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An EU perspective on what lies ahead for upland and alpine birds

MICHEAL O'BRIAIN

DG Environment, European Commission, Brussels, Belgium

Email: Micheal.O'Briain@ec.europa.eu

Since 1979 the EU Birds Directive has provided a strong legal framework for the conservation of all species of wild birds naturally occurring within the European Union. Together with the 1992 Habitats Directive it also provides for the protection of habitats of EU conservation concern, especially within the framework of the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. This includes areas of high biodiversity value in alpine and upland areas that are important for the conservation of wild birds.

Implementation of EU nature legislation is at the core of EU biodiversity policy. The EU has set an ambitious target to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services by 2020. In 2011 the European Commission set out a strategy to help achieve this objective, consisting of six mutually supportive and inter-dependent targets. Target 1 focuses on implementation of EU nature legislation with a view to achieving a significant measurable improvement in conservation status. The Commission will issue an EU-wide assessment in 2015 on the conservation status of protected species and habitats, which will also assess key pressures and the role of Natura 2000.

Achieving the 2020 target will require effective management and restoration of Natura 2000 sites, while at the same time promoting the multiple benefits of the network. The Commission is encouraging co-operation between Member States in each of the different Biogeographical Regions, and discussions, relevant to habitat conservation in upland and alpine areas, have started in the Atlantic, Boreal and Alpine regions of the EU. There also remains the challenge of reconciling economic developments, including energy projects such as wind farms, with the protection of biodiversity.

Achieving improvements within Natura 2000 and the wider countryside will require significant financial investments. In the context of EU support agricultural funds remain the most important source of funding. The newly reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) provides to national and regional authorities a range of opportunities to promote biodiversity including: (i) greening measures in the first pillar, (ii) cross compliance and (iii) rural development measures in the second pillar of the CAP. The greening measures support agricultural practices for crop diversification, ecological focus areas and the maintenance of permanent grasslands. In addition, rural development measures contribute to the biodiversity target mainly through agri-environment-climate, organic farming and Natura 2000 measures.

Other relevant new policy initiatives under the EU Biodiversity Strategy include the development of green infrastructure, the mapping of ecosystems and their services and a new policy initiative on no-net loss, foreseen

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for 2015, which should provide a much stronger basis for managing and restoring natural capital. The Commission is also undertaking a fitness check of the Birds and Habitats Directives as part of a programme aimed at promoting better/smart EU legislation, making it more responsive to current and future challenges and helping improve implementation. A review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy in 2015 should help determine if the EU is on track to meet the 2020 biodiversity target. This evolving policy debate needs to be underpinned by a robust knowledge base.