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Commission announces winners of the 2015 LIFE Best Awards

Today during [EU Green Week](#) – the biggest annual occasion to debate European environment policy – the European Commission announced the winners of the LIFE Best Awards for 2015. The awards recognise the most effective and inspiring LIFE projects in the field of nature protection and environment, which, if applied widely, would have a highly positive impact on the environment, boosting economic growth and providing significant benefits for European citizens.

From more than 50 finalists ("Best LIFE projects"), the most outstanding projects have been awarded the accolade "Best of the Best" LIFE project. The 11 winners include projects from Cyprus, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK.

Karmenu Vella, EU Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries said:

"Sincere congratulations to the winners and the finalists in this year's edition of LIFE Best Awards! These innovative projects show how effective small scale actions, with the help of LIFE funding, can lead to big results, replicable across national borders, with benefits for all. That's the real EU added value of the LIFE programme – being a catalyst for private and public investments helping to build a greener future."

Selection criteria for the Best Projects focus on their contribution to both immediate and long-term environmental, economic and social improvements; their degree of innovation and transferability; their relevance to policy and their cost-effectiveness.

The winning projects represent the three strands of the LIFE programme: Nature; Environment; Information & Communication.

Background

#EUGreenWeek 2016 focuses on the many facets of green investment, highlighting financing that is good for the economy and good for the environment. The EU has a number of funding programmes in place to support the transition to a low-carbon, resource-efficient and sustainable future. LIFE, the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action, is one of them, targeting successful green projects that can be scaled up and replicated across the EU.

The LIFE funding programme has been running since 1992 and has co-financed more than 4 000 projects across the EU and beyond, mobilising € 7.8 billion and contributing € 3.4 billion to the protection of the environment and climate. Around 1100 projects are ongoing. The budget for the LIFE Programme for 2014–2020 is set at € 3.4 billion in current prices, and has a sub-programme for environment and a sub-programme for climate action.

LIFE has already co-funded more than 650 projects related to the circular economy, with a total budget of over € 1.6 billion. The majority of these projects have tackled waste, with water efficiency as another important priority.

For more information on LIFE:

<http://ec.europa.eu/life>

ANNEX

Best Nature projects:

CYPRUS

JUNIPERCY – Improving the conservation status of endemic juniper forests in Cyprus

The project's main objective was to promote and enable the long-term conservation of the native juniper forests in Cyprus. As a first step it mapped the target habitat in three Natura 2000 network sites. This enabled an assessment of threats and the development of monitoring and management plans. Concrete conservation actions were implemented to provide sustainable management and effective habitat restoration, including replanting, fencing, removal of competitive vegetation and measures to reduce forest fire risks, including through enhanced visitor infrastructure at two of the three sites, which are popular tourist destinations. In particular, the project established the first seed bank for forest species in Cyprus and created a stock of several thousand juniper saplings covering all four species found on the island.

FINLAND

Boreal Peatland Life – Restoring the Natura 2000 network of boreal peatland ecosystems

This project enhanced the quality of more than 4 800 ha of Finland's unique boreal peatland habitats. Based on 35 restoration plans drafted by the project, this involved removing trees from more than 3 300 ha and blocking drainage ditches on some 4 790 ha of peatland to restore the natural hydrology. Other restoration actions focused on rewilding forest roads and leaving dead wood as habitats to increase biodiversity. Under the project, three management plans were drafted to ensure effective conservation after the end of the LIFE funding. The project team's experience of carrying out restoration measures in a cost-efficient way was crucial to the success of Boreal Peatland Life project.

HUNGARY

HUSEEDBANK – Establishment of the Pannon seed bank for the long-term conservation of Hungarian vascular wild plants

This project set up a seed bank for the long-term preservation of seeds of the wild vascular flora of the Pannonian biogeographical region. It collected and stored seeds from 912 species, more than 50 % of Hungary's native flora, including 204 protected species and 45 that are strictly protected. Many of these species are of economic as well as ecological importance. The project also developed collection, storage and germination protocols for many of the species. In trials, selected seed bank samples were reintroduced to a typical sand steppe community with priority habitats in the Kiskunság National Park, a Natura 2000 site. Lessons from the project can be applied elsewhere in the Pannonian biogeographical region.

POLAND

Biomass use to safeguard the Aquatic Warbler habitat – Facilitating aquatic warbler (*Acrocephalus paludicola*) habitat management through sustainable systems of biomass use

This project linked the production of biomass as a renewable energy source with the large-scale mechanised management of aquatic warbler habitat. A programme of tree

and bush removal and mowing enlarged the area of fen mire habitat favourable to the species from 1 551 to 6 344 ha. Monitoring indicates that there has been a 7.71 % increase in the area covered by aquatic warblers, accompanied by a 26 % rise in population (some 575 extra individuals). A pelleting facility was established at Biebrza Valley to convert the biomass generated by the project into fuel pellets. The long-term management of the sites will be assured by agri-environment scheme subsidies for mowing and other conservation measures.

SPAIN

VENENO NO – Fighting illegal poison use in the natural environment in Spain

VENENO NO developed effective and innovative methods and strategies for tackling wildlife poisoning in Spain, especially where endangered raptor species are at risk. Recognising the significance of the project, six Spanish regional governments approved protocols against the use of poison. During the project, the beneficiary took part in 24 criminal court proceedings tackling illegal use of poison, resulting in ten convictions. It also established a poisoning investigation unit (UNIVE) in Castilla-La Mancha and ran 19 training courses showing officials how to detect and bring to court wildlife poisoning cases. The project also analysed all the instances of such poisoning occurring between 2005 and 2010 in Spain. The study showed that many of the cases involved the use of banned substances, highlighting the need to strengthen controls on the marketing and use of various products including biocides.

Best Information & Communication project:

POLAND

BEST FOR BIODIVERSITY – Promotion of best practices for biodiversity protection in forest areas, including Natura 2000 areas

BEST FOR BIODIVERSITY promoted best practices related to information and communication about biodiversity protection in state-owned forests in Poland between January 2012 and December 2014. It published 11 guidelines for protecting selected species (ranging in size from insects right up to the European bison) and two habitats – wetlands and xerothermic – i.e. dry and hot – grasslands. More than 1 300 people took part in training sessions designed to implement the best practices identified in the guidelines. The project also developed a successful media campaign to increase awareness of biodiversity in Poland's forests, including 11 films made for national television, which attracted more than 8 million viewers; over 12 million people watched the trailers for the films.

Best Environment projects:

FINLAND

Odourless casting – Odour and hazardous emission abatement of foundries

The project aimed to define odorous and hazardous emissions in typical aluminium, steel and iron foundries and to demonstrate emission abatement techniques suitable for wide-scale implementation. The beneficiary calculated odour and hazardous emission balance measurements for each of the eight participating foundries and demonstrated the feasibility of different abatement options. Results showed that hazardous and odorous emissions from different foundry processes could be reduced by 80-90 % using best available techniques. If the systems tested during the project were fully implemented by the eight foundries it would prevent the emission of some 11 000 tonnes of noxious compounds. Project results can also be used in further developing the Best Available Techniques Reference (BREF) documents for the foundry industry.

ITALY

HEO – High-efficiency ovens through eco-friendly, energy efficient sol-gel enamelling process

The HEO project demonstrated the feasibility of an innovative enamelling technology for electric ovens that requires 60 % less energy to manufacture and facilitates 30 % less energy use than conventional, modern electric ovens, offering significant potential reductions in electricity bills. A life-cycle assessment of the technology indicates a reduction in global warming potential of 9-61 % for HEO ovens compared with existing technologies. The project's HEO oven prototype, which completely avoids the use of nickel and cobalt, was given an A++ classification in the EC energy-efficiency labelling scheme introduced in January 2015. The new ovens meet existing EU consumer legislation and can be produced with few modifications to existing manufacturing plants, thus simplifying the wider dissemination of this innovative technique and facilitating market entry for the new type of oven.

SPAIN

EDEA-RENOV – Development of energy efficiency in architecture: energy renovation, innovation and ICTs

EDEA-RENOV demonstrated that energy efficiency in the housing sector can pave the way towards the adoption of a sustainable model of architectural development. It introduced active and passive energy-saving measures to reduce the carbon footprint of social housing. This resulted in energy savings of up to 30% in the participating neighbourhoods in Extremadura. Lower energy bills are of great benefit in such low-income areas. The project initially created an online energy simulator called EDEAsim, which can be used to assess the energy efficiency of any building. A second open source project tool – EFICIEX – monitored energy consumption and room temperature, alerting residents through a mobile app. Overall, the project highlighted the need to improve the technical knowledge of technicians working in the public administration on energy-efficiency strategies. It also showed that energy rehabilitation has a significant potential for job creation.

UK

ACUMEN – Assessing, capturing & utilising methane from expired and non-operational landfill sites

The ACUMEN project demonstrated the technical and economic viability of a range of techniques for monitoring, using and mitigating methane emissions from closed landfills. In so doing, it showed that these sites, which are currently a financial burden on their owners – often local authorities – could be transformed into an income-generating asset through the sale of gas rights. For instance, sites with small-scale spark-ignition engines (150 kW) use captured gas to generate electricity, yielding around (€65 000) per year. The project brought together a wide-ranging stakeholder partnership (regulators, owners, operators, equipment suppliers and monitoring specialists) to create a nascent market for the use of landfill gas from closed sites. As a result of its activities at five UK demonstration sites, the project found that previously operational sites are best-placed to generate energy because of their connections to the electricity grid and landfill gas collection infrastructure.

SEWeb – Scotland's environmental web

SEWeb developed a Shared Environmental Information System (SEIS) for Scotland. This website brings together data and information as well as expertise from a number of organisations to provide a comprehensive view of Scotland's environment. One of the

key project achievements was to develop a partnership programme that linked key data providers with data users, and facilitated cross-discipline discussion. SEWeb worked with 32 authors from 12 environmental organisations to update the State of the Environment report for Scotland, a crucial tool for identifying the priorities to be tackled in the work programme of the regional environmental protection agency. The project team also developed mapping and data visualisation applications for more than 300 datasets from 15 partner organisations. These high-quality online interactive resources increase public understanding of environmental issues.