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Headline: EU poised to OK major plan to meet climate goals, better protect nature

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A farmer sits atop a tractor during a protest outside the European Parliament offices in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. AP

A farmer sits atop a tractor during a protest outside the European Parliament offices in Madrid, Spain, Monday, Feb. 26, 2024. AP

STRASBOURG, France — The European Union is on the brink of approving a major plan to fight climate change and better protect nature in the 27-nation bloc after protests from farmers and opposition from the biggest party in parliament led it to be diluted.

The plan is a key part of the EU's European Green Deal that seeks to establish the world's most ambitious climate and biodiversity targets and make the bloc the global point of reference on all climate issues.

The Nature Restoration plan has had a rough ride through the EU's complicated approval process, and a watered-down version will proceed to a final vote by the EU member states, where it is expected to survive.

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"Today's vote to get the Nature Restoration Law over the finish line offers fresh hope for Europe's ability to combat the worst effects of climate change and biodiversity loss for decades to come," said Noor Yafai of the global environmental group The Nature Conservancy.

Under the plan, member states would have to meet restoration targets for specific habitats and species, with the aim of covering at least 20% of the region's land and sea areas by 2030. But quarrels over exemptions and flexibility clauses allowing member states to skirt the rules plagued negotiations.

The bill was adopted earlier by a 329-275 vote with 24 abstentions after the center-right Christian Democratic European People's Party of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen decided to vote against it.

"Today is an important day for Europe as we move from protecting and conserving nature to restoring it," said Socialist S&D legislator César Luena, who led the bill through parliament. "The new law will also help us to fulfill many of our international environmental commitments."

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The plan has lost some of its progressive edge during negotiations since last summer because of fierce opposition from the EPP, which along with other conservatives and the far right has insisted the plans would undermine food security, fuel inflation and hurt farmers.

"It has not been shut down, so it's still flying. It is imperfect. It is incomplete. It lacks ambition. But at least we have a foundation on which to build in the next term," said Philippe Lambert, co-president of the Greens group.

The EPP has been a vocal backer of the farming community, which has been against any additional rules that would make their profession more complicated, bureaucratic and expensive. Farmers have been protesting throughout the bloc for weeks.

"We are implementing additional bureaucratic rules for our farmers in a time where food production and food prices are having a direct impact," EPP leader Manfred Weber said.

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Despite the droughts, floods and heat waves that have swept through many areas in Europe, Weber called for a pause on such environmental action in order to protect economic competitiveness.