

Priority Note of the Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry of Austria and Sweden

**on finding solutions to mitigate and counter the threat of large
carnivores on agriculture, forestry and hunting**

Alpbach/Austria, August 2023

The year 2023 marks the 30th anniversary of the Habitat Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC). It has indeed been a milestone in protecting endangered flora and fauna in Europe and is a success story as an important pillar in reducing biodiversity loss. In some Member States, predators had been eradicated for more than 100 years and have started to reappear just over a decade ago. However, the recovering of certain protected carnivores has led to severe problems in the field of agriculture such as livestock farming, forestry and hunting.

Clearly, within the last thirty years, circumstances have changed. With an estimated number of 19.000 individuals in the 27 EU Member States¹, the wolf population can exponentially increase by approximately 30% annually. Especially farmers and hunters are negatively affected by this development, for example livestock or hunting dogs taken by wolves causes animal distress as well as direct and indirect economic damages. In the field of farming, the evolving threat of attacks of large carnivores on livestock being killed as a direct consequence constitutes a real risk for traditional agricultural practices. Indeed, the current lack of countering attacks of large carnivores is leading to more and more farmers either completely ending farming in areas including mountain, transhumance and reindeer herding areas or feeling impelled to substantially shorten the grazing period. In addition, this might equally result in a further degradation of rural areas and affiliated economic sectors including tourism.

Therefore, the undersigned Ministers believe that, the current European regulatory framework ought to be examined and adapted accordingly in order to tackle the very uncertain and aggravating situation. Failing to find sustainable solutions, would not only negatively impact the agricultural sector, but could also lead to repercussions in the maintenance and sustainable development of rural areas at large as well as a negative view on wolf management and an increased risk of illegal hunting of wolves.

Moreover, we the undersigned Ministers fully agree that the agricultural and forestry sector as well as hunting community may also contribute towards resolving the current situation. To this end, we have identified steps and measures that are vital to protect amongst other livestock, traditional farming practices as well as biodiversity and endangered species.

In line with this statement, the undersigned Ministers agree to continue working on an Action Plan to put forward to the attention of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the respective Presidency of the Council and the Member States and call upon the European Commission to swiftly initiate processes for their respective implementation.

¹ *Assessment of the conservation status of the Wolf (Canis lupus) in Europe*, Bern Convention, Council of E2022
<https://rm.coe.int/inf45e-2022-wolf-assessment-bern-convention-2791-5979-4182-1-2/1680a7fa47>

Measures to consider, evaluate and implement include but are not limited to:

1. Re-evaluation of the protection status of certain large carnivores in the Habitats Directive

- Given the recovery of the European wolf population over the past years, we call for a reevaluation of their strict protection status and the possibility to move the wolf from annex 4 to annex 5 in the Habitats directive.
- It ought to be evaluated whether and to what extent the current legislation is suitable and practicable to counter the increasing threat of large carnivores to grazing livestock and the possible effect on preserving biodiversity-rich agricultural areas.
- Provide for exemptions from the strict protection rules and possible regulation of stocking densities in regions for certain particularly affected areas where extensive agriculture traditionally plays an important role (e.g. in the Alps or transhumance) and herd protection measures are not economically justifiable or feasible.

2. Establishment of a European working group or reference centre

- While recognizing that the establishment of a joint working group would involve a number of entities, we see a necessity for a joint platform to
 - evolve the exchange of DNA analysis and methods between EU countries;
 - share and accumulate knowledge about distribution, frequency and relationship-patterns of wolf populations;
 - foster a better understanding of requirements deriving from the Habitat Directive to reach a favourable conservation status from a supra-regional perspective that considers geographical conditions;
 - create and compile factsheets on herd protection projects, to enable an evidence-based cost-benefit assessment and thus the feasibility and limits of herd protection measures;
 - encourage and resolve discussions on technical issues (e.g. fence heights);
 - reduce the risk and number of EU infringement procedures with respect to livestock protection measures in the context of wolf attacks.

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