much of the scientific, technical, and legal foundation underpinning the implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation. Weakening them would undermine the credibility of National Restoration Plans.

Climate change further increases the importance of protected areas such as biodiversity refugia, carbon sinks or ecological corridors. The Natura 2000's adaptive management framework already provides the flexibility needed to adapt conservation objectives and management approaches to changing ecological conditions. Strengthening ecological connectivity and adaptive management will be essential to support biodiversity recovery and climate resilience across the EU.

Read the White Paper:

<https://www.biodiversa.eu/2026/06/22/white-paper-safeguarding-europes-biodiversity-legislation/>