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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee
21st meeting

Strasbourg, 26-30 November 2001

Document for information

**The common hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*)
in the Netherlands**

Report by the Government

*Document prepared by
the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries of the Netherlands*

INTRODUCTION

At its 19th meeting (29 November- 3 December 1999) the Standing Committee of the Bern Convention decided to open a file on the Common hamster in the Netherlands. To that end it adopted Recommendation No 79 which advised the Netherlands and other countries where the hamster population is under threat to continue their efforts to improve the conservation status of the hamster and to implement the existing action plans.

At its 20th meeting (27 November – 1 December 2000) the Netherlands informed the Standing Committee about the steps the Netherlands had taken to improve the situation and to implement Recommendation No 79 on the protection of the common hamster in Europe.

The Netherlands had adopted the Hamster Protection Plan 2000-2004. The Hamster Plan's objective is to safeguard the hamster for the Dutch fauna. To achieve this objective forty-two actions were defined that were to be realised during the 2000-2004 planning period. The English version of this plan was distributed at the 20th meeting of the Standing Committee and the French version of the Dutch Hamster Protection Plan was sent to all participants of the Standing Committee in the autumn of 2001.

At its 20th meeting the Standing Committee took the decision to close the file and asked the Netherlands, France and Germany to continue reporting to the Standing Committee.

In this report the Dutch Government informs the Standing Committee about the progress made from December 2000 to date.

RESULTS OF THE HAMSTER PROTECTION PLAN 2000-2004 FROM DECEMBER 2000

• **Inventory of habitats where hamsters are still likely to be found (Actions 1-3)**

At the request of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries inventories of hamster habitats are made in the spring and autumn every year. This is done on the basis of a standardised method.

These inventories have yielded the following information:

- Total number of hamster burrows in the autumn of 2000 : 15
- Total number of hamster burrows in the spring of 2001 : 12 (4 of which destroyed)
- Total number of hamster burrows in the autumn of 2001 : 7

• **Capture, breeding and re-introduction programme (Actions 4-7)**

The Dutch breeding programme at Blijdorp Zoo has produced about 100 young animals.

Right from the start efforts were made to get hamsters from abroad to avoid in-breeding. The German authorities in NordRhein-Westfalen and Göttingen were contacted. However the authorities in NordRhein-Westfalen declined to make hamsters available and the hamsters from Göttingen proved not to have the right DNA-profile. These efforts were subsequently abandoned

At the suggestion of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries Blijdorp Zoo made contacts with a French zoo (Mulhouse). A DNA study is set up to get a picture of genetic variation.

The Dutch research institute Alterra has been asked to give advice on the basis of the provisional conclusions of the genetic study. Again efforts will be made to get at least 5 hamsters from Germany (NordRhein-Westfalen) and 5 from Belgium next year (in 2002) for the Blijdorp Zoo breeding programme and the German and Belgian authorities will be presented with Alterra's recommendations.

Although 6 of the 100 hamsters in the breeding programme show signs that may be the result of in-breeding the population is not doomed yet. The hamsters are healthy enough to be released into their habitats in the spring of 2002.

The operation planned for the spring of 2001 was postponed. There were not enough hamsters to be released nor was the area of suitable habitat large enough. A suitable location for re-introduction should cover at least 30 hectares. The number of animals is sufficient now but more land was needed.

To that end a temporary financial incentive was introduced which allowed for the purchase of land at compulsory purchase value, additional measures and a maximum allowance of a f40.000,--.

With this incentive in place an additional 2.75 hectares became available as of 1 November 2001. The area is likely to be extended. In the spring of 2002 the hamsters will be released here. (See Measures for core areas)

- **Legislation (Actions 8-10)**

The Flora and Fauna Act, which will be in force from 1 January 2002, and the new 1998 Nature Conservation Act will further contribute to the protection of the hamster and its natural habitat. Under the new Nature Conservation Act sites may be designated as special nature conservation areas and under the Flora and Fauna Act it is possible to designate sites as areas of special conservation on the grounds that a particular area is part of the range of a protected native species.

The proposed amendments to the Nature Conservation Act were adopted by Parliament. The Privy Council has come with recommendations and the proposal will be presented to the House of Representatives shortly. With this proposal the protection of areas that come under the EU Habitat Directive will be incorporated in Dutch law.

- **Spatial planning (Actions 11-12)**

Incorporating evaluation and enforcement of hamster considerations in planning decisions as agreed started in 1999.

The various legal procedures make it abundantly clear to municipal councils and developers that nature conservation considerations, particularly with respect to the hamster, must be taken into account at a very early stage of the planning process.

- **Measures for core areas, linking zones, fields outside core areas (Actions 13-28)**

A total of 500 ha consisting of 11 core areas will be devoted to the rehabilitation of the hamster: 150 ha will be designated as areas of special conservation and the other 350 ha will come under management contracts.

22 hectares have so far been purchased and 33 hectares have come under management contracts (9). These contracts are concluded on a voluntary basis;

The Provincial Council of Limburg has developed a detailed proposal for the adaptation of hamster tolerance packages (to be included in management contracts) and presented this to the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries. It is likely to be included in the Management Programme (Programma Beheer) (2002/2003);

- **Co-ordination of hamster conservation efforts (Action 29)**

For the duration of the Hamster Protection Plan's planning period the hamster consultation group, set up in 1998, continues its efforts to co-ordinate hamster protection measures and implement the Hamster Protection Plan.

- **Research (Actions 30-35)**

Over the years to come the focus will be on:

- A thorough research and monitoring programme regarding the hamsters that have been released.
- Completing the genetic studies, embarked upon by Alterra and Halle University, into the European hamster population;
- A study into possible signs of inbreeding in hamsters kept in captivity.

- **Monitoring and evaluation (Actions 36-40)**

All hamster protection measures will be evaluated (See above) .

- **Education and public information (Actions 41-42)**

A Plan of Action has been drawn up together with all the stakeholders concerned to increase public awareness about hamsters in anticipation of their re-introduction by the 2002. This was an initiative of the Netherlands Society for Nature and Environment. The public information campaign will be launched in the autumn of 2001.