



INTERNATIONAL
LAND CONSERVATION
NETWORK

Eurosite-ELCN Co-Hosts Meeting of the European Commission Expert Group on the Nature Directives (NADEG) on Tools and Incentives for Private Land Conservation

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On January 19th, Eurosite-ELCN co-hosted a meeting of the European Commission's "Expert Group on the Nature Directives" (NADEG) on Tools and Incentives for Private Land Conservation. The meeting was very well attended with 115 participants, including representatives of the authorities of 20 different European Union (EU) Member States.

Traditionally, NADEG has coordinated the implementation of the EU's core nature conservation legislation: the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive ("the Nature Directives"). Lately, NADEG has expanded its scope and addressed the implementation of EU biodiversity policy more broadly. It is now the most important working-level platform for dialogue between the European Commission, EU member states, and interest groups on EU nature conservation issues.

The European Commission arranged this NADEG meeting to highlight the relevance of private land conservation in the EU and to discuss with member states how long-term, voluntary private land conservation can support the EU Green Deal and EU biodiversity targets, e.g. to protect at least 30% of EU's land and sea by 2030, to improve management effectiveness and coherence of the European network of protected areas "Natura 2000", to restore degraded ecosystems, and to enhance biodiversity in the wider countryside.

The meeting provide examples of how private landowners and users can be mobilized to take voluntary action for nature on their land. Landowners, authorities, and NGOs may not have the same objectives, but we do share a concern for nature.

Andrew Bowman, President of the Land Trust Alliance, made a presentation to the group regarding how over the past four decades land trusts in the US have made a remarkable contribution to land conservation and formed a vital movement through legal tools for conservation and financial incentives. Specifically, he underlined the huge impact of conservation easements in connection with tax incentives in the US and the potential applicability of this approach to the EU.

This view was shared by Sue Stolton and Brent Mitchell from the IUCN Privately Protected Areas Specialist Group as well as Jim Levitt and Chandni Navalkha from the International Land Conservation Network, who attended the meeting as external experts to answer questions from the audience. In addition to conservation easements, privately protected areas and land stewardship agreements were highlighted as promising tools to scale up private land conservation in the EU.

Presentations from EU member state officials supported this assessment. Santiago Gracia from the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge and Pilar Vendrell from the Government of Catalonia (department of Climate Action, Food and Rural Agenda) showed that Spain is a frontrunner in the EU in using land stewardship agreements for nature protection. By 2019, 3.100 agreements protecting 578.000 ha of land had been signed by 218 entities. Mikko Kuusinen from the Finish Ministry of the Environment presented the Forest Biodiversity Programme for Southern Finland (METSU) as a tool to create privately protected areas on a voluntary basis. Landowners receive compensation payments for entering into permanent, legally binding agreements. This bottom-up approach has protected 83.000 ha so far. Carl De Schepper from the Flemish Agency for Nature and Forest explained the new Belgian system of management planning for nature reserves introduced in 2017 and Pascal Bargiarelli, from the France Ministry of Ecological Transition, introduced the French approach towards applying conservation easements – real environmental obligations (ORE). The use of OREs in France is still relatively modest as until now only about 1000 contracts have been signed. This may be partly due to its complicated incentive structure. The state provides the tool, but the financial compensation has to be established between the two contracting parties, and local authorities decide on compensations such as property tax deductions. The presented tools were illustrated by examples and words of encouragement from a Finnish and Spanish landowner.

Three key messages emerged from the following discussion between the EC, member states, and experts:

1. In addition to the quantity or acreage of land conserved, the quality of the nature that is being protected matters,
2. Peer learning is an important factor in upscaling private land conservation tools, and
3. Building trust between stakeholders and decision-makers is key.

The meeting was an important opportunity to underscore the potential of private land conservation in the EU. It became clear that the European Commission places high hopes in the ongoing LIFE project “European Networks for Private Land Conservation”. Eurosite-ELCN is called upon to continue and intensify the networking among private land conservation practitioners in the various member states.

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