

Rising large carnivore populations in Europe: Challenges for agriculture and rural areas

Note from the Austrian delegation

The recent and widespread protests of farmers throughout the EU demonstrate clearly a progressive imbalance between the three pillars of sustainability, namely economic, social and environmental aspects. The prosperity and competitiveness of European agriculture, which is essential for a stable and resilient European Union, is at stake.

In the last months, some of the concerns have been alleviated by the immediate measures taken by European, national and regional authorities. Nevertheless, particularly one important obstacle has to be urgently addressed:

The Habitat Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) has certainly been a milestone in protecting endangered flora and fauna in Europe and is a success story as an important pillar in improving biodiversity. In some Member States, predators had been eradicated for more than 100 years and have slowly started to reappear. However, within the last thirty years, circumstances have fundamentally changed. The recovering of certain protected carnivores, such as wolf, has led to severe problems in the field of agriculture and forestry. Whereas society and land managers in various countries have become used to the absence of the risks posed by some large carnivores and have developed rural areas under these conditions, the population is now rapidly growing, hence causing more and more economically relevant livestock losses as a direct consequence.

According to the in-depth analysis of the European Commission from 2023, around 20.300 wolves were detected across all EU Member States with the exception of Ireland, Cyprus and Malta. Packs are present in 23 countries and the overall number of wolves in the EU is continuously increasing. Especially extensive agricultural practices are negatively affected by this development. The number of livestock killed by wolves in the EU amounts to at least 65 500 annually, 73 % of which are sheep and goats, 19 % cattle and 6 % horses and donkeys¹. However, not only wolves are affecting the farms and welfare of farmed animals. With more than 15.000 to 16.000 bears in the EU², the bear population is increasing and expanding steadily from Eastern to Western Member States.

¹ Blanco JC and Sundseth K (2023). The situation of the wolf (*Canis lupus*) in the European Union – An In-depth Analysis. A report of the N2K Group for DG Environment, European Commission.

² <https://www.lcie.org/Large-carnivores/Brown-bear>

Agriculture and farming in less-favored areas, such as mountain farming, are traditionally a central factor for vibrant and vital rural areas and an essential element of functioning local and regional value chains. Site-adapted, traditional mountain pasture farming has a multifunctional significance, including for tourism as well as for biodiversity as alpine pastures are also home to priority species and habitat types according to the Annexes of the Habitats Directive, which in return are dependent on extensive grazing. Unfortunately, the increasing return of the large carnivores will probably lead to an increased tendency to abandon pastures in the future. The emerging decline of farming in less-favored areas must be swiftly and sustainably addressed and take the ecological, economic and social dimension equally into account.

We therefore urge the Council Presidency to remain committed to tackling the current challenges for the EU farming sector and to

- a. Rapidly finalize discussions on the protection status of wolves in order to be able to provide the necessary flexibility within the **natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora Directive**, considering, **that farmers are currently under severe pressure** due to multiple crises and that the **rise in the number of wolf attacks** on livestock across Europe will again **threaten extensive livestock farming** in the upcoming grazing season;
- b. **Address the concerns of farmers** and the need to **maintain agricultural production throughout the Union's territory**;
- c. **Consult** and comprehensively involve the **AGRIFISH Council**, and the **representatives of the AGRIFISH Council's preparatory bodies** in the work on the Proposal for a COUNCIL DECISION 202370469(NLE) at **all levels**;
- d. Take **immediate action** and allow for a **swift adoption of the Proposal for a COUNCIL DECISION 202370469(NLE) without further delay** and to promote the adaptation of the legal framework within the Bern Convention, the Habitats Directive and the guidelines in accordance with scientific evidence.

Moreover, the supporting Delegations call on the Commission to

- a. Assist for swift adoption of the Proposal for a COUNCIL DECISION 202370469(NLE)
- b. Seek solutions also for the rising population of other species such as the brown bear in some Member States, based on the actual and relevant data

- c. Seek solutions for derogations from the strict protection regime and possible density regulation in the regions for certain most affected areas, where extensive farming traditionally plays a vital role (e.g. alpine farming) and current protection measures are not feasible, as suggested through Article 2 of the Habitats Directive;
- d. Propose a cross-border, comprehensive, and systematic monitoring system – particularly in the context of the “favorable conservation status”, as stated in Article 18 of the Habitats Directive;
- e. Stress again that the common aim is to ensure a “favorable conservation status” of large carnivore populations and at the same time ensure the protection of mountain pasture farming and livestock;
- f. Provide adequate funding for herd protection measures, monitoring systems and a compensation regime for farmers in the event of loss.