

Financing Natura 2000

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PURPOSE : to assess future financing options for Natura 2000.

CONTENT : Europe's commitment to biodiversity and the preservation thereof has been outlined on numerous occasions, not least of which was at the 2001 Gothenburg summit of EU Heads of State. Following the summit the Head's of State made a commitment to reverse the decline of biodiversity in the European Union by 2010. The Natura 2000 network of protected areas made up of sites designated under the Community Bird and Habitats Directives is a key pillar of Community Action for the conservation of biodiversity. The question of financing Natura 2000 has been the matter of considerable debate amongst the EU institutions. Before preparing a response to this matter, the Commission consulted a wider variety of interested parties on the most appropriate way in which to finance Natura. In this task the Commission was assisted by an Expert Group made up of representatives of Member States and a variety of stakeholder groups. The report of the group, delivered in 2002 quantified the financial needs of the Natura 2000 network and reviewed experience of Community financing to date, as well as identifying options for future Community co-financing of the network.

Based on the findings of the report the Commission asserts that choices must now be made regarding future financing - either the integration of Natura financing into other relevant Community policies or a stand-alone fund. Most of the Member States' favour the integration option, while stakeholders have shown a preference for a dedicated Natura 2000 fund. In the end the Commission has opted for an integrationist approach to the matter of financing. It does so for the following reasons:

- It will ensure that the management of Natura 2000 sites is part of the wider land management policies of the EU. Farming, for example, will be part of the CAP financial support and, structural interventions, being part of rural and regional development policies. This complementary approach will enable the network of Natura 2000 sites to play its role in protecting Europe's biodiversity – more so than if Natura sites are seen to be isolated or different from the wider policy context.
- It will allow Member States to set priorities and to develop policies and measures which reflect their national and regional specificities.
- It will avoid duplication and overlap of different Community funding instruments and the administrative complication and transaction costs, which would be associated with such duplication.

Based on the reasons outlined above, the Commission has decided that it will propose, as part of its forthcoming package of legislative proposals on the future financial perspectives, measures allowing Member States to draw co-financing for certain activities in Natura 2000 sites from a range of existing instruments.

Moreover, in a recent policy document the Commission stated that future rural development policy after 2006 should be structured, inter alia, around:

- Enhancing the environment and countryside through support for land management, including the co-financing of rural development actions related to Natura 2000 nature protection sites and
- The development and implementation of the Natura 2000 network of sites to protect European biodiversity as well as implementation of the biodiversity actions plans.

To conclude, therefore, the Commission foresees a substantial part of future Natura 2000 funding coming from the Structural and Rural Development Funds, albeit that it will not be possible to fix a target for the level of this funding since the final expenditure will depend on the priority given to Natura 2000 within individual Member State programmes.