

Technical background note on the uniform format for the national restoration plans

This informal background document was prepared by the services of the European Commission's Directorate General for Environment to provide some initial explanations to facilitate the work of Member States in filling in the uniform format for the national restoration plans, pending the preparation of detailed explanatory notes by the European Environment Agency (EEA). It does not commit the European Commission and is without prejudice to any potential future Commission Communication setting out guidance on the interpretation of the relevant provisions. It is not legally binding and does not replace, add to, or amend the provisions of applicable Union law. Only the Court of Justice of the European Union is competent to authoritatively interpret Union law.

Introduction

Article 14(1) of Regulation (EU) 2024/1991 on nature restoration (the Regulation) indicates that Member States shall each prepare a national restoration plan and carry out the preparatory monitoring and research needed to identify the restoration measures that are necessary to meet the restoration targets and fulfil the obligations set out in Articles 4 to 13 and to contribute to the Union's overarching objectives and targets set out in Article 1, taking into account the latest scientific evidence.

Article 15(7) of the Regulation requires the Commission to establish, by means of implementing acts, a uniform format for the national restoration plan. The uniform format includes the elements listed in Article 15(3) to 15(6) (content of the national restoration plan) as well as necessary elements from Article 14. By 1 December 2024, the Commission has to submit the draft implementing acts to the Nature Restoration Regulation Committee.

The uniform format was developed with the assistance of the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Topic Centre on Biodiversity and Ecosystems (ETC BE). It has also benefited from input from Member State experts through the European Union Biodiversity Platform (EUBP)'s ad-hoc group on future national restoration plans, input from members of the expert sub-group on the Nature Restoration Regulation, and input from public feedback.

The uniform format is a comprehensive planning support tool, set up to closely follow the requirements of the Regulation, while supporting Member States in the implementation phase and allowing for comparability across Member States. It allows for the structured presentation of the necessary data and information in a step-by-step manner.

The uniform format therefore constitutes a comprehensive, transparent and operational planning tool, providing all concerned actors, including public authorities at national, regional or local level as well as stakeholders the opportunity to be informed about and participate in the planned restoration measures as appropriate, as foreseen by the Regulation. The uniform format is designed to facilitate close cooperation between the administrations of the Member States concerned, including the authorities responsible for the environment, water, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, as well as relevant stakeholders. The design of the uniform format facilitates the public consultation required by Article 14(20) of the Regulation.

It also facilitates the assessment by the Commission required by Article 17 of the Regulation, both in terms of assessing the adequacy of meeting the targets and fulfilling the obligations it sets out (Article

17(2) a)-b) as well as the respective contributions to the Union's overarching objectives (Article 17(2)c).

By presenting the information in a concise manner with a carefully balanced degree of detail, the task of completing the uniform format is proportionate to its benefits and will support the promotion of ownership and participation in the restoration effort.

The fields that are optional for Member States to provide some contextual information useful for the overall comprehension are marked in light blue and constitute about 46% of the overall number of fields. Where possible, the uniform format will simplify Member States' planning task by automatically including information from or linking to already existing or planned national policies and programmes contributing to the restoration targets and objectives set out in the Regulation. The uniform format is therefore a self-standing tool providing a central overview and allowing Member States to make use as much as possible of existing plans (prepared for other pieces of EU legislation), measures and data.

In line with the principle of limiting administrative burden and reusing existing information ('report once' approach), the uniform format will be implemented on the existing Reportnet3 EEA platform, which is a modern digital tool, including possibilities for pre-filling information available to the EEA through other workstreams. These elements are indicated by green fields in the draft uniform format and concern overall roughly 10% of all fields. They include fields that require relatively the highest amount of data; for Article 4 it concerns 21%.

Information that could be reused by Member States is available from the Nature Directives, Water Framework Directive, Marine Strategy Framework Directive, EMODNET and Maritime Spatial Plans, integrated national energy and climate plans, long-term climate strategies, and Eurostat datasets.

The platform allows exporting the reported data as e.g. a text document (word or pdf) in order to be printed or also as an excel for other uses. The final reporting format when transferred in the reporting platform may undergo small adjustments to accommodate technical solutions. These adjustments will not impact the content of the reporting format.

The uniform format also reflects the flexibility that Member States have in deciding when and where to put in place restoration measures according to their national circumstances, by allowing a bottom-up approach to filling in those parts of the template dedicated to concrete restoration measures, allowing Member States to explain the underlying considerations for their planning choices in a limited number of short free text fields or providing the option to limit the planning exercise to a strategic overview for the period after 2032.

The draft implementing Regulation has been submitted to the Nature Restoration Regulation Committee on 25 November 2024, in accordance with Article 15(7) of the Regulation. This implementing act establishes the uniform format for the first draft national restoration plans referred to in Article 16. Updates of the uniform format may be proposed in view of the future revisions of the national restoration plans.

Colour scheme

Mandatory and optional fields will be clearly marked in the digital tool being developed by EEA and the possibility to make the colour coding available in the tool will be explored.

- Light blue: optional fields;
- Light green: fields for which existing data may be used.
- Light grey: titles and explanations on the fields.
- White: space to provide the information corresponding to the field, with basic information about the metric and/or other basic instructions to follow

Overall structure

The uniform format for the national restoration plans, after a chapter of basic information, consists of three interrelated parts:

- **Part A** contains information that is transversal to the different targets of the Nature Restoration Regulation: general information about the plan, consideration of the diversity of situations in various regions, as well as the contribution to the Regulation's overarching objectives. It provides an overview of co-benefits and links with other policies, as well as aggregated financial information. It also includes elements on the monitoring, the effectiveness assessment and the revision of measures.
- **Part B** covers national targets and obligation by article, across the ecosystems-specific Articles 4 to 13 and Article 18 of the Regulation. This includes:
 - o Terrestrial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems (Art. 4)
 - o Restoration of marine ecosystems (Art. 5), including in conjunction with Article 18 and Additional Information II
 - o Restoration of urban ecosystems (Art. 8), including in conjunction with Additional Information III
 - o Restoration of the natural connectivity of rivers and natural functions of the related floodplains (Art. 9), including in conjunction with Additional Information IV
 - o Restoration of pollinator populations (Art. 10)
 - o Restoration of agricultural ecosystems (Art. 11)
 - o Restoration of forest ecosystems (Art. 12)
 - o Planting of three billion additional trees (Art. 13)

For each article, this part includes information on the national approach to meeting restoration targets and fulfilling obligations set out in Articles 4 to 13, including provision of best estimates for the quantification of the areas to be restored and indicative maps of potential areas to be restored (Art. 15(3)(a)).

- **Part C** aims to identify the specific measures, in particular restoration measures, that will be put in place to achieve the targets and fulfil the obligations set out in the Regulation. Since a measure may be relevant to the targets and obligations of different articles, the description of measures also provides for specifying the different contributions of a measure to one or more targets and obligations. Member States have flexibility in choosing the granularity of the measures selected, at national, sub-national or project level, or at a combination of these levels.

Additional Information fields are provided to include observations and revision to the draft national restoration plan, in accordance with Article 19, as well as information per marine habitat type, inventory of surface water barriers and list of urban ecosystem areas following an approach different than whole local administrative units.

In particular, the information provided at measures level in Part C includes a description of the contribution of each measure to the different obligations and targets per Article, covered in Part B, so that the information provided in part B largely aggregates the information provided in part C.

Articulation between national, sub-national and project levels

The structure of the uniform format for the national restoration plan ensures coherence and flexibility across national, sub-national, and project-level planning. Parts A and B provide a national-level framework and strategic approach, including targets, obligations and aggregated data, as well as free text fields for describing relevant regional aspects, where appropriate. Part C opens the possibility for

detailed, localized planning of specific restoration measures, which can be described at the national, sub-national, or project level, or through a combination of these approaches.

Digital Format

The uniform format is a static representation of a dynamic digital tool to be developed in the EEA Reportnet3 system. The uniform format covers all the required information to be submitted by Member States as well as optional fields introduced to reflect the various flexibilities offered by the Regulation and/or to give Member States the opportunity to provide additional information deemed useful for understanding the plan.

Wherever a technical solution is available in a timely manner, the online tool will ensure a reduced burden for Member States, in accordance with the following principles:

- Avoiding double reporting in the format;
- Enabling the automatic prefilling of data from other data flows;
- Maximising user friendliness.

Different display or export options will be available, to facilitate the use of the format for different purposes. For example, the option to display the list of measures submitted in Part C and/or in Part B is being explored.

Financial information

The summary financial information in part A allows an overview of the estimated financial needs (per indicated period) for certain horizontal measures and measures taken per ecosystem in the frame of the regulation as well as 'Other' measures '.

Financial information in Part C, i.e. at the level of the measures, is structured in the same way as the one in Part A but is optional, while financial information at national level in part A is mandatory. Possibilities for aggregating the information between Parts A and C will be explored, but Member States will (whether part C is filled in or not) be responsible for a complete and consolidated estimate of financial needs in Part A.

Relationship of financial information with the Prioritised Action Framework (PAF)

The information required in the frame of the PAF exercise is largely overlapping with the one required under the NRP. The uniform format therefore allows for a full integration of PAF related information in the NRP format. The ecosystem typology used (see accompanying technical background note for more explanations) in Part A and C is consistent with the one used in the Prioritised Action Framework (PAF) under the Habitats Directive.

In addition to the mandatory information under the NRP the financial section consequently includes a few additional fields, which are required under the PAF only and are marked as optional, for example costs relating to Natura 2000 sites only or measures not directly referring to the nature restoration regulation.. Member States are encouraged to submit the PAF financial information through the relevant fields in the NRP by also filling the optional ones created for collecting PAF information not directly required by the NRR, in order to merge the exercises and reduce administrative burden. If a Member State fills in the optional fields in the financial information section on part A, no other PAF document will be requested from Member States. The Commission might however ask those Member States that do not fill in the optional fields in the financial info in part A to submit this information separately.

The summary financial information table in part A is highly policy relevant as it could play an important role in the discussion on the future EU financial support for biodiversity and restoration and in the programming phase under future EU funds.

Strategic overview

The uniform format provides that where Member States decide to apply the provisions referred to in Article 15(2) ('strategic overview'), the information provided includes at least the minimum elements enabling the Commission to carry out the assessment referred to in Article 17(2)(b) and (c).

Measures

Definition of restoration measures

Article 3(3) of the Regulation defines 'restoration' as the process of actively or passively assisting the recovery of an ecosystem in order to improve its structure and functions, with the aim of conserving or enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, through improving an area of a habitat type to good condition, re-establishing favourable reference area, and improving a habitat of a species to sufficient quality and quantity in accordance with Article 4(1), (2) and (3) and Article 5(1), (2) and (3), and meeting the targets and fulfilling the obligations under Articles 8 to 12, including reaching satisfactory levels for the indicators referred to in Articles 8 to 12.

Effective and area-based restoration measures

Effective and area-based restoration measures are measures that can be localised and that can actually contribute to the recovery of an ecosystem in a science-based measurable way. The measures can be accounted only on those areas where there is expected a measurable impact on the ecosystem.

Measures and measures typology

Considering that Member States have full flexibility in Part C to define their measures, which may include a bottom-up approach to fill in information by regions or even individual projects, there is a need to have a common typology to which these different measures can be related to. This typology does not contain a list of detailed measures but rather refers to types or groups of measures (see accompanying technical background note for more detailed explanations).

Restoration measures implemented or started before 18 August 2024 that have not yet reached their full effect

Some restoration measures implemented or started before 18 August 2024 may have not yet reached their full effect on ecosystem condition.

In case such measures are included in the national restoration plan, the following conditions should be considered:

- the measure is corresponding to the definition of restoration provided in Article 3(3), and
- the measure is showing the envisaged improvement-effect but the intended full impact of the measure (e.g. full recovery to the good condition of an area of a habitat type or reaching satisfactory levels for the indicators referred to in Articles 8 to 12) has not been achieved yet.

When the restored area has fully recovered or reached the intended state, any subsequent measures on the same area aiming at ensuring the sustained effects of restoration measures (e.g. recurring management) should be considered as non-deterioration measures in the meaning of Articles 4(11), 4(13), 5(9) or 5(10) or as one of the provisions referred to in Article 15(3)(q).

These considerations are without prejudice to the specific case of barrier removals for which Article 15(3)(i) states that the national restoration plan includes the length of free-flowing rivers to be achieved by the removal of barriers estimated from 2020 to 2030.

Information on marine ecosystems

The uniform format is designed to facilitate the sharing of information and promote cross-links between different data sources on marine ecosystems to enable Member States to better plan effective restoration measures and to coordinate their efforts to close the knowledge gaps in a cost-effective way. Member States are encouraged to integrate information from various sources, including data reported under Article 8 of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), as well as maritime spatial plans available in EMODnet, and any other relevant databases. This approach aims to streamline reporting obligations, reduce the administrative burden on Member States and promote a more co-ordinated approach to marine restoration under relevant EU legislation.

Notably, Additional Information II of the uniform format, titled "Information per marine habitat type," offers the possibility for Member States to voluntarily submit details about the availability or lack of data for each marine habitat type to better plan and coordinate their efforts in a regional sea.

Information on urban ecosystems

Member States can delineate their 'urban ecosystem areas' (UEAs) in one of the following ways. They can either opt to have all their UEAs delineated at the full administrative boundaries of their local administrative units (LAUs) or they can choose to have some or all of their urban ecosystem area (UEAs) with boundaries that fall within the boundaries of the LAU (as long as it includes the most densely populated parts of the municipality). Determining which LAUs are classified as 'cities' and 'towns and suburbs' must be based on the list available from EUROSTAT, (the latest available will be 2024), and the most densely populated parts of the LAUs – the urban centres and clusters - must also be based on the EUROSTAT list (the latest available being 2021). Once these Urban Ecosystem Areas are established, from 2024 to 2030, they cannot be changed. Changes could be foreseen at the point when the NRPs are revised in 2030.

Pre-filling options may be possible when urban ecosystem areas are ALL based on full outer LAUs boundary limits, and when no LAUs are aggregated together. However, such automation would be limited when the boundaries of the UAs are newly created by Member States, until such time as this information has been passed to the Commission. This being said, the Commission could still help if Member States provide the information about urban ecosystem areas before the NRPs are drafted. The Commission will provide an explanation of how to use "appropriate supplementary data" in accordance with the Regulation shortly. The key parameters being that the data should be based on and be 'additional' to the Copernicus dataset.

Information on free-flowing rivers and on the inventory of artificial barriers to the connectivity of surface waters

In the inventory of barriers to the connectivity of surface waters, a flexible range of options is given to Member States to report on the location of barriers. The geospatial information must be provided in vector format, either as a point corresponding to the generalized centre point of the barrier, or as a line or as a polygon. This enables to take into account both the general need for simplification in the format, and the large extent of some barriers (lateral ones in particular), for which point features may not be precise enough. In general, when applicable, Member States are invited to provide information in the inventory in a way that is consistent with other reporting requirements (such as for the Water Framework Directive or the Flood Directive for example).

Quantified contributions to the objective of restoring 25000 km of rivers as free-flowing rivers by 2030 as compared to 2020 are not requested at the level of each barrier planned to be removed, but at the national level (Part B). Besides, restoration measures aiming at this objective must be identified in part C, with the optional possibility to estimate the surface area or length subject to the measure (14.5.1 of the Uniform Format).

In part B, the quantification of restored free-flowing length to be achieved as compared to 2020 must be expressed as a net gain, which means it has to take into account the potential loss of free-flowing river length due to existing barriers built after 2020 and to projects of new barriers. However, projects of new barriers do not have to be individually inventoried in the national restoration plans.