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MEPs of environment committee vote down the Nature Restoration Law, throwing its survival into doubt

By **Jorge Liboreiro** & **Sándor Zsíros** • Updated: 27/06/2023

The European Parliament's environment committee on Tuesday voted down an amended version of the Nature Restoration Law.

The legislation, which seeks to reverse biodiversity loss by rehabilitating Europe's degraded land and sea areas, has become the object of relentless criticism by conservative parties.

After going through a long series of amendments, the text as a whole received 44 votes and 44 against, meaning it failed to garner the necessary simple majority to move forward by one single ballot.

The tally prompted a mix of applause and jeers inside the room, a vivid reflection of the stark ideological divide prompted by the law.

It marks the first time the parliament's environment committee (ENVI) rejects an element of the European Green Deal. Previously, two affiliate committees, agriculture (AGRI) and fisheries (PECH), had struck down the text.

As a result, the legislation will be sent to plenary in its original form, as proposed by the European Commission, with a recommendation to be scrapped in its entirety.

The decisive vote is expected to be held in the week of 10 July.

Non-attached lawmakers and independent-minded conservatives could tip the balance and save the draft text, although this is far from guaranteed.

If the hemicycle does follow the advice of the 88-member committee, the legislative process will come to an end: MEPs will not be able to enter negotiations with member states, which have already **agreed on a common position**, and the law will be effectively dead.

"The process, as far as we understand, is not finished in the European Parliament," said a spokesperson for the European Commission. "Of course, we respect the process that is currently ongoing."

The spokesperson then confirmed that if the Nature Restoration Law were to fall apart, the executive would not table a second proposal.

A bitter exchange of accusations

Tuesday's knife-edge vote took place amidst a political atmosphere of **unprecedented hostility** against the draft piece of legislation.

Over the past months, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the largest formation in the parliament, has mounted an incessant negative campaign against the Nature Restoration Law, which the group sees as a direct threat to the traditional livelihoods of European farmers, fishers and forest managers.

The EPP describes the law as a case of "good design, bad

intentions" and says its legally-binding targets to rehabilitate land areas will disrupt supply chains, decrease food production and raise prices for everyday consumers.

The claims put forward by the conservatives have been forcefully contested by progressive parties, environmental NGOs, climate scientists and the renewable energy industry, which argue nature restoration and economic activity are two compatible goals that can thrive side by side.

The back-and-forth played out in public view on Tuesday during the press conferences that the two opposing sides held right after the key vote.

César Luena, the socialist MEP who serves as the law's rapporteur, and Pascal Canfin, the liberal MEP who chairs the ENVI committee, denounced the EPP for distorting the legislation and teaming up with far-right parties to bring it down.

"About this law, a lot of lies and hoaxes have been said," Luena told reporters. "One has to have a bit of class. In the political fight, you have to argue with data, with knowledge, with ideas, but not lies."

Canfin bluntly accused EPP Chair Manfred Weber of replacing "one-third" of the conservative members in the ENVI committee with "nature-sceptic" lawmakers in order to secure the rejection of the draft law.

"It was a very clear manipulation of the ENVI vote," Canfin said. "It cannot happen in the plenary because Manfred Weber cannot replace members in the plenary."

"As a chair of a committee, it's very appalling to see (that) a political group is able to manipulate to that extent," he added.

Christine Schneider and Peter Liese, two German lawmakers

from the EPP, immediately fired back, calling Canfin's comments shocking and unacceptable.

"Pascal Canfin is the worst and most partisan chair of the ENVI committee I've ever experienced since 1994," Liese told reporters. "This has never happened before."

Liese admitted his party had "many substitutions" during the vote because "we wanted to be on the safe side" and said his Czech colleague Stanislav Polčák had been the "only one" who had expressed a desire of voting in favour of the law. (Polčák did not **take part** in Tuesday's vote.)

"Our problems with the law are still the same," Schneider said, calling the text "impractical," "backward-looking" and the "wrong way to go."

Schneider asked the European Commission to withdraw the law before the plenary vote and accused Vice-President Frans Timmermans, who is in charge of the European Green Deal, of threatening MEPs ahead of the closely-watched vote.

Timmermans's office denies the characterisation and insists he is committed to discussing the legislation with co-legislators and finding solutions.

Notably, the EPP's scathing campaign has so far spared Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, who is affiliated with the conservatives.

"It's very obvious that Timmermans drafted this law and Timmermans is the one who did the threats. Ursula von der Leyen didn't do so. So there's a big difference," Liese said when asked about this omission.

A Commission spokesperson said President von der Leyen "fully" supported the Nature Restoration Law and was keeping

a "close eye" on the legislative talks.

Meanwhile, beyond the parliamentary fray, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), BirdLife and Greenpeace decried Tuesday's outcome and blamed the EPP for playing "dirty tactic" and spreading "misinformation."

"It's a disgrace that politicians and lobbyists have spread the lie that nature and farming are somehow in conflict – the whole parliament must ignore that nonsense and vote to restore Europe's precious nature," Greenpeace said.

In a sign of the high stakes created by the bitter political saga, an increasingly large number of private companies have spoken on the record in defence of the law.

Earlier this month, CEOs and top executives from 50 companies, including IKEA, Nestlé, H&M, Iberdrola and Unilever, signed a joint letter urging lawmakers to adopt rules on nature restoration and create legal certainty for businesses.

"Our dependence on a healthy environment is fundamental to the resilience of our economies and, ultimately, our long-term success," the CEOs wrote.

What is the Nature Restoration Law?

The Nature Restoration Law was first presented by the European Commission in June 2022 as part of the European Green Deal and the 2030 biodiversity strategy.

The legislation, referred to as the "first continent-wide, comprehensive law of its kind," aims to rehabilitate habitats and species that have been degraded by human interference and climate change.

According to the Commission, 81% of European habitats are in

poor status, with peatlands, grasslands and dunes hit the worst.

The law sets out legally-binding targets in seven specific topics, such as farmlands, pollinators, free-flowing rivers and marine ecosystems, that put together should cover at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030.

In the now-rejected amended text, MEPs had boosted the goal to 30% in order to align the bloc with the landmark deal that was achieved in December at the end of **COP15 in Montreal**.

Under the legislation, governments would be asked to draft long-term plans on nature restoration, laying out the projects and initiatives they wish to pursue in order to meet the overarching targets.

Possible actions include planting trees, beekeeping, rewetting drained peatlands and expanding green spaces in urban areas.

Upon its presentation, the Nature Restoration Law was well received by environmental organisations, which hailed the legally-binding targets and the far-reaching scope, but triggered a significant backlash from farmers, fishers and foresters, who later called it an "ill-thought out, unrealistic and unimplementable" proposal bound to have "devastating consequences."

The EPP built upon this reaction to launch its opposition campaign, which critics say is heavily influenced by the upcoming European elections and the emergence of the sudden rise of BBB, the agrarian populist party that has disrupted Dutch politics.

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