



LIFE NETWORKING MEETING

on Key challenges to upscaling nature restoration in the EU – learning from LIFE experience



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SUMMARY FOR POLICY-MAKERS

The European Commission has developed and implemented nature and biodiversity policies since many decades. Initially, the focus of nature policy and legislation was on protecting species and natural sites. The first EU-wide nature legislation in this regard was the 1979 EU Birds Directive, addressing wild bird species only, including a protection scheme for Special Protection Areas to be established to protect these species.

Later, in the 1992 EU Habitats Directive, other species groups were added to the legal schemes, as was the attention to natural habitats and habitat types. For the first time, this Directive also referred to restoration as a means to achieve favourable conservation status of natural habitats and species of Community Interest, in addition to their conservation and maintenance.

Nature restoration became more prominent in policy in the sequence of EU biodiversity strategies, starting in 1998 and leading up to the current EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. It was increasingly recognised that nature restoration not only serves to achieve the goals of nature and biodiversity policy, but also some of the goals of other policy sectors. By restoring nature, important services provided by ecosystems to society, are maintained or enhanced. Healthy ecosystems help supporting climate change policy by contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation. They also support water policy through water purification or storage, and they contribute to food security by protecting healthy soils and pollinator populations.

This recognition of the multiple benefits offered by nature restoration, and the notion that the Habitats and Birds Directives did not set clear deadlines for achieving the policy goals, led to the adoption in 2024 of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR). The Regulation is set to, at EU level, put in place restoration measures on at least 20% of Europe's land and sea areas by 2030, and in all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050.

The Regulation has four overarching objectives:

1. To ensure the long-term and sustained recovery of biodiversity and resilient ecosystems through the restoration of degraded ecosystems.
2. To contribute to achieving the EU's objectives concerning climate change mitigation and adaptation and land degradation neutrality.
3. To enhance food security.
4. To contribute to meeting international commitments.

Being a Regulation, its targets are legally binding, and Member States are required to draft national restoration plans by September 2026 as tools to, at the national level, implement and achieve the Regulation's objectives.

One of the means to support the implementation of nature restoration is by providing financial support to Member States for project development and implementation. Since 1992, the key

financial instrument in this regard is the EU LIFE Programme. Since then, it has funded over 6,000 projects, of which about one third focus on restoring habitats and species populations. The experience and knowledge that has been built up by this pool of projects, and the actors implementing them, is a key asset to give the NRR a kick-start for upscaling nature restoration.

This networking meeting on nature restoration challenges, held online on 20 & 21 March 2025, addressed precisely this issue: the need to upscale nature restoration for higher impact in terms of nature recovery and delivery of essential ecosystem services. In three sessions, each with five LIFE projects presenting experiences, it focused on three groups of challenges:

1. knowledge transfer and capacity building
2. access to land
3. mobilizing other sectors

Based on the presentations and session discussions, it was recognized that the NRR is there to restore degraded nature, and at the same time to support other policies. It is clear that LIFE, with other EU and national funds, is an essential programme to implement the Regulation.

Ten key recommendations were distilled from the meeting:

1. The event presented only a small selection of examples; there is much more knowledge and experience in the many LIFE projects that can be learned from (e.g. urban ecosystems). Actors are advised to **consult the LIFE project database for further inspiration**.
2. All situations are different, upscaling needs to balance between applying the same measures at larger geographical scales and **customizing nature restoration solutions** per site, habitat, plot, or square meter.
3. **Volunteers and other allies** represent a key asset as guardians, work force and ambassadors for natural sites. It is important to **cherish and reward** them through recognition and engagement.
4. Upscaling requires **continuity and gradual expansion**, as is already happening in sequential LIFE projects. **Large-scale strategic projects (IPs and SNaPs) are a lever for further upscaling**, in which LIFE beneficiaries, policymakers, sector representatives and other stakeholders should get fully involved.
5. Nature restoration contributes to several policy sectors and actors, each with their own governance and institutional networks. The LIFE Programme and LIFE projects are advised to **engage these actors**, by informing them about project results, involving them in decision-making, identifying common goals, creating understanding and ownership, and building lasting partnerships.
6. Especially the private sector, including industry and commerce, offers opportunities for increasing competitiveness and innovation. LIFE projects should not shy away and rather **be ambitious in engaging the private sector**.
7. **Land purchase and management agreements continue to be essential tools** for upscaling restoration, liaising with landowners from very early stages is a prerequisite for success.

8. The importance of communication cannot be overstated. The LIFE Programme and Projects are advised to **involve knowledge brokers or other facilitators** to customize their communications to end users and allies (and enemies).
9. The LIFE community is a key asset to support the NRR. LIFE beneficiaries are recommended to **support their LIFE national contact points and national authorities** in preparing national restoration plans.
10. As there is no LIFE Programme without projects, all are invited to **continue submitting project proposals**, especially with new LIFE Calls having recently been launched on the LIFE website.

RELEVANT LINKS & REFERENCES

Event website: https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/networking-meeting-key-challenges-upscaling-nature-restoration-eu-learning-life-experience-2025-03-20_en

Event recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLKuLiQiggrCmI5msTtOcb3WWIFH8nFH3w>

Nature Restoration Regulation: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/nature-restoration-regulation_en

EC Brochure on the Nature Restoration Regulation: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/cd10f41c-fd61-11ef-b7db-01aa75ed71a1/language-enon>