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NATIONAL RESTORATION PLANS: A NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR WETLAND RESTORATION

EU member states are currently working on their National Restoration Plans (NRPs) and have up to September 2026 to provide the European Commission with their NRPs. This document hopes to provide suggestions and inspiration that can feed into this planning process.



THE NATURE RESTORATION REGULATION AND WETLANDS

The new EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR), also referred to as the Nature Restoration Law, sets **legally binding targets and timelines** for Member States to restore at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030, with the overarching goal of restoring all ecosystems in need by 2050. In addition, it introduces **"non-deterioration"** obligations, requiring Member States to ensure that areas not subject to the restoration obligation do not undergo further degradation.

The NRR was designed **to work in synergy with other EU legislation**, including the Habitats Directive, Birds Directive, Climate Law, Water Framework Directive (WFD), the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and others. The NRR is also expected to support the EU in fulfilling its commitments to the Global Biodiversity Framework (specifically **Target 2**), as a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The NRR **enhances the opportunities to protect and restore** the vital wetlands that protect our landscapes and our well-being. It provides an additional (legal) argument to wetland conservation efforts as it gives particular attention to these ecosystems.

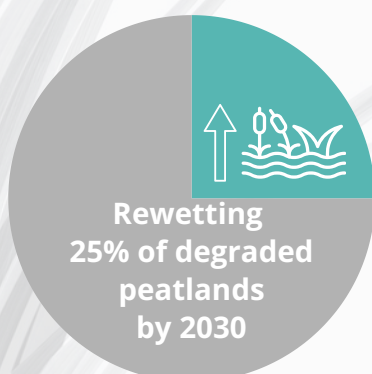
- Wetlands: Rewetting drained wetlands, restoring natural hydrology, and removing barriers to water flow. Restoring 25,000 kilometers of “free-flowing” rivers and floodplains.
- Peatlands: Rewetting drained peat soils, especially those under agricultural use, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and restore biodiversity. Rewetting 25% of degraded peatlands by 2030.

The restoration of wetland habitats can be linked to several objectives of the NRR, **contributing to both area-based and indicator-based objectives**. Restored wetlands are particularly valuable for achieving:

- the spatial objectives for terrestrial, coastal and freshwater habitats under Article 4,
- the improvement of pollinator community diversity and populations under Article 10, and
- the restoration of agro-ecosystems under Article 11.

Article 4.1 of the NRR, includes restoration targets for 28 wetland habitat types listed in Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive, including wet grasslands, bogs and fens, wet forests and coastal wetlands.

Looking back in time and thinking forward, we must acknowledge the fact that the **EU Life program** has proven to be fundamental in **implementing the EU nature directives** and most likely it will also be of crucial importance for the effective implementation of the NRPs.



HOW TO ENSURE THAT WETLAND RESTORATION IS GIVEN SUFFICIENT ATTENTION IN THE NRPS?

The current state of knowledge

The format for the NRPs is extensive, spanning forty-five pages, and requiring detailed input across all fourteen chapters. To comply with the NRR's legal requirements, NRPs must determine priority areas for restoration and **actively engage local stakeholders** to ensure effective implementation of restoration measures. **Guidance and inspiration** for NRP development can be found in the list of resources.

The ten resources listed below demonstrate a huge effort made by the different teams of colleagues over the last few years, all of them are highly relevant for wetland mainstreaming in the NRPs. The last five documents provide different regional insights and examples.

Resources used

1. [Global guidelines for peatland rewetting and restoration - Ramsar](#)
2. [Supporting the development of national restoration plans - Publications Office of the EU](#)
3. [SER-Europe in support of the implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation – SER-Europe Chapter](#)
4. [Guidance and Recommendations For Ambitious Nature Restoration Plans | WWF](#)
5. [Underpinning the EU Nature Restoration Regulation: five success factors for effective measures in the Member States - Marquard - Restoration Ecology](#)
6. [Exploring Rewetting Efforts in the Nordic countries](#)
7. [Restoring Mediterranean Wetlands Policy- Playbook 2023](#)
8. [Guidance for the preparation of national restoration plans using the example of bogs, mires and fens - CEEweb for Biodiversity](#)
9. [How can coastal wetlands help achieve EU climate goals - RESTORE4Cs Policy Brief](#)
10. [Restoring Wetlands in Europe - ALFAWetlands and Wetlands International Europe](#)

The EU and WWF guidance documents (2025 & 2024) already provide a set of clear recommendations and suggestions for the National Restoration Plans, and several other expert reports are built on these documents.

Both the “*Restoring Mediterranean Wetlands policymaker’s playbook*”, and CEEWeb’s “*Guidance for the preparation of national restoration plans using the example of bogs, mires and fens*” offer an inspiring, almost cookbook style guidance of which the logic and **examples** can easily be applied to other EU member states working on their NRPs.

In addition, the CEEWeb publication (2024 – with focus on Central and Eastern Europe), highlights the crucial **importance of sound ground water management** for the long-term and cross-generational success of wetland restoration efforts. It also emphasizes the link between groundwater and agricultural practices, particularly related to the CAP cross-compliance system^[1]. The publication provides **practical examples** on how to approach the development of an NRP.

The Wetlands policy makers handbook (2022) provides a clear overview of site prioritization process, references to international legal frameworks, and **examples of local legislation** that, beyond site protection, can help to effectuate the obligations under the NRP. Its accessible layout makes it a helpful resource for anyone involved with the NRP process, across countries.

The *ALFAwetlands policy brief* (2025) highlights the potential for the restoration of wetlands and peatlands in the NRR. It includes Country Fact Sheets with detailed information relevant for the development of the NRPs in Austria, Belgium, and Germany.

The July 2025 *Marquard publication in Restoration Ecology* highlights **key factors for successful implementation of the NRR**. These include increased stakeholder and public acceptance of restoration measures, established national restoration targets, coordination with other land uses, supportive organizational and legal framework conditions, and **increased attractiveness of nature restoration to land users and landowners**.

The 2025 Norwegian publication on policy tools and measures for success in Nordic countries provides a set of clear guidelines to enhance rewetting whilst contributing to the fulfilment of national and international climate and nature obligations.

As input for those involved with the drafting of the NRPs, the above-mentioned resources all highlight different, specific, aspects for effective integration of wetlands into the NRPs. Overall, they provide very “actionable guidance” for the NRPs. We highlight their existence and highly encourage the “restoration planners” to make optimal use of these knowledge documents.

RESTORING WETLANDS WHILST MEETING OTHER EU POLICY TARGETS

Habitat restoration has many aspects and touches upon several other EU policies, to name a few; the EU Floods Directive, the EU Soil Monitoring & Resilience Directive, the Water Framework Directive and the Common Agricultural Policy. Climate change seems to bring all these policy domains together as it is expected that food prices will rise significantly (already happening). Wetlands could **improve resilience of agricultural systems** and help limit these negative impacts.

Groundwater provides us with a specifically clear illustration of the complex nature of wetland restoration and the **need for cross policy synergies**. Many wetlands depend directly on groundwater. Even in absence of visible surface water, the additional water influence of a near-surface groundwater table often dominates the hydrology. The quantitative status of groundwater bodies can affect the ecological quality of both surface water and the related terrestrial ecosystems. Groundwater protection, however, is already a legal obligation for Member States under the Water Framework Directive (WFD; Directive 2000/60/EC). Member States must already take action to prevent, protect, and enhance the status of terrestrial ecosystems and wetlands directly dependent on groundwater, in order to prevent further deterioration.

[1] The EU CAP cross compliance mechanism, now referred to as **conditionality**, is a key part of the European Union's **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**. It links income support for farmers to their compliance with a set of **environmental, public health, animal welfare, and land management rules**.

In addition, there is a clear link between agricultural practices and groundwater sustainability. Under a “business as usual” scenario, climate change is expected to increase agricultural water demand, leading to greater surface and groundwater withdrawals. At the same time, more frequent extreme rainfall events and associated flash flooding will increase the need for drainage demands, contributing to large-scale landscape drying. These trends underscore **the urgency of profound changes in our agricultural practices**. A hopeful new fact is, that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) cross-compliance system, under its “Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition” (GAEC), has now been extended to include a new GAEC 2 standard for the protection of wetlands and bogs, mires and fens (to be introduced in most Member States from 2025 onwards).[2] The Swedish Board of Agriculture for example allocates funds from the CAP to farmers for the re-establishment and restoration of wetlands.

Another, additional, argument for rewetting wetlands, comes from an EU military defense perspective[3].

In conclusion: Sustainable wetland **restoration requires a comprehensive, regionally coordinated approach** that focuses on groundwater resources, recognizes the **interdependence** of surrounding wetlands and the upstream-downstream interdependence, which is particularly relevant for water availability, - quality and -safety.

In addition to a **landscape /watershed approach**, successful wetland restoration efforts need **cross-generational** thinking as ecological recovery and societal change processes often take one or more decades to show their full impacts.

KEY FACTORS FOR THE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF RESTORATION POLICIES

The experiences from the REWET implementation teams underline the conclusions of the recent study in Restoration Ecology (June 2025). The study highlights **five factors for the success of national nature restoration policies**, summarized:



photo: National Park Weerribben-Wieden - The Netherlands
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- **Increased acceptance of nature restoration and landscape change:**

- Nature restoration can only succeed at the necessary scale if measures are developed and implemented in close partnership with local stakeholders and the public.

- **Increased attractiveness of (voluntary) nature restoration measures to land users and landowners:**

- Successful nature restoration policies rely on the cooperation of private actors, especially in the agricultural and forestry sectors. Legislation and policies should be geared towards more environmentally-friendly land and resource management. Stringent integration of environmental concerns into the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is essential, especially in the context of nature restoration. Additionally, alternative (land-use) business models need to be developed, and tested. Where effective, these adjusted management practices should be scaled up sustainably, which requires sufficient market demand for products or services provided by restored ecosystems.

[2] The **Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC)** standards are a key part of the **EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**. It refers to a set of environmental and land management standards that farmers must follow to ensure their land is maintained in a way that supports sustainability, biodiversity, and climate goals. **GAEC 2** – specifically mentions Peatlands and Wetlands and aims **to protect carbon-rich soils** and biodiversity.

[3] [Wetland restoration: a nature-based solution for Europe's security?](#) | IUCN NL

- **Agreed quantitative and qualified national restoration targets:**

- To meet ecosystem-, habitat-, and functional group-specific restoration targets, Member States must establish clear national targets, timeframes, and most suitable restoration areas. These should be based on the best available knowledge and the latest scientific evidence. In determining the spatial distribution of restoration measures, priority should be given to areas where the defined goals can be achieved most cost-efficiently. Even though cost might be a crucial deciding factor, care should be taken that the restoration plan will effectively represent a significant portion of each of the habitat types in unfavorable condition.

- **Improved coordination of nature restoration with other land uses:**

- In line with the NRR objectives to achieve “favorable reference areas” for specific habitats, Member States should support the designation of protected areas - even in areas of low nature conservation value - if they hold a high potential for restoration.
- To ensure fairness and feasibility, financial compensation must be provided for any new land-use restrictions. Legislators should allocate sufficient funding for such payments

- **Supportive organizational and legal framework conditions:**

- When sufficient public land is unavailable, nature restoration is likely to be constrained by land tenure issues. To address this, opportunities for the public sector to restore degraded ecosystems on private land should be improved.

POINTS OF SPECIAL ATTENTION

- ✓ Article 11.4 of the NRR encourages Member States to incentivize rewetting as a restoration measure. For rewetting to be a viable voluntary option, landowners and land users must see clear benefits, whether that being a return on investment or a return on inspiration[4] or both.

[4] See also: [4 Returns Framework - Commonland](#)

It is thus of crucial importance for the successful, cross-generational implementation of the NRPs that these key stakeholders have a clear voice and vote throughout the NRP process (from the draft phase – till 31 August 2026 up to the final version – till August 2027).

- ✓ The Renewable Energy Directive (RED) predates the NRR, and this has consequences for the NRPs. Areas designated as a “Renewable Acceleration Area (RAAs)” under the Renewable Energy Directive may not qualify for restoration measures under the NRR. It is thus important to verify the RAA designations in your country. Make sure that the restoration objectives are not compromised by any incoming projects under the RED.
- ✓ Nature restoration policies must avoid causing leakage effects, such as increased imports of non-sustainably produced agricultural and forestry products, which would increase the EU's ecological footprint abroad. Avoiding such unintended negative effects requires action across multiple sectors.
- ✓ Perverse incentives. The CAP subsidies still focus on the industrialization of agricultural systems. A model that is difficult to reconcile with the targets under the NRR.

CONCLUSION

A wealth of recent, specific NRR and wetland restoration focused resources is available to those involved with in the drafting of the NRPs. Going through these key documents is likely to pay out in terms of the quality of the NRPs produced and it would be a great inefficiency not to make use of all this knowledge.