



European Division
Avenue de la Toison d'Or, 67
B-1060 Brussels, Belgium
Tel +32 2 280 08 30
Fax +32 2 230 38 02
E-mail: europa@birdlife.org
<http://europa.birdlife.org>

Ms Mariann Fischer Boel
Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development
European Commission
B-1049 Brussels
Belgium

Brussels, 22 October 2008
Ref.08/131/CP.

Request for information about loss of permanent grassland in the EU

Dear Commissioner Fischer-Boel,

I am writing to you to express the deep concern of the European Partnership of BirdLife International over the widespread destruction of permanent grasslands that we are witnessing across the EU and to ask for information on the action currently undertaken by the Commission to assess and prevent the resulting severe biodiversity loss and climate damage.

Grasslands, especially extensive semi-natural grasslands, represent some of Europe's most valuable biodiversity habitats and are protected under the EU Nature Directives. Most of these permanent grasslands are threatened by either intensification of agricultural activities (being turned into arable land) or by abandonment.

A second reason for concern is that permanent grasslands represent an important carbon stock. Ploughing up grasslands for the first time leads to a swift and potentially enormous release of soil carbon. This can significantly contribute to climate change.

Given the potentially catastrophic, and partially irreversible damage that may arise from a new wave of grassland conversion (triggered by high cereal prices and biofuel production), we believe the Commission should be taking swift and decisive action to monitor the situation, enforce existing rules and propose new ones if the current legislation is demonstrated to be failing.

In the light of this, I would like to ask you, Commissioner, to provide us, and the public, with the following information:

- The extent of grassland loss since 2004 and in particular in the past two years in all EU Member States
- An assessment of grassland loss that affects natural and semi-natural areas of importance as carbon stocks or as EU protected biodiversity habitats
- The actions taken by the Commission to ensure that all Member States are correctly enforcing the obligation to protect permanent pasture under Cross Compliance
- The actions taken by the Commission to assess whether such obligation is indeed being successful in preserving biodiversity and carbon rich grasslands
- In case the system was demonstrated to be ineffective, the possibilities which the Commission sees to improve the rules

I thank you in advance for your utmost concern about this vital issue. We are looking forward to receiving a reply from you soon on the individual questions listed above, and to cooperate with the Commission on finding solutions to this serious problem. Please find attached a briefing with more detailed information, and the press release we are issuing on this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Claire Papazoglou
Regional Director, BirdLife International European Division

Annex: Briefing

BirdLife International concerns on the loss of permanent grasslands in the EU

BirdLife International is highly concerned about the loss and destruction of permanent grasslandsⁱ in the EU, which represent invaluable habitats for biodiversity and important carbon stocks. BirdLife asks the European Commissioner for Agriculture about the extent of the problem and the measures taken by the Commission to address it.

Cereals and other arable crops prices have increased by over 80% during the last three years. This provides farmers with a clear incentive to expand their arable production at the expense of grasslands. Indeed a very significant increase in cereals production has already been recorded.ⁱⁱ Our concern is that this is accelerating the already widespread conversion of grasslands, including permanent pastures and meadows that are of great value for biodiversity – and the climate.

Grasslands, especially the extensive semi-natural grassland, represent some of Europe's most valuable biodiversity habitats. Natural and semi-natural grassland formations are one of the most important group of habitats listed in the Annex I of the EU Habitat Directive. At the same time it is known that most of these permanent grasslands are threatened by either intensification of agricultural activities or by abandonment. As a consequence grassland areas have gone through a dramatic decline in recent decades. The conversion of permanent grasslands to arable production therefore entails a significant and often irreversible loss of biodiversity.

A second reason for concern is that permanent grasslands represent an important carbon stock. Ploughing up grasslands for the first time leads to a swift and potentially enormous release of soil carbon.ⁱⁱⁱ This can give a significant contribution to exacerbating climate change.

Any data on grassland conversion is likely to be a severe underestimate. EU Cross Compliance rules only cover permanent pasture, which exclude several important categories of grasslands. Total coverage figures also mean that the first ploughing of ancient carbon and biodiversity rich grasslands is “masked” by abandonment of arable land elsewhere that is transformed into usually carbon and biodiversity poor “artificial” grassland.

Anecdotal evidence BirdLife starts to receive from experts working in various parts of Europe suggests that high cereal prices are indeed accelerating the destruction of grasslands in many regions, including inside Natura 2000 sites.

For example:

- a localised and still to be published study in Italy has shown a loss of 15% in permanent grassland and 70% reduction in rotational fodder grassland between 2007 and 2008.
- comprehensive data released by the German government shows an almost 5% decline in overall grassland cover in the Länder Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein & Hamburg between 2003 and 2007. This suggests a large scale problem (that, as explained is likely to be much more acute than what is suggested by the simple land cover figures).
- the EU funded LIFE project on the conservation of the French Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) population has registered a 7 to 24% reduction in grassland areas in recent years within the Special Protection Areas (Natura 2000 sites) of the Poitou-Charentes

region while the Little Bustard has almost completely vanished from the areas outside designated SPAs due to the almost total disappearance of grassland habitats (permanent grasslands and set aside plots).

Given the potentially catastrophic, and partially irreversible damage that is arising from this new wave of grassland conversion (triggered by high cereal prices and biofuel production), we believe the Commission should be taking swift and decisive action to monitor the situation, enforce existing rules and propose new ones if the current legislation is demonstrated to be failing.

In the light of this, BirdLife would like to ask the Commissioner for Agriculture to provide the information specified in the attached letter.

ⁱ Although the definition of “permanent pasture” does not cover all grasslands, the importance of grassland protection is recognised by the EU; for example Regulation 1782/2003 states “Since permanent pasture has a positive environmental effect, it is appropriate to adopt measures to encourage the maintenance of existing permanent pasture to avoid a massive conversion into arable land”.

ⁱⁱ The Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) has released an estimate that total EU cereal harvest this year should be close to 301 million tonnes, representing an increase of 16% compared to 2007 and 9% compared to the past 5 years’ average. http://mars.jrc.ec.europa.eu/Bulletins/Europe/2008/FU2_05%20August%202008_web.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ JRC & EEA (2006). Proceedings of the expert consultation “Sustainable bioenergy cropping systems for the Mediterranean”. Madrid, 9-10 February 2006.

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