



Wildlife and
Countryside



European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Tuesday 30th September 2015

Re: Overwhelming support from UK citizens for the EU Birds and Habitats Directives

Dear President Juncker, First Vice-President Timmermans, Vice-President Katainen, Commissioner Vella, and Commissioner Hogan

Citizens from the UK and from across Europe have sent you a clear and powerful message: they place great value on the laws that protect nature, and they want you to focus on improved implementation of those laws.

The network of sites protected under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives represent the foundation of UK nature conservation, and they are visited by hundreds of thousands of people each year. Thanks to the Directives, **the loss of important wildlife sites across the UK has declined dramatically, and many species have come back from the brink of extinction.** However here in the UK, as elsewhere across Europe, implementation of the Directives is far from complete, and while progressive, best-practice approaches to implementation have been developed by NGOs, regulators and industry, there has been insufficient action by Government to support and promote such approaches, or to address failures in implementation.

The European Commission's 12-week online public consultation undertaken as part of the 'fitness check' of the Directives witnessed the unprecedented participation of more than **half a million people, making it the largest ever response to an EU public consultation.** The vast majority of respondents recognised the critical importance of the Directives to nature conservation and their effectiveness in conserving threatened species and habitats. This is an outcome that the European Commission **should rightly be proud of.**

Over 100,000 people from the UK responded to the public consultation, demonstrating their concern regarding the current direction of travel. At a time when UK citizens are being asked to consider the UK's place in the EU, this demonstrates the **high regard with which UK citizens view EU action to safeguard nature.** It also reinforces the finding of the 2013 UK Balance of Competences review: UK citizens are deeply concerned by the state of nature, support the need for EU action to protect nature, and recognise the vital role played by the EU's nature conservation legislation. Moreover, it is not just the general public who hold these views: the important role played by EU legislation in improving the UK's environmental performance is recognised by a wide range of stakeholders, including academics and businesses.

The scale of the response of UK NGO's to the 'fitness check' has also been unprecedented, uniting as the 'Joint Links' who collectively represent voluntary organisations with **more than 8 million members** across the four countries of the UK. Responding to the consultation on behalf of the UK NGO sector, and supported by over 500 separate pieces of evidence and 100 NGOs, we have set out a strong case for why the EU Birds and Habitats Directives represent **the cornerstone of both UK and EU-wide attempts to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity.** They represent a robust yet flexible legal

framework for achieving sustainable development, scientifically proven to be effective where properly implemented, delivering demonstrable benefits for biodiversity in the face of growing pressures – including climate change – as well as significant social and economic benefits that substantially outweigh the costs of implementation. Where they are properly implemented, the Directives work **for nature, for people and for business.**

However, incomplete implementation of the Directives combined with inadequate funding and the failure to reform other UK and EU policies such as the flawed Common Agricultural Policy mean that biodiversity continues to decline at an alarming rate. **The urgent case for better implementation and greater investment in nature** is supported by citizens, NGOs, and businesses as it would bring multiple benefits to society and help the UK deliver on its national, EU, and international commitments to protect and restore nature by 2020. In contrast, making changes to the Directives now would be **bad for nature, bad for people, and bad for business.** As well as deflecting attention from the much needed focus on implementation and wider action for nature required if we are to meet our 2020 targets, it would also undermine decades of progress in clarifying requirements and developing best practice, and would cause sustained uncertainty for developers and investors alike.

This position is supported by the UK Government's own 2012 Review of Implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives in England which concluded that “...in the large majority of cases the implementation of the Directives is working well, allowing both development of key infrastructure and ensuring that a high level of environmental protection is maintained”, but that there is “...scope for improving the way the Directives are implemented in England.” The measures recommended to improve implementation were broadly welcomed by both the industry and NGO sectors, although progress in their delivery to date has been disappointing.

Citizens and other stakeholders from the UK and across the other 27 EU Member State have sent you a clear signal that they expect you **to stand up for Europe's nature** and ensure that the high levels of protection promised not only in the Birds and Habitats Directives but more generally in the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the Lisbon Treaty are fully delivered. **This objective will be best delivered by a clear focus on taking the action that nature needs now, rather than delaying that action and by making unnecessary changes to the now highly developed regulatory framework.**

Yours Sincerely,



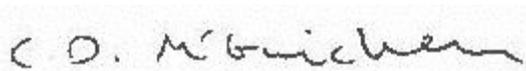
Kate Jennings
Chair, Joint Links Habitats and Birds Task and Finish Group



Susan Evans
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