

**BRIEFING NOTE**

Downlisting European Nature: From the Wolf to the Stress Test

How the logic behind the wolf downlisting is being extended to the entire framework of EU nature legislation

Green Impact ETS · 4 August 2026

WHY THIS NOTE

- Covers the European Commission's [stress test of the Birds and Habitats Directives](#) — its design, its language, and its legal risk for European citizens.
- Part II documents the lack of implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives by Member States — site designation, management plans, six-year reporting, and a set of documented non-compliance cases across the EU.

Part I — The Stress Test of the Birds and Habitats Directives

1. What the Stress Test Is

The stress test announced in December 2025 and formally launched in May 2026 represents a potential systemic threat to the entire EU framework for nature protection. Unlike the wolf downlisting — which concerned a specific species — the stress test subjects the Birds and Habitats Directives themselves to scrutiny. These directives constitute the backbone of European environmental law.

According to the European Commission, the stress test has three declared objectives:

- Assess whether the Directives achieve their nature protection objectives in a cost-efficient way
- Identify opportunities to reduce administrative burdens considered unnecessary
- Ensure coherence with other EU policies, including food security and competitiveness

The stress test focuses on the concerns and suggestions raised by some stakeholders in the call for evidence for the Commission's initiative on simplification of administrative burdens in environmental legislation, as well as those that emerged during the implementation dialogues held with Commissioner Jessika Roswall.

The call for evidence — part of the wider “Environmental Omnibus” package covering the circular economy, industrial emissions and waste management — was open from 22 July to 10 September 2025, and is explicitly aligned with the Commission's Competitiveness Compass target of cutting administrative burden by at least 25% for all companies and at least 35% for SMEs.

Among the implementation dialogues, a session held on 18 February 2026 was jointly hosted by Commissioner Roswall and the Commissioner for Agriculture and Food, Christophe Hansen, with participants from the farming

community, the water sector, civil society and Member State authorities. The discussion covered the Water Framework Directive, the Nitrates Directive, and the Birds and Habitats Directives; participants called for reduced administrative burden and regulatory fragmentation, alongside greater predictability and legal certainty. A further, dedicated Implementation Dialogue specifically on the legislation protecting birds and habitats, hosted by Commissioner Roswall, is scheduled for the third quarter of 2026.

The public consultation is open from 12 May 2026, with results expected by the end of the year. The original deadline of 4 August 2026 has since been postponed to 10 August 2026, as confirmed on the European Commission’s consultation page.

The three thematic areas

#	Official topic, as published by the Commission (Green Forum, 2026)
1	Application of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, with a focus on the appropriate assessment procedure for Natura 2000 sites
2	Policy coherence, stakeholder participation, funding support and governance (including monitoring and reporting)
3	Species protection and derogations, and procedures for adapting the annexes to scientific and technical progress

Source: European Commission, Green Forum — “Stress test of the Birds and Habitats Directives”, 2026.

On the third topic, the Commission’s own Communication of 10 December 2025 is explicit about one of its intended outputs: it states that the stress test will “present guidelines to facilitate implementation including with regard to predatory species” (COM(2025) 980 final, p. 14; confirmed on EUR-Lex). This is the Commission’s own wording, not a paraphrase — and it is the clearest documented link between the stress test and the reasoning applied to the wolf downlisting.

Read against this framing, each topic carries a plausible risk, in Green Impact’s assessment rather than the Commission’s own characterisation: revisiting the Article 6(3) assessment procedure could weaken safeguards for infrastructure and industrial projects; folding “policy coherence” into the stress test could subordinate nature protection to competitiveness and agricultural policy objectives; and revising derogation procedures for “predatory species” could extend the wolf downlisting’s logic to other large carnivores.

2. Language That Changes Substance

The language used by the Commission deserves critical analysis. Terms such as “simplification”, “administrative burdens”, “cost-efficiency” and “coherence with competitiveness” are not neutral: they signal a paradigm shift in which nature protection is no longer a value in itself, but a variable to be optimised against economic objectives.

WARNING SIGNALS IN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

- ▶ “Fit for purpose in a cost-efficient way” — subordinates protection to economic criteria
- ▶ “Reduce unnecessary administrative burden” — presupposes that existing safeguards are excessive
- ▶ “Enhance EU competitiveness” — introduces an objective extraneous to the original Directives
- ▶ “Proportionate” — a term that historically precedes derogations in environmental law
- ▶ Explicit reference to “predatory species” — signals a direct link to the wolf case

3. “Stress Test”: A Term Borrowed from Finance — and Why It Matters

The choice of the term “stress test” is not accidental or purely stylistic. It represents a conceptual import from the financial and banking sector, where the term carries a precise technical meaning — and applying it to environmental law for the first time in EU history is itself worth examining.

Fitness Check (2016) and Stress Test (2026): what the official record says

The two exercises can be compared directly on the basis of the Commission’s own published framing of each, rather than by inference:

Fitness Check (2016)	Stress Test (2026)
Finding: the Directives “are fit for purpose but fully achieving their objectives and realising their full potential will depend on substantial improvement in their implementation” (European Commission, 2016)	Framing: assess “whether the directives remain fit to achieve their objectives in a cost-efficient way, including by identifying opportunities to reduce unnecessary administrative burden” (European Commission, Green Forum, 2026)
Outcome: the Commission confirmed the legal texts would not be reopened; effort redirected toward an Action Plan for better implementation (European Commission, 2017)	Additional scope: “also considers issues related to climate change, food security, competitiveness, resilience, the evolving case-law and need for legal certainty” (European Commission, Green Forum, 2026)
Basis: broad stakeholder evidence-gathering questionnaire across all Member States (European Commission, 2016–2017)	Explicit continuity: the stress test “builds on the results of the 2016 Fitness Check of the Directives” (European Commission, Green Forum, 2026)

Sources: European Commission, *Fitness Check of the Birds and Habitats Directives* (2016); European Commission, Green Forum — “Stress test of the Birds and Habitats Directives” (2026); IEEP, “Fitness Check of the Birds and Habitats Directives”.

Beyond this documented framing, the choice of the term “stress test” itself invites a further, interpretive reading. In EU financial regulation, stress tests have a precise technical meaning: the European Banking Authority and the ECB use them to assess whether banks can withstand adverse economic scenarios, with the bank as the potentially fragile subject and the market as the pressure it must resist. Read through this analogy — an analytical framing offered in this note, not a description used by the Commission — transposing the term to environmental law casts the Directives themselves as the fragile subject and economic interests as the adverse scenario they must prove they can withstand. Whether this analogy accurately describes the Commission’s intent, or over-reads a label chosen for other reasons, is a legitimate point of debate; it is presented here as a hypothesis to be tested against the stress test’s eventual output, not as an established fact.

THREE CONSEQUENCES IF THE FINANCIAL ANALOGY HOLDS

- It would reframe the Directives as a risk to be justified rather than a safeguard to be protected and strengthened.
- It would import a pass/fail logic in which structural changes to the legal framework follow naturally from an unfavourable assessment.
- It would normalise the evaluation of environmental law against economic criteria, a precedent potentially applicable to future EU environmental legislation.

It is also worth noting the institutional context: the stress test is explicitly framed by the Commission as part of its wider simplification initiative aimed at enhancing EU competitiveness (European Commission, Green Forum, 2026). This places the Birds and Habitats Directives alongside administrative procedures and business regulations within the same simplification agenda — a positioning that is documented, whatever conclusions are ultimately drawn from it.

4. The Stress Test as a Mechanism of Normative Erosion

The stress test is not an isolated procedural exercise. Read alongside the wolf downlisting, it fits a recurring pattern of how EU nature law is being progressively weakened:

Mechanism	How it manifests	Implication for the future
Normative precedent	The wolf downlisting is the first regressive amendment to the Habitats Directive since 1992. It breaks the taboo of the directives being untouchable.	Other species or habitats may be downlisted using the same mechanism
Inter-institutional cascading	Bern Convention → Habitats Directive → national law: each level “dragged” by the previous one	Difficult to block the process downstream once upstream changes are already adopted
Rhetoric of proportionality	“It is not realistic to protect everything equally” — accepting the principle of differentiated protection	Opens the door to future hierarchies between species, with carnivores always in a vulnerable position
Stress test as reset	The Directives are subjected to evaluation as if they were ordinary legislation, not fundamental acquis	Legitimises structural revision of one of the most consolidated frameworks in EU environmental law

The premise underlying the first row of this table — that the wolf downlisting broke a precedent — rests on a further point that is itself independently documented: the downlisting is widely disputed in the peer-reviewed literature as lacking a scientific basis. A 2025 study in *Conservation Letters* found no evidence of a recent increase in livestock damage or threats to human safety from wolves since 2022, noted that wolf and bear populations have followed a positive trend across Europe at the continental scale over recent decades, and observed that most Member States had still not achieved the “favourable conservation status” the Habitats Directive requires — a finding the study says the Court of Justice of the EU has itself confirmed. The study characterises the decision as politically and populist-driven rather than science-based (Kutal, M., Duřa, M., Haring, M., López-Bao, J.V., 2025, “Deeply Political and Populist Decisions on Large Carnivores in Europe in Recent Times,” *Conservation Letters* 18, doi:10.1111/conl.13125). A separate letter in *Science*, signed by Ettore Randi and co-authors, similarly calls on the EU to restore strict protection for wolves, arguing the case on conservation-science grounds (Randi, E. et al., 2025, “Restore strict protection for wolves in Europe,” *Science* 390, 452–453, doi:10.1126/science.aeb0660). This is consistent with the position of specialist scientific bodies at the time of the original downlisting decision: the IUCN’s Large Carnivore Initiative for Europe (LCIE) described the proposal as “premature and faulty” in a November 2024 position statement, a view echoed by the IUCN itself in a December 2024 statement raising “concerns over the EU’s wolf downlisting proposal”. Separately, close to 700 European scientists and academics signed two scientific statements opposing the downlisting on the grounds that it lacked scientific justification (Green Impact ETS, open letter, 31 January 2025).

5. The Legal Basis of the Stress Test: Open Questions

Beyond the consultation process itself, the stress test raises a distinct legal question: whether subjecting the Birds and Habitats Directives to economic and competitiveness criteria is compatible with EU primary law, the Treaties, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The issue is structural and precedent-setting. Allowing the Directives to be evaluated today on the basis of economic burden and simplification criteria — rather than conservation effectiveness — creates exactly the same kind of normative precedent as the wolf downlisting: a first instance that, once established, becomes the template for future interventions.

LEGAL QUESTIONS UNDER SCRUTINY

- ▶ Does the Commission have the legal authority to subject the Birds and Habitats Directives to evaluation criteria derived from the competitiveness and simplification agenda, rather than from conservation and biodiversity objectives?
- ▶ Is the framing of the stress test compatible with Art. 191 TFEU (environmental policy principles), the precautionary principle, and the non-regression principle in EU law?
- ▶ Does the stress test process, by importing financial sector methodology into nature law, constitute a de facto pre-legislative instrument that predetermines the outcome of any subsequent amendment — and if so, is this procedurally legitimate?

Part II — The Implementation Gap: Applying the Habitats and Birds Directives on the Ground

The following data, drawn from the same June 2026 briefing, documents how the Directives are actually being implemented today. It is presented here because it bears directly on the stress test's premise: before asking whether the Directives are “cost-efficient”, the record shows that their existing obligations are, in large part, still unmet.

1. Natura 2000: A Network on Paper, Management in Arrears (EU-wide)

Under Article 6(1) of the Habitats Directive, Member States are required to establish conservation measures for Natura 2000 sites, including management plans and administrative or contractual measures corresponding to the ecological requirements of the Annex II species present on those sites. The wolf (*Canis lupus*) is listed as a species of Community interest under Annex II, placing a specific and legally binding obligation on Member States to monitor its conservation status and to ensure or bring about a favourable conservation status for the species. These obligations exist independently of the downlisting from Annex IV to Annex V — which affects the strict species protection regime, not the habitat management obligation.

EU NATURA 2000 NETWORK — KEY IMPLEMENTATION DATA (end of 2023 unless noted)

- 27,165 sites, covering 18.6% of EU land area and 10.5% of EU marine territory — the largest coordinated protected area network in the world (EEA, 2025)
- 1,963 sites — 9.1% of the total — had still not been formally designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), in breach of the six-year designation deadline mandated by the Directive (EEA, 2025)
- Less than half of assessed Natura 2000 sites in the EU have a management plan in place; even where plans exist, many were delayed for years and remain incomplete (Oceana Europe, 2025)
- The Commission's own Fitness Check of the Habitats Directive (2016) already found that 50% of designated sites lacked a management plan
- Under the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, Member States were required to submit national plans by 2023 for bringing 30% of species/habitats in poor condition to favourable status — almost all countries missed this deadline (EUROPARC, 2024)

Sites without adequate management risk becoming “paper parks”: areas that hold formal protected status but provide little actual conservation benefit. This is not a marginal problem — it is the structural condition of the Natura 2000 network across the majority of Member States.

2. Documented Non-Compliance Cases Across Member States

Non-compliance with the Habitats and Birds Directives has been documented, through Commission infringement action and CJEU rulings, across a broad range of Member States, in relation to both site designation and the substantive obligations that follow from it. Overall, the Commission has opened 68 infringement procedures over the years for non-communication of national transposition measures alone — 23 concerning only the Birds Directive, 14 only the Habitats Directive, and 31 both (European Commission / ERA).

A FEW DOCUMENTED CASES OF NON-COMPLIANCE (ILLUSTRATIVE, NOT EXHAUSTIVE)

- Italy — SAC designation completed with serious delay relative to the Directive's six-year deadline; formal notices from the Commission in October 2015 (infringement procedure no. 2015-2163) and January 2019 for still-unresolved compliance; the quality and coherence of management plans varies substantially across and within regions, and management of marine Natura 2000 sites remains very inadequate
- Germany — referred to the Court of Justice in 2023 for failing to designate Special Areas of Conservation and adopt site-specific conservation objectives and measures for numerous Natura 2000 sites, in some cases more

than ten years after the deadline; the CJEU characterised the breach as “systemic and persistent” (Case C-116/22, judgment of 21 September 2023)

- Ireland — referred to the Court of Justice on materially similar grounds; the CJEU likewise found a “systemic and persistent” infringement of the Habitats Directive’s designation and conservation-measure obligations (Case C-444/21, judgment of 29 June 2023)
- Spain — found by the CJEU to have breached Article 6 of the Habitats Directive through water abstraction contributing to the deterioration of the Doñana wetland, a Natura 2000 site of international importance (Case C-559/19, judgment of 24 June 2021)
- Slovakia — found by the CJEU to have infringed both the Habitats and Birds Directives by permitting forest exploitation and unassessed plans within Special Protection Areas designated for the capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*) (Case C-661/20, judgment of 22 June 2022)
- Finland — found by the CJEU as early as 2007 to have breached Articles 12 and 16 of the Habitats Directive by authorising preventive wolf hunting without meeting the Directive’s strict derogation conditions (Case C-342/05); a further preliminary ruling in the Tapiola case restrictively interpreted the same derogation provisions (Case C-674/17, judgment of 10 October 2019)
- Sweden — under a Commission infringement case since 2010 over licensed wolf hunting found incompatible with the Habitats Directive’s derogation regime (INFR(2010)4200); the case was closed on 11 December 2025 not on a finding of compliance, but because Directive (EU) 2025/1237 moved the wolf from Annex IV to Annex V, removing the legal basis on which it rested (European Commission, closure notice, 13 March 2026)
- Portugal — sent a letter of formal notice in May 2024 for national legislation that allows compensatory measures to be taken into account when assessing whether a project harms a Natura 2000 site, contrary to the Directive and to CJEU case law (European Commission, May 2024 infringement package)
- Poland — sent an additional letter of formal notice for national law that does not allow environmental organisations to challenge in court “negative screening” decisions on Natura 2000 impact assessment (European Commission, 2025)
- Greece — received a first letter of formal notice in 2014 over its Special Spatial Plan for renewable energy and the failure to set national conservation targets and measures for Natura 2000 sites; as of a 2025 parliamentary question, the matter remained unresolved eleven years later (European Parliament, E-000372/2025; WWF, 2022)
- Austria — under infringement procedure from 2013 for insufficient designation of Natura 2000 sites; discontinued only once the national list was completed, illustrating how long full compliance can take even where it is eventually achieved
- Slovenia — referred to the Court of Justice in June 2026 for failing to comply with the Birds Directive by not classifying the most suitable marine areas, including the Osrednji Tržaški zaljiv, as Special Protection Areas for the Mediterranean shag; the Commission had sent a letter of formal notice in June 2021 and a reasoned opinion in July 2022 before referring the case (Case INFR(2021)2068; European Commission, June 2026 infringement package)
- Ireland — sent a letter of formal notice in April 2026 for failing to complete its network of marine Natura 2000 sites under both the Habitats Directive (Sites of Community Importance) and the Birds Directive (Special Protection Areas for seabirds) (Case INFR(2026)2051; European Commission, April 2026 infringement package)
- Poland — sent a letter of formal notice in April 2026 for failing to fulfil its obligations under the Water Framework Directive, the Industrial Emissions Directive, and the Habitats and Birds Directives in relation to the Oder River, whose ecosystem has deteriorated following the 2022 toxic algae bloom that caused massive fish deaths (Case INFR(2026)2009; European Commission, April 2026 infringement package)

The pattern that emerges is not confined to any one region or legal tradition: it spans northern, southern, eastern and western Member States, and covers both the formal step of designating sites and the substantive steps of protecting them once designated. This is the backdrop against which the stress test proposes to evaluate the Directives’ “cost-efficiency”.

3. The Six-Year Reporting Cycle: A Second Layer of Non-Compliance

Beyond site designation and management, the Directives impose a distinct and recurring obligation: under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive and Article 12 of the Birds Directive, every Member State must report every six years

on the conservation status of the habitats and species on its territory and on the measures taken to protect them. This reporting cycle is not a peripheral formality — it is the mechanism that produces virtually all the EU-wide conservation status figures cited earlier in this note (e.g. the 81% of habitats and 62% of species in poor or bad condition, EEA 2025). The deadline for the most recent round, covering 2019–2024, was 31 July 2025.

THE REPORTING RECORD ITSELF IS PART OF THE COMPLIANCE PROBLEM

- ▶ **Timeliness:** EEA scoreboards for the previous (2013–2018) reporting round tracked the delivery date of every Member State’s submission against the deadline, precisely because late and second-round deliveries were common enough to warrant a standing monitoring tool (EEA, Timeliness of submission — Habitats Directive Article 17)
- ▶ **Data quality:** the EEA itself notes that Member States report a markedly higher proportion of “unknown” conservation status assessments for species than for habitats, and that this proportion “varies greatly” depending on whether effective monitoring systems are in place — meaning the evidentiary base for EU-wide assessments is itself uneven by Member State (EEA, State of nature in Europe)
- ▶ **Delayed delivery, current round:** Ireland submitted its fourth Article 17 assessment (59 habitats, 60 species) in August 2025, after the EU-wide 31 July 2025 deadline (NPWS, 2025)
- ▶ **Contested methodology, Sweden:** in December 2024, the Swedish government instructed its own Environmental Protection Agency to change the methodology for identifying “favourable reference areas” for the 2025 Article 17 report, overriding the Agency’s own recommendation. Members of the European Parliament subsequently asked the Commission whether it is sound scientific practice for a Member State to report a habitat’s status based on the year it joined the EU rather than current science-based criteria, and whether reporting a status as “unknown” when it is in fact known to the Member State is acceptable (European Parliament, Question P-002047/2025)
- ▶ **Outright non-submission, Spain and Romania:** in the January 2026 infringement package, the Commission sent letters of formal notice to Spain (INFR(2025)2214) and Romania (INFR(2025)2215) because they had not submitted their implementation reports for the 2019–2024 cycle at all — Spain’s Habitats Directive report and Romania’s Birds Directive report were simply missing past the 31 July 2025 deadline. Spain’s case was escalated to a reasoned opinion in July 2026 after an unsatisfactory response (European Commission, January and July 2026 infringement packages)

The Spain and Romania cases show that, for some Member States, the compliance problem is not contested methodology but a simpler failure to report at all. The Swedish case is a different but related risk: if a Member State can instruct its own scientific agency to change the methodology underpinning a legally mandated status report, the six-year reporting cycle is vulnerable to exactly the kind of political direction this note documents elsewhere in relation to the wolf downlisting — with the added complication that, unlike a downlisting decision, a change in reporting methodology is far less visible and much harder for third parties to contest. The pessimistic EU-wide figures already cited in this note come from this same reporting system; a system shown, in documented instances, to be susceptible to both non-delivery and methodological pressure warrants scrutiny in both directions — including if a future reporting round were to produce an unexpectedly favourable picture coinciding with the stress test’s conclusions.

4. Why This Matters for the Stress Test

THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

- ▶ The stress test asks whether the Habitats and Birds Directives are “cost-efficient” and whether their “administrative burdens” should be reduced.
- ▶ The implementation record shows the opposite problem: 9.1% of Natura 2000 sites are still not formally designated; over half lack an operational management plan; Italy has been under active infringement procedures since 2015 for delayed designation.

- ▶ A framework that is under-implemented cannot legitimately be evaluated as over-burdensome. The evidentiary basis for “simplification” has not been established — the record instead supports a case for stronger implementation and resourcing, not a reduction in obligations.
- ▶ This evidentiary basis is directly relevant to the consultation, open until 10 August 2026.

Source and References

This note consolidates material originally published in: Green Impact ETS, “From the Green Deal to the Stress Test: The Progressive Dismantling of Nature Protection in the EU and its Legal Foundations — The wolf downlisting as a prejudicial normative precedent”, Policy Briefing 1-2026, 6 June 2026.

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- European Commission — Infringements package, May 2024 (letter of formal notice to Portugal on compensatory measures and Natura 2000 impact assessment)
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- ERA — “EU Nature Protection Legislation: Focus on Site Protection” (overview of the 68 transposition infringement procedures under the Birds and Habitats Directives)
- European Commission — Public consultation on the Birds and Habitats Directives, open 12 May 2026 (deadline postponed from 4 August to 10 August 2026)
- European Commission — Call for Evidence on the Simplification of Administrative Burdens in Environmental Legislation, open 22 July – 10 September 2025 (Have Your Say portal, initiative 14794)
- European Commission, DG Environment — Implementation Dialogue on Environmental Legislation with Commissioners Roswall and Hansen, 18 February 2026
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