

Strasbourg, 22 August 2023

T-PVS/Files(2023)54

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

43<sup>rd</sup> meeting  
Strasbourg, 27 November - 1 December 2023

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**Follow-up to Recommendation No.190 (2016)**

**Recommendation No.190 (2016) on the  
conservation of natural habitats and wildlife,  
especially birds, in afforestation of lowland in  
Iceland**

**- REPORT BY THE GOVERNMENT -**

*Document prepared by  
the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Climate of Iceland*

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**1. Develop a schedule and clear programme of work to implement the recommendations in this report.**

In August 2022, the minister for food, agriculture and fisheries (which The Icelandic forest service and The Soil Conservation Service are under) published the first combined strategy for land reclamation and forestry as well as an action plan.

The strategy is prepared according to recent laws on land reclamation, as well as on forests and forestry.

[The Action Plan](#) touches on recommendations in Recommendation no. 190.

**2. Finalise and activate as soon as possible the proposed contract between the Environment Ministry and IINH for a project supporting the implementation of AEWA;**

This contract has not been finalized.

**3. Accelerate significantly Iceland's work towards its contribution to the international Emerald Network of sites**

In December 2021 Iceland proposed five sites to the Emerald Network. In June 2022, a biogeographical seminar was held in Iceland. At the 42<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee in December 2022, the five sites were listed as candidate sites.

**4. Implement urgently the provisions in the 2006 legislation for Strategic Environmental Assessment of regional afforestation programmes, and of those Municipal plans that cover areas of importance for waterbirds. Undertake the SEA of national forestry policy as originally recommended under the Bern Convention in 2002;**

In 2021 Parliament passed a revised act on Environmental Impact assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment. This does not change much with regards to forestry.

It must be noted that the regional afforestation programs were abolished as such in 2019 and are now part of the Forestry Service.

**5. Develop a national indicative forestry strategy in the short term, for full implementation over the longer term.**

In the year 2022 the minister for food, agriculture and fisheries, issued a 10-year national strategy for combined forestry and land restoration. The strategy includes a five-year action plan.

A new land reclamation law was passed by the Althingi in the autumn of 2018, and in the spring of 2019 a new law on forests and forestry was also passed. The act stipulates that the Minister shall issue, at least every five years, land reclamation and national forestry plans for 10 years. They provide for the government's vision and policy on land reclamation and forestry, taking into account the objectives of the Acts.

Two project boards were appointed in June 2019 with the task of formulating proposals for these two plans. The project boards presented their proposals together with an environmental assessment in an open consultation in the spring of 2021. In the meantime, they submitted their proposals to the Board.

In accordance with Article 6 of the Land Reclamation Act and Article 4 of the Forests and Forestry Act, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries worked on coordinating these two plans, and in August 2022 the Minister issued a single comprehensive land reclamation and forestry plan, as well as a five-year action plan. The plan is entitled „Land and Life – Strategy and Vision for Land Reclamation and Forestry until 2031“.

The vision and focus of the new strategy are:

- The state of ecosystems and their biodiversity is consistent with ecosystem potential.
- The utilisation of forests, wetlands and other ecosystems is sustainable and they have a strong resistance to natural crises and other disturbances.
- The country's ecosystems store rich amounts of carbon in soil and vegetation and play a key role in the carbon balance.
- Increased land quality in forests and thriving ecosystems support improved quality of life, public health and improves communities' resilience to environmental change.
- The land supports diverse business activities and sustainable development of settlements across the country.

The Land Reclamation and Forestry Action Plan covers 2022-2026 and therefore shapes priorities for government action in the coming years. Defined measures include research on the impacts of land reclamation, forestry and recovery of wetlands on biodiversity, creating new quality criteria for land selection for forestry, and an assessment of the carbon balance for climate emissions accounting. Direct actions mainly involve restoring ecosystems on degraded land, restoration of wetlands, restoration of natural forests and forestry.

Regional plans are in the making, based on The Land Reclamation and Forestry Action Plan in close collaboration with municipalities. These plans will also be based on the best data available on biodiversity, habitat types and nature conservation areas. The municipalities will take this into consideration in their planning processes, which are legally defined.

The IINH maps for habitat types have proven useful on large scale. However, these maps have proven to be too inaccurate for planning land use on smaller scale, like for individual projects, although the data can give some broad indication on the habitat types in each site.

- 6. As part of the IINH work, support the implementation of AEWA in Iceland (see point 2), develop and launch with effect from 2017 an appropriately resourced country-wide scheme for long-term monitoring of waterbirds and their habitats, to:**

**(i) be capable inter alia of detecting changes caused by forestry, and**

**(ii) be used inter alia to help inform judgements about forestry development, by reference to the national and international context relating for example to bird distribution, habitat use and the status and trends of populations;**

See answer to point 2.

- 7. Continue to give priority to the screening of afforestation proposals to determine the need for Environmental Impact Assessment according to case-specific judgements concerning the risk of effects on significant ecological values, rather than according to an arbitrary size threshold. Support these decisions with guidelines on factors likely to contribute to such effects (including those that may contribute indirectly, cumulatively and synergistically), and take a precautionary approach where there is uncertainty. Undertake “Class A” assessments under the EIA legislation wherever the circumstances warrant it;**

The screening of afforestation proposals is in accordance with the EIA act and any afforestation project must go through a screening by the relevant municipality and a development permit to be issued. This is all in accordance with law.

The Land Reclamation and Forestry Action Plan states that new quality criteria for land selection for forestry shall be developed. This is to be prepared in 2023. Additionally, a risk assessment for alien

tree species is being developed and will be scrutinized by an expert committee on the import of alien species. This is also to be finalized in 2023.

- 8. Make full use of the opportunity provided by the negotiation of individual planting agreements with landowners to provide advice and attach appropriate conditions to any grant aid, in order to safeguard (and where applicable enhance) important ecological values. Develop effective collaboration between IINH and the Forestry Service, to provide an evidence based approach to support locational guidance for forest planting in future; and to build up relevant knowledge and capacities across government; T-PVS (2016)**

The Forestry Service is responsible for advising landowners, based on the best information available, including data produced by the IINH. The IINH may review individual afforestation plans.

- 9. Undertake a review of existing formalised systems for liaison, consultation and equitable input to decision-making in planning and management of forestry across the various departments and agencies responsible for forestry, planning, environmental protection and climate change policy; and define specific steps for improving coordination and the coherence of action. Address explicitly as part of this review the supportive role of NGOs, academic experts and civil society;**

These processes are reviewed on regular basis. By adopting in law the issuance of national and regional plans for forestry an inclusive and broad review process is included.

- 10. Update Iceland's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, incorporating provisions relating to forestry policy and migratory waterbirds that reflect the recommendations made in the joint AEWA/Bern Convention mission report, and setting out a timeline for the future implementation of actions, accompanied by the necessary resourcing commitments;**

Authorities have recently introduced a Green Book which contains information on the state of biodiversity in Icelandic ecosystems. The Green Book is a step towards a national biodiversity strategy which plans are to start developing in cooperation with relevant stakeholders coming autumn.

- 11. Give priority in future environmental research projects and programmes to gathering better Iceland-specific evidence on the ecological mechanisms by which afforestation may impact upon birds and other biodiversity. This should give particular attention to effects that may be secondary, cumulative, synergistic, indirect or "edge"-related, as well as any complicating factors associated with climate change. Make the findings available to all concerned, and use the resulting knowledge fully in EIA screening processes, good practice guidance and advice on e.g. buffer distances, mitigation measures and options for habitat restoration;**

This is included in the Land and life action plan. A research proposal is being prepared which addresses both the impact from afforestation and from habitat restoration on biodiversity, including birdlife. Other research is also ongoing on how different types of forests affect birdlife and on edge related impact.

- 12. Update and expand existing guidance on good environmental practice in afforestation, to include (for example):**

**(i)the Bern Convention's draft Code of Conduct on plantation forestry and invasive alien trees, when adopted,**

- (ii) more advice (especially to help municipalities) on EIA and planning decisions,**
- (iii) updated information on the location of sensitive habitats and important sites,**
- (iv) avoidance of sites that support important bird populations (irrespective of habitat quality), and**
- (v) setting back plantation boundaries to provide buffer zones for reducing “edge effects” on wetlands;**

It is included in the Land life action plan to update existing guidance on good environmental practice in afforestation. This is to be concluded in 2023.

- 13. Given the need, as part of wider ecosystem management, to maintain and restore wetland values and services, as articulated in the Terms of Reference for the Mission; then explore the scope and possibilities for introducing State-funded “positive” financial incentives for land management in favour of nature conservation. This should be informed by research on trends in uptake of existing forms of support and on landowner perspectives concerning the future;**

Included in the Land and life action plan is the review of support to farmers and other landowners for afforestation and ecosystem restoration.

- 14. Keep the Standing Committee regularly informed about the progress in the implementation of this Recommendation.**