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Development

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To: EU Ministers of Environment and Ministers of Agriculture

Dear Minister,

We are writing with regard to the situation of the wolf in Europe. After having suffered a very serious decline in most areas of Europe, wolf populations have been recovering in recent decades, returning to countries and regions of their former range. The wolf is a protected species under the EU Habitats Directive. The recovery of the wolf is a contribution towards nature protection in Europe and towards halting global biodiversity loss.

The latest data<sup>1</sup> (updated to 2016) indicate that there are nine different populations of wolves in the EU, with an estimated 13,000 - 14,000 individuals in total. Such data confirm a continuing recolonization of wolf populations in several areas. An updated assessment of the wolf conservation status is being prepared for the period 2013-2018, in the framework of the Member States reporting under the Habitats Directive, and should be available in 2019.

We strongly believe that conflicts associated with the conservation of the wolf require a comprehensive approach.

We are fully conscious of the challenge that the return of the wolf poses, especially in those areas where it had been absent for many decades and in rural areas with extensive livestock farming.

Achieving coexistence with large carnivores in the EU is our common goal, and an objective that is fully compatible with EU nature conservation policy. The Commission has been actively supporting Member States and stakeholders to reconcile the conservation of these species with the interests and needs of people. In the context of the Fitness Check of the Habitats Directive, all EU Member States, the European Parliament as well as stakeholders have unanimously confirmed that the Directives are fit for purpose, and have called on the Commission not to reopen the legal framework.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/617488/IPOL\\_STU\(2018\)617488\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/617488/IPOL_STU(2018)617488_EN.pdf)

In accordance with the commitments in its *Action Plan for nature, people and the economy*<sup>2</sup>, the Commission will continue to help national authorities and stakeholders with financial support, guidance, exchange of information and good practices. In this respect, the EU Large Carnivores Platform is playing an important role and we trust that the regional platforms that the Commission is setting up in several Member States will also provide an important contribution.

The Commission is currently working on updating EU guidance on species protection rules under the Habitats Directive, which will further clarify the existing flexibility available under the Directive to use derogations, including those applicable to large carnivores. This guidance is being developed in close cooperation with Member States and stakeholders, and will be finalized later this year. We encourage you to ensure your experts actively engage in this process and provide their comments to our services.

Nevertheless, we would like to underline that it is for the relevant national authorities to elaborate, establish and implement the specific recovery or management measures that are most appropriate in each regional context. We therefore invite you and the relevant authorities in your country to elaborate your own plans to manage and conserve wolf populations, making use of the instruments and possibilities under the existing EU and national legal and financial framework.

In this context, lethal control is an available tool for national authorities to use, in accordance with the conditions of the Habitats Directive, within the overall objective of ensuring the favourable conservation status of the concerned wolf populations. As you know, such measures must be reported and justified to the Commission every two years. To date, in the vast majority of cases, the Commission has not objected to these measures. However, lethal control should not be a substitute for a comprehensive system of measures to attain favourable conservation status. Rather, it is an alternative to consider in cases of problematic animals for which prevention has proved ineffective and should not be detrimental to the maintenance of the favourable conservation status.

This is why providing support for effective prevention measures to avoid or reduce livestock damages is critical. In order to support farmers in areas where large carnivores are present, the Commission has amended the State Aid guidelines for the agricultural sector in November 2018 to allow full reimbursement of costs related to such investments as well as for indirect costs such as veterinary costs and labour costs related to the search for missing animals. Another key element is having an efficient and fair compensation system to address damages to livestock which is also allowed under the State Aid Guidelines.

In addition, comprehensive training, technical assistance, and monitoring, as well as communication and information to the public and dialogue with all concerned stakeholders, are fundamental to reconciling the need to protect our nature and biodiversity with our human activities. To this end, significant financial support is available and possible both under the Rural Development Programmes financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and under the EU's environment and climate programme LIFE. Furthermore, support for preventive measures, such as investments in the purchase of protective fences or purchase of guard dogs as non-productive investments, which can be financed up to 100 %, is possible under EAFRD. Under agri-environment-climate commitments, payments in areas where the presence of wolves might prevent delivery of environmentally beneficial grazing practices may cover additional labour costs for maintenance of protective fences, if related work is done regularly and leads to recurring costs. Also, the costs related to maintenance of guard dogs can be included in the premium, where regular use of such dogs is foreseen.

Member States are encouraged to make use of these also under the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework.

We look forward to continue our close cooperation in this important matter.

Karmenu Vella

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Phil Hogan

Handwritten signature of Phil Hogan in blue ink.