

Federal Council on Sustainable Development.

Opinion on the Belgian National Biodiversity Strategy

- Requested by the Inter-ministerial Environmental Conference of 15 December 2005 and at the request of the minister for the environment, Bruno Tobbacq in a letter received on 16 January 2006,
- Prepared by the *ad hoc* Biodiversity and forest working party
- Approved by the general meeting on 24 February 2006 (see appendix 2.2)
- The original language of this opinion is Dutch

1. Background

[1] On 15 December 2005 the Inter-ministerial Environment Conference requested the council's opinion on the National Biodiversity Strategy 2006-2016. The request had previously been announced in June 2005. The environment minister Bruno Tobbacq repeated the request on 16 January and specified the following four questions:

1. What did the council think of the proposal to work with 14 strategic objectives from which operational objectives are derived? Is the council of the opinion that these are relevant objectives?
2. What, in the view of the council, are the priorities for a coordinated policy between the various authorities?
3. What measures does the council think should have priority at the federal level?
4. Has the council proposals for the implementation of the strategy (e.g.. drawing up action plans?).

The deadline for the opinion was extended to the end of March, the national strategy can be approved at the April 2006 Inter-ministerial Conference at the earliest, given that a consultation procedure has to be respected which has been introduced by a new law¹ that will shortly be published.

[2] The *National Biodiversity Strategy* (NBS) is a requirement under the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD) ratified by Belgium in 1996 (Article 6). The objectives of the Convention are threefold: the maintenance of biological diversity, the sustainable use of natural resources and the equitable distribution of the benefits from the use of genetic resources. Several decisions taken by Conference of the Parties (COP) similarly emphasise the importance of the national strategy in achieving the *Objective 2010* set out in the Strategic Plan, "to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the competitor rate or biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level"².

¹ Draft law concerning the appraisal of the environmental impact of certain plans and programmes and public consultation in the elaboration of environmental plans and programmes, approved by the Chamber (parliamentary document 51-2108/001, 2005-2006).

² For more information see <http://www.biodiv.org/2010-target/default.asp>



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- [3] The memo on the NBS issued on behalf of the Inter-ministerial Conference of 15/12/2005 points out that while Belgium has regional and federal plans for tackling the issue of biological diversity, it is one of the last European countries to lack a national biodiversity strategy. The strategy proposes to harmonise existing regional and federal measures, taking account of Belgium's European and international obligations.
- [4] The memo also explains how this is to be done. An ad hoc working party³ (under the Biodiversity Convention Steering Committee of the Coordinating Committee for International Environmental Policy) was established in September 2004 to develop a Belgian strategy. The contact group brought together representatives of federal and regional administrations (environment and other sectors such as agriculture, scientific policy, development cooperation etc.), NGOs⁴, representatives from the academic world, etc. The working party met four times. In addition bilateral meetings were organised with the various sectors.
- [5] The aim of the national biodiversity strategy is to create an overall, national approach to ensure that biological biodiversity is adequately taken into account in national and international Belgian policies so that Belgium can contribute to the European objective of halting biological diversity loss by 2010. The first objective of this strategy is the integration of existing measures in a national context.
- [6] During the contact group meetings it was agreed that the national strategy should be a short, political, clear and unambiguous strategic document, adapted to the Belgian context with practical objectives. During drafting, account was taken of the documents already available (regional strategies and action plans, federal plans, European strategy and action plans, the Message from Malahide, the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy (PEBLDS), national reports and other reports on the state of the environment in Belgium, etc.).
- [7] The National Biodiversity Strategy establishes the general framework within which to contribute to the European objective of halting biological diversity loss by 2010. It identifies 14 strategic objective, sub-divided into operational objectives to simplify and support the practical implementation of the objectives.
- [8] The strategy prescribes no practical actions; these will be developed at a second phase in collaboration with the regions, sectors and all other players. A first exercise in this direction was begun during the drafting of the strategy; a table of possible actions was drawn up to encourage and simplify implementation. For each strategic objective, the table provides a summary of actions already taken and additional measures that should be taken in order to meet the targets. This table is still an ongoing project that will require further work and which must be approved by the appropriate experts.
- [9] The contact group decided to adopt English as the working language in order to draft the document. This decision is justified for the following reasons :
- The national strategy comes in response to an obligation under the Convention on Biological Diversity, and must be submitted to the CBD secretariat. English is therefore a suitable language.

³ The group was coordinated by Claire Collin (FOD Public health, Food chain safety and environment) and Marianne Schlessler (Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences)

⁴The NBS mentions three NGOs that have played an active part: KWIA (support for indigenous peoples), Inter-Environnement Wallonie and Greenpeace.

- The fact that the strategy coordinators worked in English worked allowed them to work with one single document and to avoid the extra work of translation.

Should the document be adopted, it will be translated into the three national languages.

- [10] The new consultation procedure (see par. [1]) requires that public consultation on Federal Government environmental plans and programmes must be announced not later than 14 days in advance in a notice in the Belgisch Staatsblad/Moniteur belge, on the federal web site and in another freely chosen communication medium. The public consultation procedure lasts for 60 days. The notice in the Belgian Staatsblad gives the opening and closing dates of the public consultation period and explains how the public can make their opinions and comments known.

2. Summary response to the questions posed.

2.1 Comments concerning question 1 (NBS proposal in accordance with objectives)

- [11] The council observed that the underlying strategy takes the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD) as its starting point, and uses it as a structural basis. The council thinks that the text, as a top-down approach, provides a reasonable and valuable way of implementing the CBD in Belgium. Consequently, the council can concur with the strategic objectives. However, the council thinks that there should be an objective regarding conservation. The strategy should also indicate how implementation will be assessed.

2.2 Comments concerning question 2 (priorities for a coordinated policy)

- [12] The council regrets that Belgium was unable to establish this strategy earlier. The delay in establishing the national biodiversity strategy should not, in the council's view, lead to any reduction of its actions. This NBS and its practical implementation should, in addition, take account of existing plans in the regions and at the federal level.
- [13] The council endorses the "objective 2010" priority and believes that to bring this about, the necessary resources must be made available and used efficiently.
- [14] The council urges policy bodies to make every effort to harmonise regional and federal measures in cases where this can deliver added value to biodiversity policy. The council also believes that it is important for Belgium to agree on a uniform set of indicators within a reasonable time.

2.3 Comments concerning question 3 (priority actions at federal level)

- [15] To prepare for the second phase of practical arrangements between the various policy levels, and to safeguard the bottom-up approach, the NBS objectives must be tested against the policies and the actual reality in the various regions. By investigating how the NBS objectives are already translated in the policy, and how they are implemented on the ground, the council believes that the necessary understanding can be reached of how far the regions are in line with each other, what gaps and bottlenecks there are and which priorities emerge.
- [16] The council attaches great importance to the following areas:
- The objective introducing measures to minimise the negative impact of sectoral policy, not least in relation to spatial planning.
 - Climate change and the impact on biodiversity in Belgium



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- Informing and educating the public, and raising awareness: the council believes that the traditional media should play a greater role.

2.4 Comments concerning question 4 (proposals for the implementation of the NBS)

- [17] The council is of the view that, in implementing the NBS objectives, any tensions between the social, biological and economic aspects of the actual situation must always be exposed. This will allow policy makers to listen to all points of view, weigh up the interests at stake, and identify all the sectors and actors involved for the purposes of consultation.
- [18] The council approves the fact that the NBS aims to involve the stakeholder partnerships in decision-making on all levels. To implement the strategy, the maximum possible engagement of all the players must be stimulated. The council believes that the interest of the actors can be aroused by enabling them to work together on practical projects connected to the priority objectives. It would also be useful to estimate how far the operational objectives will contribute to the 2010 objective. The council calls for timings to be agreed when arranging practical measures. The arrangements should also be practical and results-oriented, so that the extent of their success can be monitored later.