



Brussels, 27.4.2017
SWD(2017) 139 final

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Factsheets providing details of actions in the Action Plan for nature, people and the economy

Accompanying the document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

An Action Plan for nature, people and the economy

{COM(2017) 198 final}

ACTION 1:

Update, develop and actively promote, in all EU languages, guidance on

(a) site permitting procedures, species protection and management as well as sector-specific guidance;

(b) integrating ecosystem services into decision-making

Objective: Improving guidance and knowledge and ensuring better coherence with broader socioeconomic objectives (Priority A)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

(a) The Commission services have issued guidance documents on site permitting procedures^{1,2}, species protection³ and management⁴, as well as sector-specific guidance⁵. The Fitness Check has revealed the need for updating them and developing new sector-specific guidance, with the aim of clarifying the flexibility provided by the Nature Directives, promoting strategic planning and early screening of plans and projects, combined and streamlined assessment procedures, (e.g. under the Nature Directives, the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive⁶, the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive⁷ and the Water Framework Directive⁸) and applying cost-effective approaches to their application. Furthermore, based on the findings of a recent study⁹, the Commission will engage with the stakeholders and Member States in a process to analyse ways of streamlining permitting procedures in the most strategic networks (in particular the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and its cross-border connections¹⁰). In a recent performance audit on Natura 2000 implementation, the European Court of Auditors¹¹ has recommended to the Commission to increase its efforts to promote the dissemination and application of its guidance documents.

¹ "Methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6 (3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC", see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/art6/natura_2000_assess_en.pdf

² "Managing Natura 2000 sites: The provisions of Article 6 of the 'Habitats' Directive 92/43/EEC", see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/art6/provision_of_art6_en.pdf

³ "Guidance document on the strict protection of animal species of Community interest under the 'Habitats' Directive 92/43/EEC", see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/guidance/pdf/guidance_en.pdf

⁴ "Guide on hunting under the Birds Directive (updated in 2008)" see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/wildbirds/hunting/docs/hunting_guide_en.pdf, "Key Concepts document on Period of Reproduction and pre-nuptial Migration of huntable bird Species in the EU", see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/wildbirds/hunting/key_concepts_en.htm

⁵ "Guidance on Aquaculture and Natura 2000 - Sustainable aquaculture activities in the context of the Natura 2000 Network", "Inland waterway transport and Natura 2000 - sustainable inland waterway development and management in the context of the EU Birds and Habitats Directives", "Wind energy developments and Natura 2000" and "Non-energy mineral extraction and Natura 2000" – see http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/guidance_en.htm

⁶ Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment, OJ L 197 of 21.07.2001, p. 30

⁷ Directive 2014/52/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014 amending Directive 2011/92/EU on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment (EIA Directive), OJ L 124, 25.4.2014, p. 1

⁸ Directive 2000/60/EC establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy, OJ 327 of 22.12.2000, p. 1

⁹ Study on permitting and facilitating the preparation of TEN-T core network projects, <http://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/transport/files/2016-12-permitting-facilitating-ten-t.pdf>

¹⁰ The Commission plans to carry out an impact assessment process in 2017-2018 to identify the most effective ways of streamlining permitting procedures at national and EU levels with a view to facilitating the implementation of TEN-T projects of common interest

¹¹ European Court of Auditors Special Report No 1/2017: More efforts needed to implement the Natura 2000 network to its full potential - <http://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=40768>

Under this action, the Commission, in close cooperation with Member States and stakeholders will:

- ✓ Update the interpretative guidance document on provisions of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive on the conservation and management of Natura 2000 (by 2017)
- ✓ Update the methodological guidance on Article 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive (by 2018) on the permitting requirements for plans and projects likely to have a significant effect on Natura 2000 sites, also addressing issues relevant for the Projects of Common Interest (PCI) under the Trans-European Transport and Energy Networks (TEN-T/TEN-E)
- ✓ Update the guidance on species protection rules under the Habitats Directive (by 2018)
- ✓ Update the "Key concepts document on the period of reproduction and pre-nuptial migration of hailable bird Species in the EU" (by 2019)
- ✓ Develop a new guidance on hydropower and Natura 2000 (by 2017)
- ✓ Develop a new guidance on electricity transmission facilities and Natura 2000 (by 2017)
- ✓ Update guidance on wind energy and Natura 2000 (by 2019)
- ✓ Develop new guidance on Natura 2000 and fisheries under the common fisheries policy rules (by 2018)

(b) Ecosystems and their services (i.e. the benefits that flow from nature to people and the economy) are the natural capital that underpins Europe's socio-economic fabric, the prosperity and the wellbeing of its citizens. However, they are often not fully considered in decisions or not properly priced in market transactions.

This action seeks to pull together the growing knowledge and European and international best practices into guidance on incorporating ecosystems and their services into planning and decision-making at the EU, national and sub-national levels. This will include the identification of co-benefits of nature protection. The guidance will address a range of decision-making procedures, promoting the use of tools and approaches based on the Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystems and their Services (MAES)¹², Natural Capital Accounting (NCA)¹³ (including existing MAES methodological reports and first pilot EU ecosystem services accounts expected by end 2017), results from the EU research and innovation framework programme related to ecosystem services evaluation and valorisation, Member States' experience. It will also promote synergies with the deployment of Green Infrastructure and restoration activities¹⁴.

Under this action, the Commission, together with Member States and stakeholders will:

- ✓ Develop guidance and a set of practical tools to support the integration of ecosystems and their services into planning and decision-making processes at local, regional, national and EU levels (by 2018)
- ✓ Provide capacity building measures for authorities, planners and developers (2018-2019)

The above package will assist planners and decision-makers to:

- incorporate the value of ecosystem services into the cost-benefit analysis of policies, plans and investment decisions;
- incentivise innovative approaches to project planning in order to maximise potential net positive impacts on ecosystems;
- implement best practices for plans and projects to minimise and compensate for unavoidable residual impacts on ecosystems and their services.

¹² http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/ecosystem_assessment/index_en.htm

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/capital_accounting/index_en.htm

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ecosystems/index_en.htm

This will aim to support the design of plans and investment decisions that can achieve socio-economic objectives combined with sustaining or enhancing the multiple services ecosystems provide. It will also contribute to implementing Europe's climate mitigation and adaptation policies and plans. Measures for awareness raising, best practice exchange and capacity building will link with existing platforms such as the Business@Biodiversity platform¹⁵ and the forthcoming BioEconomy Knowledge Centre of the Commission, run by the Joint Research Centre (JRC).

For both a) and b) above, the Commission will

- ✓ Translate the above guidance documents in all official languages (2018-2019)
- ✓ Make easy-to-read summaries of guidance documents available online in all official EU languages (2018-2019)
- ✓ Provide an online 'Frequently Asked Questions and Answers' on Natura 2000 (2017)

The Commission, the Committee of the Regions, Member States and stakeholders will

- ✓ Actively promote and disseminate the above guidance documents to improve local uptake (2017-2019) – see Actions 5, 6, 13.

¹⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/biodiversity/business/index_en.htm#

ACTION 2:

Establish a support mechanism to help Member State authorities address key challenges in applying the permitting requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives for Natura 2000 and species protection rules

Objective: Improving guidance and knowledge and ensuring better coherence with broader socioeconomic objectives (Priority A)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

In addition to recognising the need for further development and promotion of EU guidance documents, the Fitness Check underlined the need for strengthening support to competent authorities with a view to smart application of permitting for Natura 2000 and species protection rules. Such support mechanisms already exist with a targeted mandate (e.g. JASPERS¹⁶ under cohesion policy) or are being developed (e.g. Task Force for the setting-up of Single Investment Teams¹⁷ for projects under the 'Juncker Plan'¹⁸).

Member States can also use technical assistance under the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to reinforce their administrative capacity. However, it emerges from the Fitness Check that there are issues related to permitting/species protection for which a support mechanism may be needed by national and regional authorities. These issues include the interpretation and application of legal requirements, the length of procedures, access to guidance, best practice, knowledge and information, as well as stakeholder involvement.

The newly issued Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) reports¹⁹, that include significant sections dealing with nature legislation and policy, identify specific issues/challenges for the authorities in different countries. Moreover, country specific needs might emerge from structured bilateral follow up discussions (Action 5). In this context, one of the proposals in the EIR is "*Providing tailored support to Member States' experts directly by their peers in other Member States*²⁰: Peer exchange is an important means to improve mutual learning and expertise and to make sure that tested solutions are passed on to others. The Commission is establishing a corresponding tool for the Member States under the EIR."

Furthermore, innovation deals²¹, which are voluntary cooperation between the EU, innovators, and national, regional and local authorities, can support stakeholders and authorities in the implementation of the Nature Directives. They can provide innovative solutions that help achieve the Directives' objectives while at the same time clarifying perceived regulatory obstacles. They can help create legal certainty within the existing legislative framework, including on the basis of guidance on the Nature Directives (see Action 1).

¹⁶ It provides assistance upon request mainly for the preparation of major projects to be submitted for co-financing under the cohesion policy http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/special-support-instruments/jaspers

¹⁷ The Task Force has been created to pursue, at EU level, a stronger convergence of the timelines of the different procedures regarding strategic infrastructure investment projects

¹⁸ European Commission's Investment Plan for Europe (EC IPE) - COM/2016/0764 final Investment Plan for Europe: evaluations give evidence to support its reinforcement - <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0764>

¹⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eir/index_en.htm

²⁰ See page 14 of the Communication - http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eir/pdf/comm_en.pdf

²¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-deals/index.cfm?pg=about>

Under this action, the Commission will:

- ✓ Identify, in cooperation with them, Member States in need of targeted support on key challenges, including of a structural nature, in relation to the application of the permitting requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives for Natura 2000 and species protection rules (by 2017)
- ✓ For the identified Member States, support, including through providing opportunities under LIFE Environmental Governance & Information, the setting up of ad hoc training programmes and support mechanisms for administrations dealing with the permitting requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives for Natura 2000 and species protection rules (2017-2019)
- ✓ Encourage Member States to make full use of the EIR Peer to Peer mechanism to spread best practice and transfer know-how between national and regional authorities for issues related to the permitting requirements of the Birds and Habitats Directives for Natura 2000 and species protection rules (2017-2019)
- ✓ Encourage Member States to make full use of JASPERS as regards EU co-financed major projects as well as of other available assistance through the Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) (2017-2019)
- ✓ Based on the experience gained from the current pilot action, explore widening the scope of innovation deals to the Nature Directives, in order to clarify perceived regulatory obstacles and apply innovative solutions that can support implementation of the Nature Directives (2018-2019).

ACTION 3:

Improve knowledge, including through enhanced and more efficient monitoring, and ensure public online access to data necessary for implementing the Directives (e.g. satellite imagery from the Copernicus programme)

Objective: Improving guidance and knowledge and ensuring better coherence with broader socioeconomic objectives (Priority A)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

Inadequate knowledge and poor access to data were identified in the Fitness Check as obstacles to implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives. Some stakeholders highlighted that information on Natura 2000 sites is often inadequate or unavailable from the competent authorities, resulting in additional costs and time consuming authorisation procedures for project developers. The information available at EU-level is primarily generated in the context of monitoring and reporting under the Directives but also through regular updating of the Natura 2000 documentation provided by Member States and managed by the European Environment Agency (Natura 2000 viewer²², Standard Data Forms²³ & maps). Despite improvements, there are still significant knowledge gaps and differences between Member States, notably in relation to the level of update, accuracy and completeness of Natura 2000 Standard Data Forms, the availability of data on conservation status and trends of species and habitats and the contribution and effectiveness of the Natura 2000 network to the achievement of the objectives of the Directives. These gaps need to be addressed, to ensure an adequate knowledge base for successful implementation. Innovative ways to include regional and local authorities and citizens in improving knowledge need to be promoted.

Recent technical advances in the availability of high-resolution satellite imagery (Sentinels)²⁴, and in using digital technology offer high potential to support implementation of the Directives at all levels. Developments in terms of ecosystem accounting can also provide support (see also Action 1). There are also many initiatives on the websites of national nature/environmental authorities²⁵. The full implementation of the INSPIRE Directive²⁶ will also facilitate the active dissemination of data related to nature and biodiversity. Furthermore, “Citizen science” is becoming an important source of information, as dedicated smartphone applications allows citizen scientists to provide geo-coded biodiversity information²⁷.

²² <http://natura2000.eea.europa.eu/#>

²³ Each Natura 2000 site has a unique identification form called Standard Data Form (SDF), prepared by Member States using an agreed format and providing relevant information for management and protection, including an ecological evaluation of the protected species and habitat types present on the site

²⁴ The European Space Agency (ESA) is developing a new family of missions called Sentinels specifically for the operational needs of the Copernicus programme

http://www.esa.int/Our_Activities/Observing_the_Earth/Copernicus/Overview4

²⁵ A 2015 study for the Commission assessed the availability of online official information relating to the Nature Directives and the extent to which spatial data are compliant with the INSPIRE Directive (which aims to ensure that spatial data are usable in an EU and cross-border context) and provided recommendations on how information could be improved for the Nature Directives. Peters, R.L., et al (2014) Active dissemination of environmental information in relation to the Birds and Habitats Directive. Study Contract ENV.D.4/ETU/2013/0063r. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/aarhus/pdf/siif_report.pdf

²⁶ Directive 2007/2/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 March 2007 establishing an Infrastructure for Spatial Information in the European Community (INSPIRE)

²⁷ E.g. the App developed by JRC allowing citizens to report to authorities on Invasive Alien Species in Europe (currently for 37 species)

Under this action, the Commission with Member States and the European Environment Agency will:

- ✓ Update and improve the on-line Natura 2000 viewer in order to better display information necessary for implementing different requirements of the Directives (by 2018)
- ✓ Improve data quality, by making a systematic assessment of the coherence of the data-sets provided by Member States, followed by discussions in relevant expert groups (by 2019)
- ✓ Support the creation of a European regional GEOSS²⁸ to accelerate the uptake of open Earth observation data, information and knowledge allowing citizens' access to data relevant to the Natura 2000 network (2017-2019)
- ✓ Assess the most recent progress in satellite-based remote sensing as a support for better implementation of the Nature Directives, develop a pilot online tool for a near real-time tracking of changes to high-nature value grasslands in Natura 2000 sites and support the generation of relevant spatial datasets to monitor land use and land use changes in and around Natura 2000 sites under the EU Space programmes²⁹ (2017-2019)
- ✓ Promote the further development and use of alternative information sources on status and trends of protected sites and biodiversity in the EU, including through a targeted support of citizen science projects (2017-2019)
- ✓ Further work on defining the concept of Favourable Reference Values and establishing values for certain habitats and species as a basis for debate in the frame of the biogeographical process (2017-2019)

Member States should:

- ✓ Enhance monitoring and fill the gaps in knowledge on the Natura 2000 network, the conservation status and trends of species and habitats, the effectiveness of the Natura 2000 network and its contribution to achieving the Directives' objectives, including in view of the next reporting under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive and Article 12 of the Birds Directive due in 2019 (2017-2018)

²⁸ EuroGEOSS. GEOSS is the Global Earth Observation System of Systems

²⁹ Copernicus, Galileo

ACTION 4:

Complete the Natura 2000 network, especially filling gaps for the marine environment, and put in place the necessary conservation measures for all sites

Objective: Building political ownership and strengthening compliance (Priority B)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

The establishment and effective management of the Natura 2000 network is a core objective of the Nature Directives. While the establishment of the terrestrial component of the Natura 2000 network is largely complete, there are still important gaps for the marine environment, particularly offshore, requiring additional sites to be proposed by the Member States. These additional efforts should also be consistent with the achievement of the objectives of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive³⁰ (MSFD) aiming at meeting the 'good environmental status' of EU marine waters by 2020 and with international agreements.

Once the sites are adopted by the Commission as Sites of Community Importance (SCI) under the Habitats Directive, Member States have up to six years to designate them as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and to establish the necessary conservation measures to meet the conservation objectives for the sites. Similar measures are required for Special Protection Areas (SPA) designated by Member States under the Birds Directive. These conservation measures can involve the establishment of management plans specifically designed for the sites or integrated into other development plans, and/or appropriate statutory, administrative or contractual measures. According to the available information, out of the 22.419 SCIs in January 2010, one third had not been designated as SACs by January 2016, i.e. the expiry of the 6-year deadline. Furthermore, even though there are large differences between Member States in the extent to which they have developed the necessary conservation measures, by the end of 2012, only 50 % of sites were reported to have sites management plans.

The Fitness Check has highlighted strong stakeholder awareness and cooperation as a major factor for success in establishing conservation measures. As Natura 2000 is not restricted to national parks and nature reserves but is based on a wider concept of conservation and sustainable land use, involving significant areas under private ownership, engaging land owners, land users and stakeholders is necessary to achieve this objective.

Under this action, Member States will, in line with the applicable deadlines in the Directives:

- ✓ Complete the designation of Natura 2000 at land and at sea
- ✓ Establish and implement the necessary conservation objectives and measures for all Natura 2000 sites, ideally in the framework of site management plans or equivalent instruments

Under this action, the Commission will (2017-2019):

- ✓ Support Member States in delivering the above two sub-actions, including by:
 - Providing EU co-financing of site management plans preparation and implementation (see also Actions 8, 9, 10, 11)
 - Facilitating the exchange of best practices among Member States and the development of common goals to ensure coherence of conservation objectives and measures at biogeographical level (see also Actions 6, 13)

³⁰ Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy, OJ L 164, 25.06.2008, p. 19

- Holding dedicated bilateral meetings with competent authorities, encouraging Member States to actively involve all relevant stakeholders at an early stage in the process of designation of sites and preparation and implementation of the necessary conservation measures, including site management plans (see also Actions 5 and 6)
- Further developing methodologies and criteria to assess the coherence of the marine protected areas network, including the marine Natura 2000 sites, in full cooperation with the four European Regional Seas Conventions³¹
- ✓ Strengthen enforcement action of relevant legal obligations (i.e. Articles 4(1), 4(4) and 6(1) of the Habitats Directive and Articles 4(1) and 4(2) of the Birds Directive)
- ✓ Support Member States to improve synergies while implementing the Nature Directives, the Water Framework Directive³² (WFD), the Nitrates Directive³³, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive³⁴ (MSFD), the Floods Directive³⁵ (FD), and the Invasive Alien Species Regulation³⁶, through building on the existing guidance³⁷
- ✓ Facilitate the development of fisheries measures under the common fisheries policy (CFP)³⁸ for marine Natura 2000 sites, to meet the conservation objectives of habitat types and species protected under the Nature Directives and in line with the objectives of the MSFD. This will include supporting the effective functioning of the regionalisation approach under the CFP³⁹ and ensuring the necessary measures for the conservation of habitats and species are included in the proposals for fisheries multiannual plans⁴⁰
- ✓ Facilitate interactions between Regional Seas Conventions and Regional fisheries management organisations in developing conservation measures to comply with environmental legislation
- ✓ Develop an adaptation strategy to deal with potential effects of invasive species and climate change on fisheries in the Mediterranean (by 2018), under the implementation of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) new mid-term strategy (2017–2020) towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries that encompasses, in particular, a target on minimizing and mitigating unwanted interactions between fisheries and marine ecosystems.

³¹ In Europe, there are four cooperation structures, the Regional Sea Conventions, which aim to protect the marine environment and bring together Member States and neighbouring countries that share marine waters:

- [The Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment in the North-East Atlantic](#) of 1992 (further to earlier versions of 1972 and 1974) – the OSPAR Convention (OSPAR)
- [The Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment in the Baltic Sea Area](#) of 1992 (further to the earlier version of 1974) – the Helsinki Convention (HELCOM)
- [The Convention for the Protection of Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean](#) of 1995 (further to the earlier version of 1976) – the Barcelona Convention (UNEP-MAP)
- [The Convention for the Protection of the Black Sea](#) of 1992 – the Bucharest Convention

³² See footnote 8

³³ Council Directive 91/676/EEC of 12 December 1991 concerning the protection of waters against pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources, OJ L 375 of 31.12.1991, p. 1

³⁴ Directive 2008/56/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 June 2008 establishing a framework for community action in the field of marine environmental policy, OJ L 164, 25.06.2008, p. 19.

³⁵ Directive 2007/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2007 on the assessment and management of flood risks, OJ L 288, 6.11.2007, p. 27

³⁶ Regulation (EU) No 1143/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species, OJ L 317, 4.11.2014, p. 35

³⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/starter_guide.pdf

³⁸ Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy amending Council Regulations (EC) No 1954/2003 and (EC) No 1224/2009 and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 2371/2002 and (EC) No 639/2004 and Council Decision 2004/585/EC (OJ L 354 28.12.2013 p.22)

³⁹ Under Article 11 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013

⁴⁰ Under Articles 9 and 10 of Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013

ACTION 5:

Use the new Environmental Implementation Review process for dedicated bilateral meetings with national and regional authorities to develop agreed roadmaps to improve implementation and consult with landowners and other stakeholders on implementation challenges

Objective: Building political ownership and strengthening compliance (Priority B)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

The Environmental Implementation Review (EIR) is a newly developed tool to help strengthen implementation of EU environmental legislation, including the Nature Directives⁴¹. The EIR complements existing activities aimed at improving implementation of the environmental acquis, notably compliance assurance through infringement procedures. The EIR provides a new framework, which includes setting up a structured implementation dialogue with each Member State, aimed at addressing structural problems and responding to the needs of each Member State. Transparency and wide participation of relevant stakeholders from different sectors and different levels of administration are key elements of this framework.

Under this action, the Commission and Member States will (2017-2019):

- ✓ In the framework of the EIR structured dialogue, hold dedicated bilateral meetings, involving national and regional authorities competent for implementation of the Nature Directives. Based on individual Member States' needs, key actions to improve implementation will be identified and agreed in common implementation roadmaps, with milestones and deliverables. These dedicated bilateral meetings will take place at least once for all Member States in the course of 2017-2019 and will be followed, as appropriate, by other meetings. These meetings will focus on key implementation issues, in particular:
 - the overall strategy for reaching favourable conservation status and for Natura 2000 management, any structural problems in each Member State impeding completion of Natura 2000 and the establishment of conservation objectives and necessary conservation measures for the sites (see also Action 4) the adequacy of and planning for financing/resources/capacity (see also Action 8), possible obstacles faced during appropriate assessment of plans and projects (see also Action 1), how to tackle diffuse sources of pollution or other broad drivers (e.g. water over-abstraction) that cause deterioration to protected habitats and species
 - governance approaches and effectiveness of cooperation, e.g. among different parts of the Member States administration at central level (e.g. between the Ministry for the environment and the Ministry for agriculture or fisheries or the Ministries in charge of permitting for extracting mineral resources), between central and regional levels, between administration and stakeholders and with neighbouring Member States
 - raising awareness, capacity and understanding of legal requirements, including in relation to other environmental legislation such as SEA⁴²/EIA⁴³ and WFD⁴⁴
 - facilitating efficient implementation approaches, including by promoting the use of relevant EU and national guidance (see also Action 1)
 - emphasising the need to actively engage landowners and other stakeholders,

⁴¹ See COM(2017) 63 final

⁴² See footnote 6

⁴³ See footnote 7

⁴⁴ See footnote 8

especially in management planning for the Natura 2000 sites

- ✓ Hold back to back meetings with private sector, NGOs and other stakeholders in national capitals
- ✓ Follow up the implementation of the agreed roadmaps.

ACTION 6:

Bring together public authorities and stakeholders from different Member States at the biogeographical region level to address common challenges, including on cross-border issues

Objective: Building political ownership and strengthening compliance (Priority B)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

In 2012, the European Commission launched the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process⁴⁵, a multi-stakeholders' co-operation process at the biogeographical level⁴⁶, including seminars, workshops and cooperation activities to enhance effective implementation, management, monitoring, financing and reporting of the Natura 2000 network. The Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process is supported by a web-based Natura 2000 Communication Platform⁴⁷ where relevant documents and useful links to an events' calendar are available.

The Fitness Check has revealed that effectiveness of the Directives has been constrained by, among other factors, the lack and insufficient targeting of funding, limited stakeholder awareness and cooperation, and gaps in knowledge. It has also highlighted the need to put in place effective conservation systems, enabling delivering of the Directives' objectives, having full regard to the socio-economic context in which they operate.

In a recent performance audit on Natura 2000 implementation the European Court of Auditors⁴⁸ has recommended to the Commission to increase its efforts to promote the dissemination and application of the results of the biogeographical seminars, and promote the exchange of best practices on cross-border cooperation.

Under this action, the Commission, in cooperation with Member States and stakeholders will (2017-2019):

- ✓ Refocus the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process to enable it to better contribute to the establishment of coherent, effective and efficient conservation systems for the Natura 2000 network throughout the EU through:
 - improved coherence in evaluating conservation status of protected habitats and species and setting conservation objectives and priorities at biogeographical level
 - identification and promotion of best practices in conservation management approaches to deliver conservation results at biogeographical level, also with a view to seizing funding opportunities (see also Actions 8, 9, 10, 11) and to identifying actions that deliver multiple ecosystem service benefits, e.g. climate resilience and mitigation
 - strengthened cooperation and sharing of experience on common challenges and opportunities, such as communication and stakeholder involvement, multiple benefits of the Natura 2000 network and cross-border issues, e.g. the potential of supporting green infrastructure.

⁴⁵ See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/seminars_en.htm

⁴⁶ The Habitats Directive refers to the nine following biogeographical regions: Alpine, Atlantic, Black Sea, Boreal, Continental, Macaronesian, Mediterranean, Pannonian and Steppic

⁴⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/platform/index_en.htm

⁴⁸ See footnote 11

- ✓ Agree biogeographical-level roadmaps for cooperative action
- ✓ Complete the second round of Natura 2000 Seminars⁴⁹ and organize thematic events in all biogeographical regions, including the marine regions
- ✓ Further develop the Natura 2000 Communication Platform to make it more user-friendly and effective

Under this action, the Commission and the Committee of the Regions will (2017-2019):

- ✓ Actively promote engagement by national and regional authorities and by stakeholders in the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process
- ✓ Use the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process to disseminate and promote EU guidance (see also Action 1)
- ✓ Use the Natura 2000 Biogeographical Process to promote and contribute to implementation of Species and Habitats Action Plans (see also Action 7)

⁴⁹ By the time of publication of this Action Plan, 8 Natura 2000 Seminars have been organized since 2012

ACTION 7:

Further develop Species and Habitats Action Plans for the most threatened species and natural habitats as well as stakeholder platforms on the coexistence with conflict species (e.g. large carnivores)

Objective: Building political ownership and strengthening compliance (Priority B)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

Since 1993 the EU has funded the development of *Species Action Plans* for around fifty of the most threatened species listed in Annex I of the Birds Directive⁵⁰. A 2010 evaluation⁵¹ of the Plans for twenty-three of these species revealed that well-resourced and coordinated implementation efforts deliver species recovery results. EU *management plans* have also been developed for thirteen huntable bird species⁵² listed in Annex II of the Birds Directive in unfavourable status and for three species protected under the Habitats Directive⁵³. The EU has also collaborated with relevant biodiversity Conventions and Agreements⁵⁴ on the development of international plans, which provide a wider framework in which EU action takes place. These plans provide information about the status, ecology, threats and current conservation measures for each species and list the key actions that are required to improve their conservation status across their range within the EU. Each plan is the result of an extensive process of consultation with individual experts in Europe as well as competent Member States' authorities and International Conventions and Agreements. EU action plans have not yet been prepared for habitat types, although management models have been developed for 25 protected habitat types, in order to help site managers preparing their own site-specific management plans⁵⁵.

Both the State of Nature in the EU report⁵⁶ and the Fitness Check have highlighted the need to urgently address the on-going decline of protected species and habitats, many of which are still in unfavourable conservation status. The Fitness Check has also highlighted the need to address the continuous challenge posed by certain protected species that come into conflict with some human activities such as agriculture. This concerns most notably large carnivores and Cormorants for which stakeholder dialogue and information platforms⁵⁷ have been created to promote good practices and practical solutions under the Nature Directive for coexistence between humans and these species.

Building on current experience, this action will focus on species and habitats with unfavourable conservation status, suffering significant decline, and having restricted ranges

⁵⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/wildbirds/action_plans/index_en.htm

⁵¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/wildbirds/action_plans/docs/Final%20report%20BirdLife%20review%20SAPs.pdf

⁵² http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/wildbirds/hunting/managt_plans_en.htm

⁵³ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/action_plans/index_en.htm

⁵⁴ e.g. The Berne Convention, The Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA), Eurobats

⁵⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/habitats/models_en.htm

⁵⁶ COM (2015) 219 final - http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/pdf/state_of_nature_en.pdf

⁵⁷ An EU Platform on Coexistence between People and Large Carnivores was set up in June 2014 involving different stakeholder groups with the aim "To promote ways and means to minimize, and wherever possible find solutions to, conflicts between human interests and the presence of large carnivore species, by exchanging knowledge and by working together in an open-ended, constructive and mutually respectful way" http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/conservation/species/carnivores/coexistence_platform.htm

A cormorant platform collecting information and best practice has also been created:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/cormorants/home_en.htm

across several Member States. The new and updated action plans will also have regard to key pressures and threats on species and habitats, including the increasing challenges posed by climate change.

Under this action, the Commission, Member States and stakeholders will:

- ✓ Develop and implement the following action plans
 - a new EU multispecies action plan covering forty-four bat species (by 2017)
 - a new EU multi-species action plan for eight lowland breeding waders (*Haematopus ostralegus*, *Vanellus vanellus*, *Calidris alpina*, *Calidris pugnax*, *Gallinago gallinago*, *Numenius arquata*, *Limosa limosa* and *Tringa totanus*) (by 2018)
 - two new EU species action plans for marine birds (*Puffinus yelkouan* and *Hydrobates montei*) (by 2018)
 - six EU/international action plans for the following species: *Gypaetus barbatus*, *Aegypius monachus*, *Pelecanus crispus*, *Streptopelia turtur*, *Melanitta fusca* and *Oxyura leucocephala* (by 2018)
 - a minimum of two plans for the most threatened habitat types, having regard to the recent European Red List of Habitats⁵⁸ (by 2019)
- ✓ Implement in the EU the Memorandum of Understanding on the conservation of migratory birds of prey in Africa and Eurasia (Raptors MoU), under the Convention on Migratory Species⁵⁹ (by 2017-2019)
- ✓ Make fully operational a system to track implementation of the Species Action Plans (by 2018)
- ✓ In the framework of the LIFE EuroSAP project⁶⁰ establish a "European Bird Species Coordination Group" in support of development, coordination and implementation of species action plans (by 2018)
- ✓ Further support stakeholder platforms/fora to promote dialogue, including at biogeographical level and within the framework of international Conventions and Agreements, to exchange experience, knowledge and co-operate in addressing conflicts between people and protected species (e.g. large carnivores, Cormorants, geese) (2017-2019)
- ✓ Contribute to the adoption of a comprehensive regional management plan for red coral, in the Mediterranean under the implementation of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM) new mid-term strategy (2017–2020) towards the sustainability of Mediterranean and Black Sea fisheries that encompasses, in particular, a target on minimizing and mitigating unwanted interactions between fisheries and marine ecosystems (by 2018).

The Commission, the Committee of the Regions, Member States and stakeholders will

- ✓ Actively promote and disseminate the above Species and Habitats Action Plans to improve their implementation (2017-2019) (see also Actions 5, 6, 13)
- ✓ Actively promote engagement in the stakeholder platforms by national and regional authorities and by relevant stakeholders (2017-2019) (see also Actions 6, 13).

⁵⁸ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/knowledge/redlist_en.htm

⁵⁹ <http://www.cms.int/raptors/en/legalinstrument/birds-prey-raptors>

⁶⁰ <http://www.birdlife.org/europe-and-central-asia/project/life-eurosap>

ACTION 8:

Strengthen investments in nature

- (a) Help Member States to improve their multiannual financial planning for Natura 2000 through the update of their Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs),
- (b) Propose a 10% increase in the LIFE budget dedicated to projects supporting the conservation of nature and biodiversity, while keeping the overall budgetary envelope of the LIFE programme unchanged
- (c) Stimulate private sector investment in nature projects

Objective: Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments (Priority C)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

The Fitness Check identified funding shortages as a key obstacle to implementation. There is a need to improve financial planning as well as testing and developing investment sources additional to public ones.

a) Article 8 of the Habitats Directive provides a legal basis for EU co-financing of conservation measures for Natura 2000 sites and foresees the establishment of a mechanism for strategic planning of Natura 2000 funding through the establishment of Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs). Member States developed their PAFs identifying Natura 2000 funding needs and priorities as well as intended sources of financing in view of the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Whereas PAFs were variable in their degree of ambition and quality, they have made a positive contribution to securing funding for Natura 2000 under EU funding instruments. The European Court of Auditors (ECA) performance audit of Natura 2000⁶¹ found that the approved programming documents under different EU funds did not necessarily reflect all the needs for Natura 2000 identified in the PAFs. According to ECA the combination of incomplete or inaccurate information in the PAFs, with their insufficient integration into the programming documents for the 2014-2020 funding period⁶², points to the need to strengthen the PAF exercise to ensure consistency of EU funding for Natura 2000. ECA recommended to the Commission to give guidance to the Member States on improving the quality of PAFs and on estimating, in a reliable and harmonised manner, planned and actual support for Natura 2000 from EU funding programmes. ECA gave also recommendations to Member States.

The Commission together with Member States and stakeholders will:

- ✓ Review the success of the development/application of the PAFs under current MFF and draw lessons with a view to improving the applicability of this tool and enhance co-benefits for more efficient use of resources (by 2017)
- ✓ Update the PAF format in agreement with Member States to ensure a more harmonised approach to calculation of costs and identification of conservation objectives and measures including clear priorities and possible synergies with other sectors and policies (such as green infrastructure) to reflect socio-economic benefits of investing in Natura 2000, e.g. in relation to its climate change mitigation and adaptation potential, human

⁶¹ See footnote 11

⁶² This conclusion is also corroborated by the findings included in a report prepared for the Commission in 2016 'Integration of Natura 2000 and biodiversity into EU funding (EARDF, ERDF, CF, EMFF, ESF). See p. 52: 'Integration of priorities, specific objectives and measures linked to Natura 2000 ... has been achieved to varying degrees in the national programmes analysed ... in general the planned measures do not cover all the needs identified in the PAFs for all habitats and species that require conservation or restoration actions'

health and wellbeing (by 2017)

- ✓ Launch a process with Member States for updating their PAFs ahead of the post-2020 MFF in line with Article 8 of the Habitats Directive (by 2018)
- ✓ Promote awareness about the updated PAFs within the Commission and among Member States authorities, targeting those in charge of programming under different EU policies (as soon as updated PAFs are available, at the latest by 2019)
- ✓ Support the preparation of LIFE integrated projects for Natura 2000, which would focus on key priorities identified in PAFs – aiming for at least one project being initiated in each Member States by 2019, which may include cross-border actions that improve ecological connectivity and overall coherence of the network
- ✓ Draw lessons and share experience, including through dedicated workshops, from ongoing LIFE integrated projects (2017-2019) to develop strategic recommendations for investment in the management and coherence of Natura 2000.

b) Although it is a relatively small EU funding instrument, the evidence provided in the Fitness Check highlighted the strategic role that the EU LIFE programme⁶³ plays in supporting implementation of the Nature Directives. LIFE Nature & Biodiversity projects deliver high value for money and can support a much wider range of measures for both management and restoration of Natura 2000 sites than other EU funding instruments, including communication and outreach activities. As such, LIFE has significant capacity for developing partnerships for effective and efficient implementation. Furthermore, the LIFE Regulation for 2014-2020 provides for a possibility of funding management of the Natura 2000 network and improving its coherence through 'integrated projects' on condition that they implement the PAFs. The current LIFE programme stipulates that a minimum of 55% of budgetary resources allocated to action grants shall be dedicated to projects supporting the conservation of nature and biodiversity. The Commission is empowered, albeit not obliged, to adopt a delegated act to increase this percentage by a maximum of 10%, resulting in a minimum of 60,5%, provided that the total funds requested for nature/biodiversity over two consecutive years (meeting minimum quality requirements) exceed by more than 20% the available budget. This condition is fulfilled, as the requested funds in 2014 and 2015 largely exceed the budget by more than 150%.

Under this action, the Commission will:

- ✓ Propose in 2017 to avail of the possibility under the LIFE Regulation to increase the Nature and Biodiversity envelope by 10%. This additional EU co-funding for LIFE Nature projects would contribute to accelerate the speed of achievement of the objectives of the Nature Directives. This would also enable further development of LIFE Integrated Projects for Nature in the Member States, thus strengthening capacity for larger scale territorial action.

c) Private land conservation is an innovative approach for engaging the private sector in nature conservation. Recent studies carried out for the European Commission⁶⁴ as well as exchanges with international partners⁶⁵ have shown that the use of specific advisory tools

⁶³ LIFE began in 1992 and to date there have been four complete phases of the programme (LIFE I: 1992-1995, LIFE II: 1996-1999, LIFE III: 2000-2006 and LIFE+: 2007-2013). The LIFE 2014-2020 Regulation establishes the Environment and Climate Action sub-programmes of the LIFE Programme for the next funding period, 2014–2020. The budget for the period is set at €3.4 billion in current prices

⁶⁴ See report on *Alternative Ways to Support Private Land Conservation*
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/publications/lifepublications/generalpublications/documents/support_land_conservation.pdf

⁶⁵ See *summary of discussions at 2015 GreenWeek*
<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/features/2015/gw2015.htm>

aimed at promoting private land conservation (e.g. through covenants, conservation easements, private protected areas, fiscal benefits, etc.) has considerable potential to contribute to the overall targets set by EU nature legislation and biodiversity policy. Examples in other countries (e.g. US, Canada etc.) show that this approach can lead to very positive results and provide complementarity to land acquisition, compensation or regulatory approaches. As a large share of the Natura 2000 network is privately owned, an increased involvement of private owners is essential for successful management of the network. The studies carried out clearly show that these tools are so far only used to a limited extent in most Member States, are very heterogeneous and poorly known. In the framework of the LIFE programme, the Commission is co-funding a first targeted preparatory project, the aim of which is to set up a European network of private land stewardship organisations. Private sector investment is also supported under the Natural Capital Financing Facility (NCFF)⁶⁶ whereby the European Investment Bank provides loans and investments in funds to support projects which promote the preservation and improvement of natural capital, including for adaptation to climate change, in the Member States. Finally, under the EU Business and Biodiversity platform⁶⁷, the Community of Practice on finance and biodiversity (EU CoP F@B) serves as a forum for dialogue between financial institutions to share experiences, raise awareness and promote best practices at EU level on how to integrate biodiversity and natural capital into mainstream financial activities and foster investments in natural capital as a new asset class.

Under this action, the Commission will:

- ✓ Support additional pilot projects, specifically targeted at landowners' organisations and their constituency, that significantly contribute to testing the applicability of tools for private land conservation in Natura 2000 sites under the LIFE programme (2017-2019)
- ✓ Further support biodiversity-related projects under NCFF with the aim of securing 9 to 12 projects within the implementation period (2017-2019)
- ✓ In the framework of the EU CoP F@B, contribute to the transition towards a sustainable financial sector by encouraging better integration of biodiversity into financial activities in support of better coherence of the Natura 2000 network (2017-2019)
- ✓ Identify with Member States and other stakeholders best practices on investment for extractive operations and for land rehabilitation and restoration by non-energy mineral extractive industry, in order to complement the existing guidance on non-energy mineral extractive industry⁶⁸ (2018).

⁶⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/funding/financial_instruments/ncff.htm. The main aim of the NCFF is to demonstrate that loans for investments in natural capital projects can generate revenues or save costs, whilst delivering on biodiversity and climate adaptation objectives, through a pipeline of replicable, bankable operations that will serve as a "proof of concept". NCFF can support projects relating to Payments for Ecosystem Services, Green Infrastructure, Innovative pro-biodiversity and adaptation investments and Biodiversity offsets within and outside Natura 2000

⁶⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/biodiversity/business/index_en.htm

⁶⁸ "Non-energy mineral extraction and Natura 2000",

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/nee_i_n2000_guidance.pdf

ACTION 9:

Promote synergies with funding from the common agricultural policy, including effective use of Natura 2000 payments and agri-environment-climate measures, the development of result-based schemes, support to farmers through Farming Advisory Services, and innovation and knowledge transfer through the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability

Objective: Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments (Priority C)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

The Fitness Check⁶⁹ has highlighted that the overall continuing decline of species and habitats associated with agriculture shows the need for more effective integration with the common agricultural policy (CAP) in order to reach biodiversity objectives. Although ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources is specifically stated as an objective in Article 4 of Regulation 1305/2013 and the CAP 2014-2020 provides for supporting measures in favour of biodiversity, impacts on the ground depend also from Member State and farmers' implementation choices. Policy coherence is also being assessed in the framework of on-going work on modernising and simplifying the CAP⁷⁰. The establishment of conservation objectives and measures for Natura 2000 sites is central to ensuring better targeting of available funding opportunities (see also Action 4).

In a recent Special report on Natura 2000 implementation⁷¹, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) (para 84) found that "*as regards EU funds, no specific performance indicator system providing data on whether the supported measures have produced the expected outputs, results and impacts for the Natura 2000 network was in place*" and recommended to the Commission to establish cross-cutting Natura 2000 indicators for all EU funds for the next programming period. The Commission accepted this recommendation. ECA gave also recommendations to Member States.

Under this action, the Commission will:

- ✓ Carry out an evaluation of the impact of the CAP on biodiversity, including on the use of financial resources for biodiversity protection and Natura 2000 and the use of the Natura 2000 measure to compensate beneficiaries for additional costs and income foregone resulting from the implementation of the Nature Directives (2018-2019)
- ✓ Encourage the full and effective use of the financial resources available for Natura 2000 sites and wider biodiversity protection in the period 2014-2020 under the European Agricultural Rural Development Fund (EARDF) drawing upon the lessons learnt and identified best practices, as well as existing guidance⁷² and policy⁷³. This will be through workshops, bilateral dialogue with Managing Authorities, in view of possible proposal for modifications to Rural Development Programmes and by showcasing the identified best practices in available fora (e.g. European Network for Rural Development and the National Rural Networks) (2017-2019)
- ✓ Encourage Member States to extend the designation of their Permanent Grassland as

⁶⁹ See SWD(2016) 472 final, sections 6.4.4 and 7

⁷⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/consultations/cap-modernising/2017_en and https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/simplification_en

⁷¹ See footnote 11

⁷² http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/financing/index_en.htm

⁷³ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ecosystems/index_en.htm

Environmentally Sensitive Permanent Grassland in designated Natura 2000 sites (2017-2018)

- ✓ Assess existing experience on result-based payment schemes for farmers under Rural Development, identifying opportunities and limitations as well as potential areas of application in order to promote their wider use (2017-2018)
- ✓ Continue promoting innovation and knowledge exchange via the network for the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI), in particular by taking up the results of the High Nature Value farming focus group (2017-2018)
- ✓ In response to the ECA recommendation to the Commission to establish cross-cutting Natura 2000 indicators for all EU funds for the next programming period, without prejudice to the outcome of the upcoming discussions on the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) programming period, consider improvement to existing indicators and the possibility to establish new ones, where relevant (2017-2018)

Member States should:

- ✓ Assess the current use of financial allocations for biodiversity protection and Natura 2000, including the Natura 2000 measure to compensate beneficiaries for additional costs and income foregone resulting from the implementation of the Nature Directives (2017-2019)
- ✓ In response to the ECA recommendation to Member States to ensure appropriate coordination between all authorities involved in the management of Natura 2000 sites, ensure that agricultural and environmental authorities share relevant information for the management of Natura 2000 sites, including on conservation objectives and measures for Natura 2000 sites, on the allocation and uptake of rural development measures, and on application of cross compliance (2017-2019)
- ✓ Support training and awareness raising for farmers and other relevant stakeholders in rural areas, e.g. forest owners, in particular through Farming Advisory Services about the measures implementing the Nature Directives. These measures include the Natura 2000 sites conservation measures, as defined in the site management plans or equivalent instruments, as well as measures established in national/regional legislation to avoid deterioration of habitats and disturbance of the species for which the sites have been designated, as well as measures to implement species protection rules which also apply outside Natura 2000 sites (2017-2019).

ACTION 10:

Increase awareness of cohesion policy funding opportunities and improve synergies

Objective: Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments (Priority C)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

Cohesion policy for the 2014-2020 period provides investment support, capacity building and cooperation opportunities for biodiversity and nature protection. Furthermore, sustainable development, including biodiversity protection, is horizontally mainstreamed across the investments and there are a number of measures put in place to ensure that possible negative impacts on the environment from investments in some other areas are avoided or mitigated (e.g. SEA and EIA requirements, approval of large projects, technical assistance).

In terms of financing, about EUR 4 billion is allocated from the cohesion policy funds to biodiversity and Natura 2000 sites for the period 2014-2020 covering a broad range of projects (e.g. planning, conservation, management and capacity building). The majority of Member States (22) have planned such interventions in their operational programmes and these are also included in the interregional, transnational and cross-border cooperation programmes. Many of these programmes also include green infrastructure measures under various investments priorities (e.g. for connecting habitats, flood protection, regeneration of cities and of brownfield sites).

Threats to biodiversity are also addressed in the action related to cities as part of the Urban Agenda for the EU and in the framework of EU Macro-Regional Strategies (MRSs), which cover the Baltic Sea, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine Regions. The EU Covenant of Mayors also promotes the use of nature based solutions that enhance climate resilience while at the same time promoting nature conservation and sustainable management.

In a recent Special report on Natura 2000 implementation⁷⁴, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) found that "*as regards EU funds, no specific performance indicator system providing data on whether the supported measures have produced the expected outputs, results and impacts for the Natura 2000 network was in place*" and recommended to the Commission to establish cross-cutting Natura 2000 indicators for all EU funds for the next programming period. The Commission accepted this recommendation. ECA gave also recommendations to Member States.

Under this action, to support the cohesion policy funds' managing authorities and stakeholders in making full use of the available opportunities for increased synergies with EU Nature legislation, the Commission will:

- ✓ Prepare a short guidance on the available support under cohesion policy, identify best practices, and provide information on the benefits of Natura 2000, including green infrastructure that supports the coherence of the network. Use this guidance to raise awareness through workshops and in bilateral meetings (2017-2018)
- ✓ Provide regional actors, under the Interreg Europe policy learning platform on environmental protection⁷⁵, with targeted information on nature (policy briefs, database on best practices, experts' helpdesk) and support their cooperation (2017-2018)
- ✓ Encourage the countries (EU and non-EU), regions and stakeholders involved in the EU

⁷⁴ See footnote 11

⁷⁵ <http://www.interregeurope.eu/policylearning/environment-and-resource-efficiency/>

MRSs to develop projects/initiatives with a macro-regional relevance on nature protection in the regions covered (2017-2018)

- ✓ Launch a partnership under the Urban Agenda for the EU on Sustainable Land use and Nature Based Solutions. Promote and discuss biodiversity and nature based solutions, where relevant, in other partnerships (e.g. on Climate adaptation, Circular economy, Air quality) and other relevant initiatives (e.g. Covenant of Mayors). In addition, and in support of the partnership on Sustainable Land Use and Nature Based Solutions, launch a call under Urban Innovative Actions⁷⁶, which provide funding to cities to test novel solutions for selected sustainable urban development themes (2017-2019)
- ✓ In response to the ECA recommendation to the Commission to establish cross-cutting Natura 2000 indicators for all EU funds for the next programming period, without prejudice to the outcome of the upcoming discussions on the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) programming period, consider improvement to existing indicators and the possibility to establish new ones, where relevant (2017-2018).

⁷⁶ <http://www.uia-initiative.eu>

ACTION 11:

Improve synergies with the common fisheries policy and the integrated maritime policy, including more effective use of the financing opportunities available

Objective: Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments (Priority C)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

The Fitness Check has highlighted a broader coherence of the current legal framework of the common fisheries policy (CFP) and the Nature Directives compared to the past. Although the coherence with the broader integrated maritime policy (IMP) was not assessed, there are important opportunities to improve synergies with its main instruments, including by strengthening investment in Natura 2000 through relevant funds in view of the common objective of safeguarding marine biodiversity. This would address the Fitness Check findings related to funding shortages for Natura 2000 and the Directives' implementation in general.

The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) provides financial support to biodiversity protection and Natura 2000 sites. For the 2014-2020 period, Member States have allocated over 18 million euros through their EMFF Operational Programmes to support the management, restoration and monitoring of Natura 2000 sites and other marine protected areas; to promote more selective fishing gear to avoid accidental by-catch of species (marine mammals, seabirds) and to support aquaculture providing environmental services. Moreover, 10% of the integrated maritime policy part of the EMFF is allocated for the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) purposes, which also include biodiversity protection.

The Maritime Spatial Planning Directive⁷⁷ requires Member States to develop spatial plans for their seas and oceans by April 2021, applying an ecosystem-based approach. Ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning (MSP) can provide for both blue growth and good environmental status, including effectively-managed Natura 2000 sites and green and blue infrastructure. The EU MSP Platform constructed and managed under the assistance mechanism is already showcasing best practices/experiences in ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning in Europe.

In a recent Special report on Natura 2000 implementation⁷⁸, ECA found that "*as regards EU funds, no specific performance indicator system providing data on whether the supported measures have produced the expected outputs, results and impacts for the Natura 2000 network was in place*" and recommended to the Commission to establish cross-cutting Natura 2000 indicators for all EU funds for the next programming period. The Commission accepted this recommendation. ECA gave also recommendations to Member States.

Under this action the Commission and Member States will:

- ✓ Facilitate full and effective use of the financial resources allocated for biodiversity protection and Natura 2000 sites in the period 2014-2020 under EMFF and, where feasible, promote increased allocations and uptake, by:
 - assessing the current use of financial allocations for biodiversity protection and Natura 2000 (by 2017)

⁷⁷ Directive 2014/89/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning OJ L 257, 28.8.2014, p. 135–145

⁷⁸ See footnote 11

- drawing lessons and identifying best practices, especially with regard to projects related to the identification and designation of the Natura 2000 sites in the marine environment and the establishment and implementation of the necessary conservation objectives and measures for marine sites⁷⁹ (see also Action 4) (by 2017)
- facilitating Member States' use of existing opportunities for financing projects related to the Nature Directives' implementation and biodiversity protection under EMFF, on the basis of the lessons learnt and identified best practices, as well as of the existing guidance⁸⁰ and policy⁸¹ (2018-2019). This will be done through workshops, expert group meetings, bilateral dialogue with Managing Authorities and by showcasing the identified best practices in all available fora, including European Maritime Day 2018 or 2019
- ✓ In response to the ECA recommendation to the Commission to establish cross-cutting Natura 2000 indicators for all EU funds for the next programming period, without prejudice to the outcome of the upcoming discussions on the next multiannual financial framework (MFF) programming period, consider improvement to existing indicators and the possibility to establish new ones, where relevant (2017-2018) and the possibility to develop ex-ante conditionalities
- ✓ Launch a study on ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning under the integrated maritime policy work programme and showcase best practices/experiences in applying ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning in Europe (2017-2018).

⁷⁹ Article 40(1)(d) and (e) of Council Regulation (EU) No 508/2014 of 15 May 2014 on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)

⁸⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/financing/index_en.htm

⁸¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ecosystems/index_en.htm

ACTION 12:

- (a) Provide guidance to support the deployment of green infrastructure for better connectivity of Natura 2000 areas;
- (b) Support nature-based solutions projects through EU research and innovation policy and Horizon 2020 funds

Objective: Strengthening investment in Natura 2000 and improving synergies with EU funding instruments (Priority C)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

(a) The Fitness Check has revealed that the Natura 2000 network alone cannot deliver the Directives' objectives. Habitat and landscape management and restoration measures through Green Infrastructure (GI)⁸² are needed, both within and outside Natura 2000 sites, with a view to achieving favourable conservation status of protected habitats and species and ensuring the coherence of the Natura 2000 network, whilst delivering multiple environmental, economic and social benefits through enhanced ecosystem services, such as climate change mitigation and adaptation. According to recent studies⁸³, such EU-level strategic investments in Green Infrastructure would have the potential to provide even greater benefits per € invested than the current GI policy implementation and funding allocation.

Under this action, the Commission, in close cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, will:

- ✓ Publish a report to the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, on the review of progress of the implementation of the EU Green Infrastructure Strategy. This report will further inform the development of the proposed way forward on strategically investing in Green Infrastructure in the European Union⁸⁴ (by 2017)
- ✓ Develop guidance providing a strategic framework for further supporting the deployment of EU-level Green Infrastructure, containing a series of guidelines on objectives, priorities and selection criteria⁸⁵ for Green Infrastructure projects of European interest that contribute to the goals of the Nature Directives, including through improving connectivity of Natura 2000 sites in a cross border context, with a view to identify projects to be prioritised with appropriate funding, at a scale which transcends administrative boundaries, so as to enhance the delivery of essential ecosystem services throughout the EU territory (by mid-2018). Members of the EU Working Group on Green Infrastructure Implementation and Restoration (WG GIIR) will continue to be regularly consulted and associated to the development of this initiative, as well as the Coordination Group on Nature and Biodiversity, and Nature Directors. The proposed strategic framework will allow for a more integrated approach in the current multi-annual financial framework (MFF) through integrating different funding sources, as in the LIFE integrated projects. This will also provide some lessons that can be taken into account for the next MFF.

⁸² Green (and blue) Infrastructure is referring to the spatial and functional biodiversity structure and related elements, which are part of a strategically planned network aimed at maximising the delivery of those ecosystem benefits. This is based on the understanding that the delivery of ecosystem services is enhanced if these ecosystems are connected through green infrastructure

⁸³ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/ecosystems/studies/index_en.htm

⁸⁴ Elements of conclusion are already available in the mid-term review of the Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, and the Environmental Implementation Review reports

⁸⁵ Such as connectivity or the capacity of ecosystems to provide ecosystem services

(b) There is also growing experience with European-funded research and innovation policy on Nature-Based Solutions (NBS)⁸⁶ that demonstrates how healthy ecosystems contribute to economic and social development, if prioritised. Horizon 2020 demonstration projects⁸⁷, promoting strategic investments in innovative nature-based solutions, can help support Member States' authorities, businesses and stakeholders in building a sound economic case for investing in Green Infrastructure across a range of policies, and contribute to the goals of the Nature Directives.

Whilst NBS projects are focused on developing and testing innovative solutions locally, including consolidating the evidence base recognising economic, social and environmental values and potential returns from strategic investments, this experience and knowledge can also contribute to build up a spatial and functional network of Green Infrastructure at European level with Natura 2000 as its backbone.

Under this action, the Commission, in close cooperation with stakeholders, will:

- ✓ Actively develop and disseminate the evidence base on nature-based solutions, including the exchange of knowledge and best practices to improve local uptake (2017-2019)
- ✓ Invest in a range of demonstration projects on nature-based solutions which test and develop innovative approaches on the ground on how investing in nature provides multiple benefits (2017-2019)
- ✓ Explore how nature-based solutions demonstration projects can support the proposed strategic deployment of EU-level Green Infrastructure (point (a) above)
- ✓ Propose nature-based solutions as one of the 2018 potential themes for the Knowledge Exchange Platform (KEP), a cooperation between the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission (DG Research & Innovation)⁸⁸ to share knowledge on research, innovative products and best practice in response to societal challenges faced by local and regional authorities in Europe (2018-2019).

The communication and outreach activities foreseen in the action plan will help promote the guidance and activities foreseen in (a) and (b).

⁸⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/research/environment/index_en.cfm?pg=nature-based-solutions

⁸⁷ Through the analysis of demonstration projects funded through the Horizon 2020 calls 2016-2017, of case studies on nature-based solutions collected in 2017, and results from Horizon 2020 projects on innovative financing and governance of nature-based solutions

⁸⁸ KEP action plans are prepared by the European Commission jointly with the Committee of the Regions Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) Secretariat; they are subject to endorsement by the Committee of the Regions SEDEC Commission

ACTION 13:

Support knowledge exchange and engagement of local and regional authorities through a joint platform with the Committee of the Regions

Objective: Better communication and outreach, engaging citizens, stakeholders and communities (Priority D)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

The Fitness Check has revealed that the lack of priority given to the Directives' implementation at national, regional and local level and limited expertise and enforcement by many competent authorities have been among the major factors that have reduced their effectiveness and efficiency. Engagement of local and regional authorities, including through exchange of knowledge and experience, are therefore essential steps towards achieving the Directives' objectives and helping reconcile and "build the bridge" between nature, people and the economy.

Local and regional authorities can play an important role for the future of Europe and they have a key role in practical implementation of EU environmental legislation, including the Nature Directives, on the ground. The Committee of the Regions members are ambassadors of Europe in their regions, cities and municipalities. A Committee of the Regions/European Commission Technical Platform for Cooperation on the Environment⁸⁹ was launched in December 2012 with the aim of fostering dialogue on local and regional problems and solutions in the application of EU environment law. Moreover, the Committee of the Regions has recently launched the "Reflecting on Europe" initiative⁹⁰, involving direct dialogue with citizens and young people on Europe's achievements and future challenges, as well as the Committee of the Regions Local Events⁹¹, which are also aimed at engagement on the ground.

Under this action, the Commission and the Committee of the Regions will together:

- ✓ Organize a conference to officially present the Action Plan to relevant authorities and stakeholders (6/06/2017)
- ✓ In the framework of the Joint Technical Platform for Cooperation on the Environment, organize workshops, seminars and conferences aimed at promoting local and regional authorities' smart and effective implementation of the Nature Directives, also in cooperation with European associations of local and regional authorities such as the Covenant of Mayors (2017-2019)
- ✓ Organize debates in EU cities and regions with local and regional stakeholders, and seminars to exchange knowledge and good practice among EU cities and regions on the Nature Directives implementation, including in the framework of the Committee of the Regions Local Events initiative upon the initiative of Committee of the Regions members (2018-2019)

⁸⁹ The Technical Platform does not involve any formal agreement but represents a shared approach to certain communication activities of mutual interest. It was launched with a symbolic handshake by former Commissioner Potočník and Committee of the Regions Vice-President Mercedes Bresso at the close of an implementation-themed conference co-organised by Committee of the Regions and DG ENV on 5 December 2012. The Technical Platform became one of the actions referred to in the European Commission's 2012 Communication on better implementation in the area of environment (COM(2012)95 final) adopted on 7.3.2012. See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/legal/platform_en.htm

⁹⁰ <http://www.cor.europa.eu/en/events/Pages/debate.aspx>

⁹¹ <http://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Pages/cor-local-events.aspx>

- ✓ In the framework of the "Reflecting on Europe" initiative, organize local events across Europe, mainly in the form of "citizens' debates" upon the initiative of Committee of the Regions members, regions, provinces, cities and their national associations, dedicated to the Nature Directives and the benefits provided by healthy ecosystems and nature (2017-2019).

These initiatives will be used to support outreach on the Action Plan and to reengage local and regional authorities, stakeholders and the public, especially young people, with a positive agenda towards EU nature protection policy.

ACTION 14:

Support recognition of good management of Natura 2000 sites and awareness-raising of the Nature Directives through relevant fora, availing of new technologies and outreach activities, and strengthen links between natural and cultural heritage, especially in the context of 2018 as European year of cultural heritage

Objective: Better communication and outreach, engaging citizens, stakeholders and communities (Priority D)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

Stakeholder awareness and engagement have been highlighted as key factors affecting achievement of the Directives' objectives. Good practices emerging from the Fitness Check demonstrate that good involvement of landowners, users and other stakeholders in the process of establishing management plans or equivalent measures is essential for the effective and efficient management of Natura 2000 sites. This helps create ownership, embrace approaches that are sustainable in the socio-economic context and adapted to local specificities. The Fitness Check has also revealed that biodiversity is of widespread interest and concern to EU citizens, with 61% of Europeans believing the EU should better inform its citizens about its importance⁹² and there is increasing recognition of the human health and social inclusion benefits from nature.

The Fitness Check has also underlined the need to promote the multiple ecosystem services delivered by Natura 2000 to ensure that the conservation and sustainable use of sites in the network also benefits local communities and economies, particularly by exploiting the potential for sustainable tourism and green jobs. There is increasing recognition of the strong interconnections between natural and cultural heritage in Natura 2000 and the need for integrated management of these assets. Conferences in Greece⁹³ and in Italy⁹⁴ in 2014 identified a number of options to strengthen these links. This can in turn boost recreational and eco-tourism activities and deliver green jobs and additional revenues for the management of Natura 2000 sites as long as they are managed in such a way as not to negatively impact the sites⁹⁵.

Under this action the Commission, the Committee of the Regions, Member States and stakeholders will:

- ✓ Support recognition for good management of Natura 2000 sites by:
 - Further developing the Natura 2000 award, a pan-European award recognising excellence in the management of Natura 2000 sites and conservation achievements, showcasing the added value of the network for local economies, and increasing public awareness about Europe's valuable natural heritage (2017-2019)
 - Developing and testing the feasibility of systems aimed at recognising positive

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<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2091>

⁹³ Cultural Landscapes in Natura 2000 sites: towards a new policy for the integrated management of cultural and natural heritage, Athens, 2014

⁹⁴ This resulted in the agreement on the so-called “Charter of Rome” under the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

⁹⁵ The IMP budget line is also supporting the maritime tourism sector, through grant actions, to develop tourist routes (above and below water) based on the natural and cultural heritage of the sea – i.e. helping economic operators gain sustainable economic benefit from Natura 2000 sites

management of Natura 2000 sites, including recognition of the multiple ecosystem services they provide (e.g. 'name&fame', twinning of sites) and at sharing information, expertise and good practice between site managers, including online learning opportunities (2018)

- ✓ Support awareness raising on the Nature Directives and Natura 2000, by:
 - Proclaiming the 21st May as the European Natura 2000 day⁹⁶ (15/5/2017)
 - Showcasing the benefits and opportunities provided by Natura 2000 for further integration with other EU policies in all available fora, such as the European Week of Regions and Cities, Covenant of Mayors, Interreg Europe policy learning platforms, EU Macro-regional Strategies, European Network for Rural Development and National Rural Networks, EU Business and Biodiversity platform, etc. (2017-2019)
 - Developing a Natura 2000 application for mobile phones, so people could locate, explore and learn about the protected species and habitats in Natura 2000 sites (2017-2019)

- ✓ Strengthen links between natural and cultural heritage by:
 - Evaluating the spatial overlaps between Natura 2000 and cultural heritage areas, in cooperation with UNESCO/World Heritage Sites and Council of Europe (2017)
 - Examining the potential synergies and opportunities for tapping into natural and cultural heritage in Natura 2000 areas to generate economic benefits, employment opportunities and to support key sectors such as sustainable tourism (2018)
 - Identifying and disseminating good practice case studies for integrated management of natural and cultural heritage in Natura 2000 and increasing its recognition (e.g. through the sustainable tourism award) and awareness (among site managers, users, stakeholders, policy makers), especially in the context of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage (2017-2018)
 - Exploring the benefits of uptaking and upscaling the results of R&I projects on cultural landscapes in Natura 2000 sites and explore synergies with large-scale demonstration projects launched under Horizon 2020 on heritage-led rural regeneration (2018-2019)
 - Organising joint local events at European Heritage Days and exploring integration options under the EU heritage prize/Europa Nostra awards and the Nature awards, and synergies with the European Capital of Culture (2017-2018)
 - Identifying good practice for further supporting investment in Natura 2000 areas of high cultural value through public and private funding and promoting synergistic use of available EU funds in the fields of environment, culture, education and regional development (2018).

⁹⁶ The date of adoption of the Habitats Directive and of the first LIFE Programme, which plays an essential role in supporting implementation of the Nature Directives

ACTION 15:

Involve young people actively in measures dealing with societal needs by giving them the opportunity to get involved in nature protection in Natura 2000 sites (European Solidarity Corps)

Objective: Better communication and outreach, engaging citizens, stakeholders and communities (Priority D)

Description of the action, responsibilities, deliverables and timelines:

On 7 December 2016 the European Commission launched the European Solidarity Corps which aims to provide young people with opportunities to participate in a wide range of solidarity activities at home or abroad, throughout the EU. The European Solidarity Corps offers opportunities for volunteering, traineeships or jobs that will provide young people with a chance to gain invaluable experience, develop their skills and make a contribution to society.

The initial phase for the Solidarity Corps was launched in December 2016 with the first placements starting in Spring 2017. With the support of the LIFE programme, this offers the chance to contribute to the in-country management of Natura 2000 sites. Activities may include the monitoring of species and habitats, ecological restoration activities, reforestation and tree planting and care, wildfire prevention, identification and eradication of invasive alien species, environmental clean-up (e.g. marine litter).

In 2017 the European Solidarity Corps will be consolidated by a dedicated legal framework. It will offer the opportunity to young people willing to show solidarity to go to another Member State and experience different practices to tackle the challenges of nature protection and disaster prevention, while gaining invaluable experiences for future occupation.

Under this action, the Commission for the period of 2017-2019, with the active support from the Member States and in close cooperation with stakeholders, will:

- ✓ Carry out LIFE preparatory actions for young people under the European Solidarity Corps for the conservation of Natura 2000 sites. This will focus on in-country activities
- ✓ Contribute through EU funding to offer young Europeans cross-border volunteering opportunities or professional experience in the field of disaster prevention and nature conservation.