

Protecting pollinators

Pollinating insects such as bees, butterflies and beetles play a fundamental role in our ecosystem, but all over the world they are facing a number of threats, including climate change, habitat loss, pests and intensive single-crop farming. Such threats are leading to a dramatic decline in populations of both wild and managed pollinator species, in spite of how vital they are to our well-being and nature. You are listening to 'Raising the game, better legislation' and in this podcast we will take a look at what the EU is doing to protect these tiny creatures.

Did you know that nearly 90% of the world's wild flowering plant species depend, entirely, or at least partly, on animal pollination, along with more than 75% of the world's food crops and 35% of global agricultural land? Not only do pollinators contribute directly to food security, they are also key to conserving biodiversity and, according to some estimates, up to 15 billion euro of the EU's annual agricultural output can be directly attributed to them.

Pollinators play a vital role in the reproduction of flowering plants as they help to transfer pollen between the male and female plant parts. While pollination can occur through various means, such as pollen carried by wind and water, animal pollinators, particularly insects like bees, butterflies and hoverflies, are among the most effective and important agents of pollination.

There are various pollinator species, including butterflies, birds and bats. But the most important ones are bees, and there are between 25 000 and 30 000 different bee species all over the world.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, pollinators play a crucial role from a social, economic and ecological point of view. All over the world, there are a number of threats facing them: climate change, habitat loss, pests and diseases, and intensive agriculture, and such threats are leading to the dramatic decline in the populations of these species.

In recent years, the world has witnessed a worrying decline in pollinator populations, and this trend poses a significant threat to ecosystems, agricultural productivity and human well-being. Given the urgency of this issue, the European Union has embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at addressing the decline of pollinators and promoting their conservation.

The EU's response to the pollinator crisis is not limited to policy measures – it also involves active engagement with members of the public and stakeholders. In 2022, the European Citizens' Initiative 'Save Bees and Farmers' gathered over 1.1 million signatures, demonstrating widespread public support for action to protect pollinators and promote sustainable farming practices. 'Save bees and farmers', which is the seventh successful European Citizens' Initiative, calls for significant reductions in synthetic pesticide use, with a focus on supporting farmers in transitioning to nature-friendly agricultural practices.

In 2020, the European Commission adopted the EU's biodiversity strategy for 2030. It is a comprehensive, ambitious and long-term plan to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems.

The EU also has a well-established biodiversity policy framework that has provided major benefits for biodiversity in Europe. The centrepieces of EU biodiversity policy are the Habitats Directive and Birds Directive, which have created the largest network of protected areas in the world – the Natura 2000 network.

In its December 2019 resolution on the EU Pollinators Initiative, put forward by the European Commission, Parliament called for a full-scale action programme for pollinators and for sufficient resources to be earmarked for this purpose. It advocated for the inclusion of EU-wide binding pesticide reduction targets in the revision of the sustainable use of pesticides Directive and called on the Commission to extend the ban imposed on three types of neonicotinoid insecticides to all neonicotinoid-based pesticides.

But phasing out pesticides is no simple task. In June 2022, The European Commission proposed a new regulation to reduce pesticides as part of the European Green Deal. The document received massive opposition from the pesticide industry and industrial farming organisations. The proposal was diluted as a result, and in the end, in November 2023, it did not get majority support in the European Parliament. It will now be up to the new Parliament and the new Commission, together with all EU countries, to find a solution to save pollinating insects.

Caring for bees and other pollinators is part of the fight against world hunger. Protecting biodiversity among these species is crucial to building resilience in agricultural ecosystems and adapting to climate change.

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