

Renewable Energy Directive for nature

March 2022

Both the ecological crisis and the climate crisis threaten the health of the planet, including human livelihoods and biodiversity. Achieving the climate change objectives will require a combination of efforts, including a reduction in energy consumption, increased renewable energy to replace fossil fuels and enormous increases in energy efficiency, in order to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 65% by 2030 and achieve 100% renewable energy system by 2040.

The revision of the Renewable Energy Directive is an opportunity to set priorities straight for the EU and aligning solutions that can tackle both the ecological and the climate crisis will require priorities that can safeguard nature and human livelihoods. Reducing carbon emissions is important. On top of that biodiversity protection and natural sinks should be included as a deciding factor when prioritising climate action, and especially in deciding what counts towards achieving the Renewable Energy targets. For example, forests represent 30% of all land habitats in the EU. Their protection is fundamental to tackling the biodiversity crisis and the climate crisis. The IPBES and IPCC reports are clear that addressing synergies between biodiversity loss and climate change will maximize their benefits and help meet both targets. Of the 81 forest habitat types protected by the Habitats Directive, only 14% are in good/favourable conservation status, with many still to be designated. Just as important should be minimising impacts on nature and accounting for its ecological capacities.

Wind, solar and geothermal energy, in order to have a low impact on nature, are dependent on good spatial planning as well as removing other human activities that lower the resilience of the ecosystem. For example, good spatial planning on Member States and EU-level, can help speed up development by identifying suitable and nature-compatible areas for offshore renewable energy, focusing on low impact areas based on the sensitivity of protected species and habitats. This can help to avoid biodiversity impacts and reach renewable energy goals. Specifically, wind and solar energy development need to be sped up for them to have an adequate contribution to climate change mitigation while hydropower and the large-scale demand for forest biomass and crop-based fuels for energy are highly destructive to nature and, spatial planning is unable to mitigate their impact. Hydropower plants have proven to cause dramatic changes in freshwater biodiversity and surrounding species. Besides disrupting habitats, redefining landscapes and altering the water's quality, hydropower plants are barriers to the transportation of sediments down the river. Both hydropower and biomass can greatly impact natural carbon stocks and the burning of forest biomass increases atmospheric CO₂ concentrations over climate relevant timescales that cannot be offset by replanting trees. Therefore, the EU needs to prioritise which energy to invest in.

Furthermore, greater investment will be required in a system that can support energy that aligns with nature. In particular, the EU will need to move towards electrification of energy, decentralised system and a smarter grid. This would mean the Renewable Energy Directive should:

- 1) Prioritise upgrading the energy grid that can enable the compatibility of solar, wind and geothermal energy, including for decentralising energy.
- 2) Support efforts to place solar photovoltaic cell energy on buildings, in particular to improve the energy that can be produced in urban environments.
- 3) Incentivise the electrification of the energy system by improving existing infrastructure and connecting rural areas.

In order to minimise the impact of energy systems on nature, the Renewable Energy Directive should:

- 1) Place a greater focus on minimising the need for new generation capacity and infrastructure by maximising the efficiency of already established renewable energy installations.
- 2) Remove energy from forest biomass and new hydropower plants from being accounted as renewable energy and achieving Member States' targets.
- 3) Exclude crop-based fuels due to their high Induced Land Use Changes and implement the cascading use principles, avoiding as much as possible the burning of organic matter.
- 4) Maximise the efficiency of already established hydropower installations through retro-fitting, in particular where redesigning can lower their environmental impact
- 5) Clearly set out the importance of achieving favourable conservation status of species and habitats as defined by the Birds and Habitats Directive, the good ecological status of water bodies as defined by the Water Framework Directive and the good environmental status of marine areas as defined by the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.
- 6) Set out a planning process for Member States that speeds up development and limits the impacts of renewable energy on nature and ensure that renewable energy installation and operation will not hinder the conservation, ecological and environmental status of species, habitats, water bodies and marine areas.

Contact:

- Bruna Campos, EuroNatur Foundation, Senior Policy Manager, +32 499 939 341
- Marilda Dhaskali, BirdLife Europe and Central Asia, Policy Officer for Agriculture and Bioenergy, +32478 88 73 02
- Carla Freund, NABU/BirdLife Policy Officer for nature friendly energy transition in Europe, +32 484 78 21 29
- Kenneth Richter, NABU/BirdLife Policy Officer for Bioenergy, +49 1 762 359 3712