

EU nature restoration laws face collapse as member states withdraw support

Brussels vote cancelled after it became clear law would not pass final stage with majority vote

Lisa O'Carroll *in Brussels*

Mon 25 Mar 2024 20.18 CET

Share



Polish farmers protesting against the European green deal. Many of the EU's nature rules have been weakened. Photograph: Lech Muszyński/EPA

The EU's nature restoration laws appear on the verge of collapse after eight member states, including Hungary and Italy, withdrew support for the legislation.

The laws, which have been two years in the making and are designed to reverse decades of damage to wildlife on land and in waterways, were supposed to be rubber-stamped in a vote on Monday.

But instead the vote was shelved after it became apparent the legislation would not pass its final stage with the majority required. Sources say there was “just 1%” between those who would support it and those who would not, either by abstaining or voting against.

The European environment commissioner warned that shelving the bill indefinitely would destroy the EU’s reputation globally given it had led the way at the Cop15 biodiversity summit in Montreal in 2022.

“We risk going to Cop16 absolutely empty handed,” said Virginijus Sinkevičius.

He also said it would raise “serious questions and concerns as to the consistency and stability of the EU decision-making process”.

“It is clear to everyone that there is this huge deadlock. And it is not going to be easy to get out of this considering the upcoming elections,” said the Dutch climate minister, Rob Jetten, alluding to the European parliament’s elections in June.

The setback is the latest and arguably biggest blow to the EU’s environmental agenda in recent months, as policymakers decide how to respond to farmers’ protests across the bloc. As the demonstrations continue – in advance of the June elections – many green rules have been weakened.

On Monday Spain’s environment minister, Teresa Ribera, urged critics of the bill to back it, saying the EU “cannot afford” to abandon its green ambitions.

Ribera said: “It would be enormously irresponsible to drop the entire European green agenda. Europe cannot afford to drop the green agenda, just as it cannot afford to let its ecosystems die or leave its system in poor condition, in a state of danger.”

Alain Maron, the climate transition minister of Belgium, which acts as the “honest broker” in negotiations as holder of the rotating EU presidency, told reporters: “We don’t know exactly what reasons certain countries have to be against this law. It’s possible that they will change their mind and their vote.

“This is definitely not the end of the story. The presidency will work hard in the next weeks to find possible ways out of this deadlock and put this file back on the agenda for adoption,” he added.

The problem the Belgians face is that large changes to the text would have to go back to the European parliament whose last session before the EU elections is at the end of April.

One diplomat said the bill had very little chance of getting through as any substantial changes in the text would require a return to the European parliament for a second reading, which was almost impossible.

Hopes for the bill faded at last week's summit of EU leaders. Sweden, the Netherlands and Italy were opposed but the bill still had a slim majority. Then Hungary tipped the balance, indicating it would not support the legislation, even though Viktor Orbán's MEPs had supported its passage through the European parliament. Austria, Belgium, Finland and Poland have said they will abstain.

A representative of one member state that is not supporting the bill said on Monday nothing would change its mind. "We can't tell our farmers: 'We got everything you asked for' in terms of concessions from Brussels one day and reintroduce burdens for farmers the next."

But Maron said: "The farmers are fighting for fair income. This is their fight. They are not fighting against nature."

If passed, the laws would mean work on reversing biodiversity destruction on 20% of member states' land and waterways would have to begin by the end of the decade. This has been the target of fierce opposition by political parties across the bloc who are fighting to contain the rise of the radical right.

EU leaders have tried to assuage farmers' concerns, announcing delays on rules for unused land as well as supply chain support to fight exploitation by supermarkets seeking to keep down costs for consumers.

"The agricultural sector is a very important sector, not only in Hungary, but everywhere in Europe," Hungary's state secretary for the environment, Anikó Raisz, told Reuters on Monday.