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****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****

A real European union emerges to back nature

Environment Ministers of the EU have today [Wednesday 16th December] stood up to defend nature, calling for more money for protected areas and opposing a re-opening of the Birds and Habitats Directives.

At a meeting of the Environment Council earlier, the European Commission was told to safeguard the laws, also known as the Nature Directives, and improve their implementation – seen as the best way for the EU to meet its 2020 biodiversity goals. The Commission is currently undertaking a ‘Fitness Check’ process of the directives.

A mid-term assessment out in October highlighted that most aims of the EU Biodiversity Strategy won’t be met unless far more work is done over the next five years.

The Natura 2000 network of protected areas, set up and managed through the Birds and Habitats Directives, is seen as vital for restoring and protecting ecosystems, yet it currently only receives around 10-20% of the funding it needs to fully function.

Ministers highlighted full implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives as key to achieving the targets of the Strategy, with a special focus put on enforcement.

While falling short of an outright call to reform the deeply flawed Common Agricultural Policy, Ministers recognised the role of agriculture as a main driver of biodiversity loss.

Ariel Brunner, BirdLife Europe Senior Head of Policy, stated: *“Today’s council conclusions give the European Commission a clear mandate; to not waste time and energy with a destructive reopening of the Birds and Habitats Directives, but to focus on what really matters: proper enforcement and implementation, the dramatic shortfall in funding for conservation and addressing the negative impacts of agriculture.”*

It comes after nine Environment Ministers^[1] wrote to Vice-President Timmermans and Commissioner Vella calling for the Birds and Habitats Directives to be protected. They were later joined by other EU Member States^[2], with an equally supportive letter following from MEPs representing the seven biggest political groupings in the European Parliament. A record number of people also took part in a public consultation on this issue in the summer. The overwhelming majority supported the ‘Nature Alert’ campaign to protect the laws.

However, Ministers’ commitment to biodiversity conservation has been somewhat undermined by an agreement to limit emissions of air pollution up to 2030 in a separate deliberation made at the Council meeting^[3].

The European Commission’s ‘Fitness Check’ process on the Birds and Habitats Directives is due to be completed early next year, with results due in April 2016.

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Notes:

For more on the EU Environment Council meeting, click here:
<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/env/2015/12/16/>

More information on the EU's biodiversity strategy to 2020 is available here:
<http://www.birdlife.org/europe-and-central-asia/eu-biodiversity-strategy-2020>

Details on the Nature Alert campaign are available here: <http://www.birdlife.org/naturealert>

[1] – The nine Environment Ministers represented Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia and Luxembourg.

[2] – Greece and Belgium wrote their own letters to the Commission following the original nine countries, with the Netherlands and Lithuania following with the same position in the last week.

[3] - In separate deliberations at the Council meeting, Ministers agreed on a position to limit emissions of air pollution up to 2030 (The National Emissions Ceilings (NEC) Directive sets limits to the amount of pollution every EU country can emit on a yearly basis. Currently, the EU is looking at setting new caps for 2020, 2025 and 2030 for fine particulate matter (PM2.5), nitrogen oxide (NOx), sulphur dioxide (SO2), volatile organic compounds (NMVOCs), ammonia (NH3) and methane (CH4). The European Parliament broadly backed the European Commission's proposal in a plenary vote on 28 October. Negotiations between the Parliament Council are expected to start under the Dutch Presidency in 2016). Instead of learning the lessons from the VW scandal and starting to clean up the air, Ministers decided to water down ammonia limits and completely remove methane targets, thus failing to tackle key pollutants produced by intensive farming. They also added a long list of so-called flexibilities which make the limits look like exceptions rather than the rule.

Air pollution continues to cause hundreds of thousands of premature deaths in the EU every year (according to an EEA air quality report published a couple of weeks ago: <http://goo.gl/fgEUzL>) as well as significant damages to nature, crops and buildings. Nitrogen deposition is a main cause of biodiversity loss and degradation of Natura 2000 sites in various parts of Europe.

BirdLife Europe is a Partnership of nature conservation organisations in 47 countries, including all EU Member States, and a leader in bird conservation. Through its unique local to global approach BirdLife Europe delivers high impact and long term conservation for the benefit of nature and people.