

From:
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Grace O'Sullivan, MEPs

European Parliament
60, Rue Wiertz
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Brussels, 12 May 2020

To:
Mr Frans Timmermans, Executive Vice-President of the European Commission for the
European Green Deal
Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius, Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries

CC:
Mr Janusz Wojciechowski, Commissioner for Agriculture
Ms Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health

Subject: Greens/EFA MEPs call for ambitious action on biodiversity

Honourable Vice-President and Commissioner,
Dear Mr. Timmermans, Dear Mr. Sinkevičius,

The COVID-19 pandemic is showing more clearly than ever before the risks associated with human activity causing biodiversity loss. As Europe is facing an historic crisis, there has never been a more relevant moment for actively steering the EU towards a more sustainable future, effectively tackling climate change, protecting nature and biodiversity and reversing nature loss to shield against the risk of future pandemics.

The current crisis has shown that we need more, and not less Europe. As species extinction is accelerating, and with ecosystems deteriorating at rates unprecedented in human history, we call upon the European Commission to hold on to the European Green Deal as a framework for addressing this challenge. The momentum that has already been established by this new Commission should be maintained and strengthened by bringing forward and implementing initiatives such as the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy.

We are truly convinced that this is the time for a Marshall Plan for Life on Earth. We need to work out a plan that sufficiently invests in the protection, restoration and sustainable management of biodiversity, and that re-positions nature at the heart of sustainable development. To do anything less is to succumb to a deepening crisis that will eventually have far more negative consequences for humanity than COVID-19.

We strongly believe that this crisis should encourage political leaders to rethink our socio-economic model and transform it to a more resilient system capable of

withstanding existential threats and crises, be they environmental, medical, economic or societal in origin. This new system must take planetary boundaries into account while providing well-financed essential public services and other means to ensure a fair and resilient society.

In line with this, we are asking that the future political actions of the EU enable a socio-ecological transformation of our economies that sees the topic of biodiversity linked to all human activity. We need to plan how to rebuild our economy and to introduce the necessary recovery plans in order to bring sustainable progress and prosperity back to Europe and its citizens. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the persisting climate and ecological crisis.

We would like to use this opportunity to present to you just a few of the ways in which the EU can help achieve this necessary transition:

1. Protecting Nature and Biodiversity: Reversing Nature Loss

The Commission must work on the rigorous implementation and enforcement of existing legislation, for example suspending cohesion policy pay-outs when directed to projects adversely affecting biodiversity, shortening infringement procedures to avoid irreversible damage and ensuring full implementation and enforcement of the Birds and Habitats Directives, Water Framework Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive and Natura2000 network at the member state level.

We are also calling on the Commission to prepare blueprints for the set-up of Natura2000 management plans. Although member states have dedicated valuable biodiversity hotspots, the management of these sites is often not given adequate attention and this results in insufficient protection of the species in question.

In line with the recommendations issued by UNEP, the EU must immediately start to lead the way and adopt binding targets to protect at least 30% of land and marine areas by 2030. In addition to quantity, safeguarding the quality of protected areas is also essential to stop biodiversity loss. Therefore more emphasis needs to be placed on the management of protected areas, including areas with a high level of protection where all economic activities are prohibited. We have to improve, better connect and extend areas such as Natura2000 sites and combat further deforestation, as well as conversion or degradation of natural ecosystems. A comprehensive set of measures and initiatives to protect and restore the world's forests, including new legislation ensuring value chains do not involve deforestation, is essential to reduce the EU footprint on the world's natural ecosystems.

We propose that any measures taken - not only regarding biodiversity or environmental issues, but all legislative action - should be "impact assessed" by scientists before a decision is taken and we believe that the European Environment Agency is best placed to carry out such assessments. We must follow a holistic approach and tackle the problem of biodiversity loss in an inter-disciplinary manner.

2. Future-Oriented Use of Land and Oceans

Agriculture is a key player and our agricultural model will be decisive in whether we gain or lose biodiversity. It is therefore high time for stringent biodiversity protection measures to be included in the next CAP. We must move away from using direct payments as a simple support for agricultural income, towards a more targeted form of support that rewards sustainable farming practices and investments. Payments should be related to sustainable practices such as favouring biodiversity, decreasing pollution, reducing pesticides and synthetic fertilizer input, maintaining local employment and fostering regional circuits.

We have to facilitate a conversion to organic farming and to boost the sustainable organic sector so that it counts for at least 30% of the entire farming sector all over Europe. Moreover, we should encourage the use of traditional and diverse crops, seeds and breeds as well as fruit and vegetable varieties to reverse the loss of genetic diversity in farming. Furthermore, the sustainable agricultural model of the future should not depend on the import of proteins that contribute to the exploitation of the global south. Today, the majority of protein plants is used as animal feed and not for human consumption. The problem of industrial animal production should be tackled with a policy focussing on 'less but better meat', which would also allow for the rebalancing the number of animals with the number of hectare.

In view of the close link between land and sea, such measures will also reduce the impact of agriculture on our European seas, especially semi-enclosed ones. This also means designing agricultural policy according to the "public money for public goods" principle. Importantly, the ecosystem-based management approach to fisheries should be properly implemented, having been enshrined in the Common Fisheries Policy since 2013 but remaining mostly a paper exercise since then.

Moreover, we call for improving biodiversity and climate proofing and ask for a target of at least 10% of biodiversity-related spending in the next MFF, in addition to the climate mainstreaming target, and ask for the current funding of the LIFE+ Programme to be significantly increased. We also urge the European Commission to propose binding legislation to drastically reduce the use of pesticides, with a view to phasing out chemical pesticides within 15 years. At the same time, the recommendations of the Parliament's PEST Special Committee must be properly implemented with immediate effect. If not, we risk approving products without sufficient examination, a move which would have serious consequences for the over 30% of EU land area that is used for agriculture. It is outrageous that the Union strategy for a non-toxic environment which was required to be adopted by 2018 pursuant to the 7th Environmental Action Programme was postponed by the previous Commission, and that endocrine disruptors still lack appropriate regulation. We need decisive action in the context of the upcoming chemicals strategy for sustainability that fully addresses these challenges.

3. Sustainable Transformation of our Economy

We are in the middle of the most drastic economic crisis for decades. Almost all economic sectors currently seek support and it is inevitable that some sectors will have to be completely restructured.

The tourism sector - as one pertinent example - has been hit particularly hard and is experiencing a complete standstill. We now have the unique opportunity to ensure that the recovery process meets the criteria of sustainable management from the beginning and places sustainability at the heart of all future economic activities. The revitalisation of the tourism sector must happen in line with the Paris Climate Goals, the Global Development Goals (Agenda 2030) and with respect to global human rights. We have to realise that these goals are simply not compatible with permanent growth, and the campaign to revitalise our tourism sector should instead be based on quality: better protection of natural resources and the eco-system, a revaluation of natural landscapes, and a higher quality of life for local populations through more decent and secure jobs in tourism. Unfortunately, previous strategies have often ignored the contradiction between sustainability and permanent growth. This time, we must cultivate closer involvement of local populations and create more economic stability for touristic regions.

Of course, these criteria remain equally valid for the recovery and rebuilding of all other economic sectors. We have to ensure that any form of support is founded on the principle of sustainability and its environmental impact always kept in focus. We also need to reflect on how we want to carry out a transformation process towards a sustainable economic model, which serves the common good and fosters the participation of citizens. The Conference of the Future of Europe offers an excellent opportunity to align the Recovery Plan, the Green Deal and all forthcoming EU legislative initiatives with ambitious protection of natural resources.

The fight against climate change and biodiversity loss provides potential for huge job creation and economic development that can help the EU economy recover from the COVID-19 shock. Beyond funding the pressing short term needs, funds at EU level – whether from the EU budget, ESM or EIB – should be massively increased and channelled into an EU-wide Green Recovery Investment Package that goes beyond the current Sustainable Europe Investment Plan in terms of ambition.

4. Education and Vocational Training

We firmly believe that we should convey the value of nature and the environment to the younger generation from an early age. Environmental protection and environmental awareness should be given a central place in school curricula, encouraging self-empowerment by experimental education, nature-based learning, democracy learning as well as school-gardening projects. Future generations should be imparted with the skills and background they need to face the huge challenges of the climate and biodiversity crisis and for this they need to be equipped intellectually and technically, but also emotionally, philosophically and in

actions. We hope that member states will be encouraged to integrate these aspects in their education programmes.

Moreover, we stress the importance of lifelong education and training for workers employed in the wide sector of nature-management and nature conservation. Continuous learning and the utilisation of up-to-date knowledge is an important factor to respond adequately to the challenges we are facing in the global environmental crisis and in the successful implementation and sustainable management of nature sites.

5. Global Action

The UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming in October 2020 was expected to be a key moment for the world to define a global strategy for protecting biodiversity. Just like the current Covid19-crisis, the ecological crisis requires immediate, spirited and ambitious multi-dimensional action from the EU as well as at the global level. We need a bold, coordinated, comprehensive action plan for all countries worldwide to implement. We kindly ask the European Commission to present a road map for Europe's active and leading role in the creation of a post 2020 global biodiversity strategy.

Honourable Vice-President, Honourable Commissioner,

We should take the current crisis as an urgent warning and use the experience we have acquired from it to tackle the topic of biodiversity. Therefore, we strongly hope that the European Commission stands by its aim to curtail biodiversity loss, preserve and restore our ecosystems in the most determined way and will publish without further delay a courageous and future-oriented draft of the 2030 Biodiversity Strategy. For this, you can count on our full support and cooperation.

Sincerely,

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