



## Position paper of the Birds and Habitats Directives Task Force on the Favourable Conservation Status of Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

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### **Definition**

A site (SPA) is in favourable conservation status (FCS) if the site-specific conservation targets, expressed in terms of bird population parameters (population size or other chosen characteristics), habitat extent or quality or a species' range indicate that it is at a pre-determined favourable reference value (FRV) for all of the species for which the site was classified. If any one of the populations of the classifying species is below its favourable reference value, judged by the species population, habitat or range targets, the site is in unfavourable conservation status.

Some **explanations and comments** of the definitions and terms used in the above statement:

- Ultimately, FRV is tied to the population levels of individual classifying species. Regular monitoring of the populations of all qualifying species is therefore essential in the long term, even though the monitoring of habitat and range targets can give an indication of whether or not a site is at FCS.
- At its simplest, FRV can be equal to the baseline population level of the species in question if that is accepted as being in favourable conservation status, taking into consideration the natural range of fluctuation for the given species or habitat
- Baseline population level is the population level at a designated or candidate SPA (=Important Bird Areas as identified by BirdLife International) at the time the Birds Directive came into force in the country in question
- The population, habitat or range target can be set at a different level to the one that corresponds to the baseline population level, if there is a good reason to believe that the species in question was not at a favourable conservation status at that time. The following considerations might lead to setting higher population, habitat or range targets:
  1. Species populations have increased since the baseline date
  2. Historic data indicates that the species was in decline before the baseline date
  3. Mechanisms are in place which suppress population density (e.g. hunting or disturbance)
  4. Research studies indicate that the site's carrying capacity is higher than current population levels
  5. Higher-level (network, national, EU or European) conservation objectives require setting higher targets at the site level.

Some **other important issues** to note:

- Population levels within the site might have been reduced irreversibly since the baseline was established, due to irreversible habitat loss. It is suggested that in this case the site is in permanent unfavourable conservation status (UCS) for the species in question. In such cases, the Member State has an obligation to restore populations of the given species to favourable levels elsewhere in the network to compensate for the irreversible loss.
- Population levels might have been reduced due to factors that are external to the site, e.g. general shift in the range of the species due to climatic factors or due to high winter mortality elsewhere. In this case, the site can be in FCS for the species (in terms of its habitat quantity and quality) with the species being present in significantly reduced numbers or, in extreme cases, absent. Careful investigation would be required to establish whether such external factors are operating.
- Fluctuations in terms of population levels or habitat extent that are considered normal are permitted deviations to the established targets.
- Population targets can be given as: total recommended population, population density or a given population variable (e.g. mortality rate, reproductive success)
- Conservation targets and favourable reference values can be set for species other than the ones for which the site was classified (this is important as Natura 2000 Standard Data Forms often do not differentiate between classifying and other species), i.e. for non-classifying species. However, it is suggested that these species should not be taken into consideration when defining the site's overall conservation status.

BirdLife **recommends** that the European Commission and Member State governments:

- Up-date the Natura 2000 forms for Special Protection Areas at regular intervals to ensure that they serve a strong basis for establishing and monitoring against favourable reference values (inter alia by specifically mentioning and including all classifying species for the site)
- Define favourable reference values and targets to achieve favourable conservation status of bird species at site and national level, the first time during the regular reporting under the Habitats Directive for the period 2000-06 to link it to reporting on the conservation status of habitats and species under that Directive
- The European Topic Centre on Biodiversity, in consultation with experts from the European Commission, Member States and NGOs to develop a way to set Favourable Reference Values of bird species at the EU level, taking into consideration the site and national level status assessments and FRVs and the EU and European status assessments of BirdLife
- Implement schemes to monitor the conservation status of all species (from site level upwards) and of all sites as a whole covered by this Directive, including important sites used on migration, in winter or during the breeding season.

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