

EU finally addressing threat of Invasive alien species

Title

The EU law to address Invasive Alien Species is high on the policy agenda in Brussels. After many ups and downs, the three EU institutions seem to have found a compromise on common rules which could halt the environmental, economic and health damages caused by animals and plants introduced to Europe.

In September 2013, the European Commission proposed a regulation text for a coordinated pan-European action on Invasive Alien Species. Until now Member States have been acting individually in an uncoordinated way, and often, efforts in one country were jeopardized by a lack of action across its borders that invasive species do not recognize. At the heart of the Commission's text was the establishment of a 'black list' of the most dangerous species, for which EU wide biosecurity rules would apply (ban on transport, detention, release, etc). But the list was limited to a very low cap of 50 species while **more than 12,000 alien species have gained a foothold in Europe**, from Asian tiger mosquitoes, to North American ragweed, and at least 1,500 are known to be harmful. Alarmed by this lack of realism, **the scientific and environmental community called on the European decision makers to adopt a more science-based approach** in the drafting of the regulation.

The text was then sent to the European Parliament and Council. Under the pressure of the Mink fur industry, notably very present in Denmark, a group of Member States called for derogations to allow the breeding and trade of dangerous species. The reason advanced by the fur industry and other commercial interests was the 'economical interest', which completely ignores the rapidly mounting **costs of invasives, estimated to be already above 12 billion euros per year in Europe**. Besides, such a measure would be counterproductive and costly since allowing the spread of one invasive in a specific country would undermine control efforts in other countries. Another incoherent proposal was to exclude species that represent a problem only in certain parts of the EU. This is the case of the Water hyacinth that can choke the life out of Mediterranean rivers but does not prosper in cold climates. However, without common rules within the EU where people are free of movement, nothing would prevent a British citizen, for instance, from buying the plant in the UK and then plant it in his holiday house in Spain.

The final deal reached on March 5th between the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Greek Presidency has ended up with a regulation that is far from perfect, but does provide a framework for starting to address the problem. The 50 species cap has been removed from the list of species of EU concern and an independent 'Scientific forum'

will be created to help ensure that the listing and actions are based on sound science and not just political pressures. Also, the wide ranging derogations have finally been dropped. However, the text does allow licensing of breeding facilities (such as fur farms or potted plants nurseries) and it remains to be seen to what extent such licensing will be abused.

The European Parliament and the Council now need to officially approve the deal for the text to enter into force. Many elements of the agreed text lack detail so much of the effectiveness of the Regulation will depend on decisions taken by the Commission and Member States in the implementation stage. BirdLife Europe will be there to help ensure that effective action is actually taken on the ground.
