



Strasbourg, 11 septembre 2025



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CONVENTION RELATIVE À LA CONSERVATION DE LA VIE SAUVAGE
ET DU MILIEU NATUREL DE L'EUROPE

Comité permanent

45^e comité
Strasbourg, 8-12 décembre 2025

Bureau du Comité permanent

16-18 septembre 2025
Strasbourg

Dossier en attente : 2023/2

**Allégations de dommages aux habitats et aux
espèces protégés dus à des activités d'exploitation
forestière dans le site Emeraude de Belpau
(CH0000028) (Suisse)**

- RAPPORT DU PLAIGNANT -

*Document établi par
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Pursuant to Biofuelwatch's original complaint ([T-PVS/Files\(2023\)34](#)), its follow-up ([T-PVS/Files\(2024\)38](#)) and the Swiss Government's reply ([T-PVS/Files\(2024\)56](#)), Biofuelwatch would like to:

A. Draw the Committee's attention to the fact that, earlier this month, the canton of Bern authorised the "temporary clearing" of four hectares of forest (equivalent to five football fields) in the Belpau in order to lay a drinking water pipeline. According to the cantonal [press release](#), "securing the drinking water supply is considered to be of overriding public interest" and the logging will be carried out "by the Burgergemeinde Belp on behalf of the canton and municipality."

B. Express deep concerns at the Swiss government's reply to our complaint, notably the admission that silvicultural interventions have removed excessive dead wood and old trees, with deleterious repercussions on a number of species and habitats. We question the apparent lack of species monitoring and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) ahead of logging; the continued absence of Emerald Network signposts and indeed promotion; and the admission that contracts have been drawn up with forest owners. The announcement that the Special Forest Reserve could be extended into the "Untere Belpau" is further cause for concern, as it will pave the way for further silvicultural interventions.

C. Draw the Swiss Government's attention to the Council of Europe's stated [ultimate objective of the Emerald Network](#), which is: "the **long term survival of the species and habitats of the Bern Convention requiring specific protection measures**. These habitats and species are listed respectively in [Resolution No. 4 \(1996\)](#) and [Resolution No. 6 \(1998\)](#) of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention. Once the areas proposed are officially adopted as Emerald Network sites, they have to be designated and *managed at national level*. The national designation and management measures are decided and put in place to contribute to the main objective of the Network and their *efficiency will be regularly monitored*." (Italics added). Moreover, in the *Draft recommendation on the further clarification of the obligations of Contracting Parties regarding the conservation of Emerald Network sites*, drawn up at the 44th meeting in Strasbourg this month, it is clearly stipulated that "timely and comprehensive impact assessments" are required *before* the approval of any project for the habitat involved and that projects incompatible with conservation objectives should be refused.

In more detail, therefore.

1. "Long term survival of the species and habitats"

Biofuelwatch would like to point out that the Belpau (CH0000028) was proposed as ASCI (Emerald) in 2009 and was accepted in November 2012 as an "alluvial zone of national importance—the Belper Giessen—and an adjoining beech forest" ("zone alluviale d'importance nationale Belper Giessen et à une hêtraie attenante au NE") and that its quality and importance rest upon, among others, the presence of "significant populations of amphibians", according to the [Standard Data Form](#), which also lists a number of species which the Swiss Government now admits are no longer "Present" just 12 years later.

a. Species

With regard to **amphibians** and according to the [OECD's Data Explorer](#), 73.7% of studied species in Switzerland are threatened, which puts the country third from bottom out of 35 OECD countries. Despite the Belpau being a nationally and internationally recognised site for amphibians, the Swiss Government's reply claims that "most of the amphibian species mentioned in the complaint do not occur over a large area" and focuses on just five of the ten species supposedly present, claiming they represent "isolated cases".

The ten species cited in Biofuel's complaint are all species which were declared "Present" on the original [Standard Data Form](#) and ten species, not five, are also mentioned in the Federal Office for the Environment's (FOEN) [description of the Belpau](#).

Surely the aim of the Belpau is not just to protect existing populations of amphibians, however "isolated", but also to promote their expansion? Neither objective seems to have been achieved.

While it is true that amphibians do in general like to bask in sunlight, it is also true that most travel to and from and hibernate in the surrounding forests, which makes them extremely vulnerable to logging activities, especially during the autumn, winter and spring months.

With the exception of the Midwife Toad (*Alytes obstetricans*) which tends to stick close to water and **does not usually travel** further than 100-150 m to its hibernation sites, the other species can migrate considerable distances, putting them at even greater risk. Midwife toads are however particularly sensitive to the type of habitat modification which is also regularly carried out in the Belpau.

The Yellow-Bellied Toad (*Bombina variegata*), a deciduous forest specialist, has been known to travel **2-3 km in search of new territory**. It is particularly vulnerable to logging as it hibernates among others, under logs and among roots of trees. Similarly, the Common Tree Frog (*Hyla arborea*) can migrate **up to 4 km** and it too hibernates underground as well as in holes in trees. Some young Palmate Newts (*Lissotriton helveticus*) have been known to migrate **up to 1 km**.

As documented previously, logging activities, site modifications and flood mitigation work have been observed during the autumn, winter and spring months, all along the reserve's left bank, with more heavy



machinery entering subsequently well into summer months to chip woodpiles (examples below).

With regard to **birds** and according to the [OECD's Data Explorer](#), 37.1% of studied species in Switzerland are threatened, putting the country third from bottom out of 36 OECD countries.

The admission that several species of woodpecker which were once present have not been observed recently is alarming but hardly surprising given the intensity with which old trees are harvested. Official sightings of the Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*), which requires old trees in which to excavate its nests, apparently now "occur mostly outside the reserve". Yet this species is largely sedentary and studies have shown that the median recovery distance for adults is 1 km (3 km for juveniles). The Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dedrocopos major*) is a forest specialist that requires **large trees and rather dense arboreal vegetation** to feed as well as to breed, which can be as early as January. It is hardly surprising that this relatively common species hasn't been recorded this year.

But the most egregious disappearance is that of the Middle Spotted Woodpecker (*D. medius*) which hasn't been sighted in the reserve since 2016. Europe holds 75% of the world's population (10,000–22,000 pairs) of this mature broadleaf forest, rough-bark tree specialist which is highly vulnerable to precisely the forest clearances and radical changes in forest management practised in the Belpau. While oaks are usually spared, other rough-barked trees such as old ash are not. Moreover the extensive logging has resulted in unacceptable windthrow, including of oak which is rapidly removed from the reserve.

With regard to **mammals** and according to the [OECD's Data Explorer](#), 34% of studied species in Switzerland are threatened, putting the country third from bottom out of 34 OECD countries.

The Swiss Government's reply states that Bechstein's bat (*Myotis bechsteinii*) "doesn't exist in this zone" and that sightings in the region date back to 1994, yet the species is marked as "Present" in the [Standard Data Form](#) drawn up in 2004-5. Around 4/5 of Swiss bats use forests to roost and/or hunt in and almost half spend part of

the daytime resting in tree cavities which are also important mating and overwintering sites. Large, old habitat trees are however growing increasingly rare in the Belpau.

With regard to the Belpau's second Emerald mammalian species, the beaver (*Castor fiber*), while damage has not been documented to either dams or lodges, vegetation is being extensively removed around beaver ponds and lodges, exposing the latter to footpaths and dog walkers. The Government speaks of "an exceptionally high density" of beavers in the Belpau but fails to provide any figures. Moreover, will the Belpau's beaver be guaranteed protection in view of the [modified Hunting Ordinance](#), which if adopted would allow the shooting of "problem" animals?

Finally, signs of hunting and baiting (barrel filled with corn usually used to attract roe deer, pictured page 4) have been recorded within the perimeter of the Belpau. Local nature associations were informed but nothing was done. The barrel along with mounds of cigarette butts were noted in March 2023. It could very well still be there ([click for precise location](#)).

b. Habitats

The [EUNIS units](#) describe the Belpau as being composed predominantly of broad-leaved deciduous woodland (53% N16 habitat), particularly beech (G1.6 Fagus woodland), and inland water bodies (26% N07 habitats).

As Biofuelwatch has documented, beech is one of the species most targeted in the Belpau and it is extensively logged, including old habitat trees, so much so that it is hard to know where the beech forest mentioned in the [Standard Data Form](#) actually is.

The alluvial nature of the Belpau is frequently cited, yet a dyke has been erected all along the left bank to mitigate flooding which prevents the free flow of water. Plans to restore the area's alluvial character have been thwarted both by the local community and the fact that the "Obere Belpau" doubles as a water catchment for the city of Bern. It is therefore somewhat disingenuous to speak of an alluvial forest when it is nothing of the sort.

The government's claim that "there is no evidence of eutrophication in excess of general nitrogen deposition in Switzerland", is hardly a benchmark when [90% of Swiss forests](#) are affected by excessive nitrogen inputs. Swiss forests receive on average 19.4 kg/ha/year of nitrogen which is far superior to the 10-15 kg/ha yearly maximum recommended for deciduous forests. This figure is very likely much higher in the Belpau which is surrounded by agricultural land, much of which is given over to livestock. Inputs of 60 kg/ha per annum have been recorded in forests on the Swiss Plateau.

Increased nitrates and ammonium lead to soil acidification, with knock-on effects on soil invertebrates and fungal mycorrhizae as well as on algal blooms and oxygen levels in waterbodies. It certainly explains the proliferation of both neophytes as well as nettles and brambles which take over following logging in the Belpau. The objective of "letting in light in this area" is largely negated by this rapid recolonisation of sub-vegetation



which is not being cleared (photos below, all taken in 2024).

It also explains the eutrophication recorded in many of the Belpau's standing bodies of water.

The fact that most of the wood extracted from the Belpau is burnt as biomass in four large local burners only compounds the problem.

2. “Designed and managed at national level”

Switzerland has set aside barely 1.6% of its territory as Emerald sites, 12 times less than the EU as a whole, placing it at the bottom of Europe, second only to Liechtenstein. Yet even these sites are heavily exploited.

The government claims the Special Forest Reserve of the Obere Belpau is exploited “traditionally” as a “coppiced forest.” Observations on the ground from 2019 to the present day (photos below), supported by



Global Forest Watch data, clearly show that this area of the Belpau has been industrially logged. The announcement that the Special Forest Reserve could be extended is therefore not good news and will help justify more logging.

Furthermore, as far as Biofuelwath is aware, the only Management Plan drawn up for an Emerald Network was that published for the Oberaargau (CH0000040) by the Verein Smaragdgebiet Oberaargau. And while the decision to carry out a survey of dead wood and Emerald species is timely and must be applauded, the question remains as to why this was not done sooner.

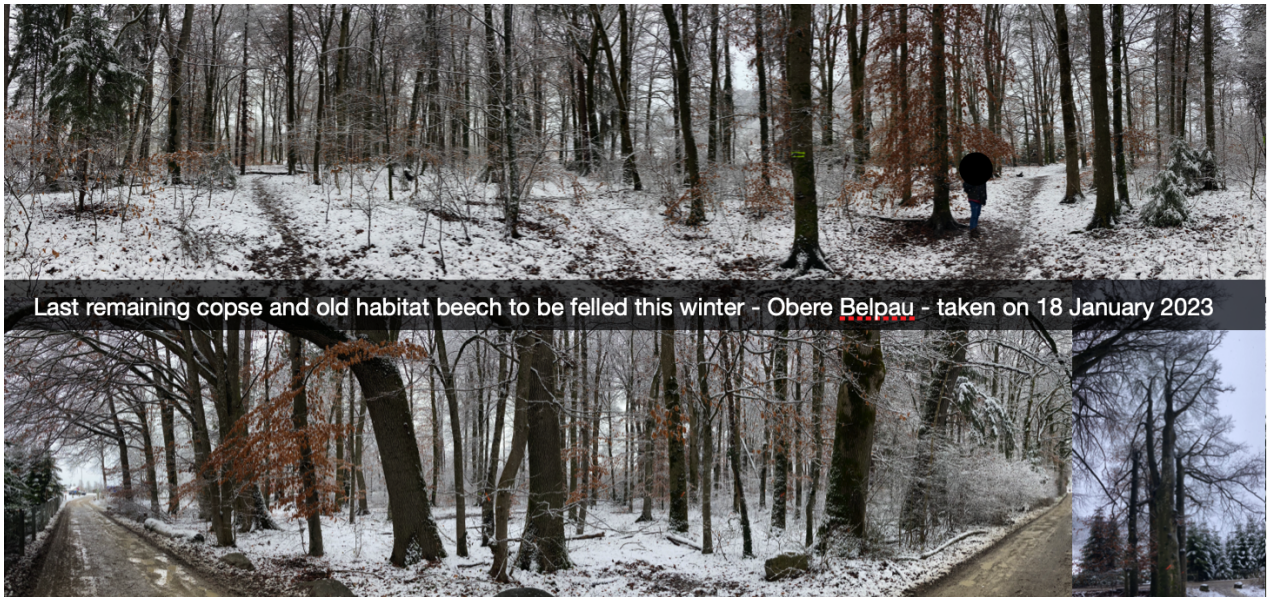
The Swiss Government has also admitted that too many old trees and dead wood have been extracted from the Belpau, but that this deficit has been acknowledged and taken into account in the new management contracts of 2022. Yet old trees continue to be targeted and windthrow resulting from the excessive interventions



continues to be removed from across the Belpau (photos below).

As detailed in Biofuel’s follow-up, the last large trees in the Obere Belpau adjacent to the Special Forest Reserve are to be felled this winter due to “safety concerns”, leaving virtually only the old oak (pictured on page 5 bordering the road). This copse has to date withstood the extreme weather events which toppled many of the isolated trees spared in the recent surrounding logging operations. Moreover, a federally certified tree specialist working on behalf of the Franz Weber Foundation — an association trying to save this last patch of forest — has argued that removing the trees from around the old oak will make the latter vulnerable to windthrow. The forest owners (the Burgergemeinde Belp) are pressing ahead regardless and have agreed to spare just one old ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), a designated habitat tree estimated to be some 100 years old, on condition that Baumpflege Dietrich GmbH — a tree surgery company — assumes responsibility for securing the tree which will include removing all dead wood. The company has accepted and the costs will be borne by the Franz Weber Foundation. Yet, according to the tree specialist, all the trees bordering and overhanging the road will require similar maintenance to make them safe following the intervention. The Burgergemeinde Belp however doesn’t deem it necessary to prune the oaks, which makes their singling out of the ash highly questionable. This winter’s intervention is also problematic from a security point of view because it will leave

the spared trees exposed, thus posing a greater risk to the public. The best option both in terms of safety and



biodiversity would therefore have been to do nothing.

Biofuelwatch would like to point out that, in the canton of Bern, cantonal foresters are also often employed by the Burgergemeinden (burger communities). This is the case in the Belpau where the cantonal forester is employed by the Burgergemeinde Belp, which owns much of the Belpau's left bank forests and whose stated goal is "to deliver 10,000 m³ of woodchips annually, supplying 4 local biomass plants."

Yet the Burgergemeinde Belp also receives financial aid in the form of subsidies to promote biodiversity. How is this not a conflict of interest? Moreover, how is this state of affairs compatible with the requirement for Emerald Networks to be "managed at national level"?

3. "Their efficiency will be regularly monitored"

The Swiss Government's reply raises more questions than it answers. Does a Management Plan exist and if not, will one be established? Have species been recorded and monitored in the Belpau in the years since the reserve was established? The Guide "Assainissement des biotopes d'importance nationale" is telling. Despite being published in 2023, the last recorded study in the Belpau seems to date to 2015 and mentions just the beaver and one dragonfly.

Moreover, logging in the Belpau continues unabated and old trees are still being removed (photos below, all taken on 13 December 2024) despite Government assurances to the contrary. Was an EIA drawn up before the planned 4 hectare pipeline intervention? And how can a local burger community and a cantonal forester be mandated with logging this nationally and internationally important nature reserve?

The fact that Switzerland has set aside just 1.6% of its territory as Emerald Networks is shocking enough, that these reserves are logged with such impunity is astounding.

Biofuelwatch calls on the Secretariat to investigate this matter more fully and at the very least to recommend



that the Special Forest Reserve not be extended into the Untere Belpau.