

# Wetlands and peatlands for a resilient Europe

## Policy Brief



## Aligning **National and Regional Partnership Plans** with **National Restoration Plans** to deliver water, climate, and environmental priorities.

Wetlands are ecosystems in which water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated plant and animal life. They include marshes, peatlands, rivers, lakes, floodplains, estuaries, salt marshes, and lagoons.<sup>1</sup> **For millennia, wetlands and peatlands have sustained Europe's resilience, competitiveness, and quality of life.** Natural wetlands store and purify water, reduce flooding, heat, drought and fire risk, protect coastlines, store carbon over long timescales – **with peatlands alone storing up to 25 % of the total carbon in EU soils<sup>2</sup>**–, support unique biodiversity, and sustain resilient and productive landscapes.<sup>3</sup>

**Yet Europe has lost around 80 % of its wetlands over the past century.**<sup>4</sup> Protected wetland habitats across Europe are in a critical

state, with **89 % assessed as either in bad or poor condition.**<sup>5</sup> The **EU Nature Restoration Regulation** sets the goal for Member States to **restore 30 % of degraded wetlands and 30 % of drained agricultural peatlands by 2030.** Identifying the main obstacles to wetland restoration and developing strategies to overcome them will be essential to achieve these targets.<sup>6</sup>

Over the last five years, **WaterLANDS**, one of four EU Horizon 2020 **Green Deal Restoration Cluster** projects (MERLIN, REST-COAST, SUPERB and WaterLANDS), has brought together **32 partners from 14 countries** to scale up wetland and peatland restoration across Europe by restoring **six Action Sites** while advancing research on co-creation, governance, and innovative financing approaches for restoration.

# From degradation to resilience:

## Lessons from the WaterLANDS Action Sites

**The Problem:** Drained and degraded landscapes

**The Solution:** Resilient and multifunctional wet landscapes



Graphic design and illustration by Neil Avern, Loop Creative

### Threat to competitiveness:

Rising public costs and investment uncertainty



Wetland degradation **increases public costs** through impacts on health, agriculture, land subsidence, and reliance on costly grey infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> Fragmented governance and harmful subsidies block or delay restoration and discourage long-term private investment.



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### Benefits to competitiveness:

#### Ems-Dollard estuary (Netherlands)

Saltmarsh restoration and the deposition of silt in wetland polders can be used to raise agricultural land, while improving estuary water quality and providing coastal resilience to sea level rise, with estimated savings of **€40-61m versus imported clay over 10 years and up to €18m in present-value climate benefits** from avoiding peat oxidation across 100 ha. [Learn more.](#)

#### Great North Bog (UK)

Covering ~7,000 km<sup>2</sup>, the Great North Bog **supplies drinking water to 15 million people**. Restoration substantially reduces emissions from damaged peat, improves water quality, lowers treatment costs and wildfire and flood risks. A forthcoming economic-impact analysis of peatland restoration shows **significant positive knock-on effects across the regional economy and job creation**. [Learn more.](#)

### Threat to security:

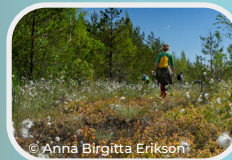
Higher exposure to climate and water risks



Degraded wetlands **increase exposure to floods, heat, droughts, wildfires, water scarcity, poor water quality, coastal erosion, and saltwater intrusion**, leaving communities and economies increasingly vulnerable to climate change impacts.<sup>3</sup>



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### Benefits to security:

#### Venice Lagoon (Italy)

Venice's saltmarshes **support adaptation to sea-level rise**, keep navigation channels clear, improve water quality and sustain the lagoon's biodiversity, fisheries and local identity. Even though ~80 % of saltmarshes have been lost, evidence-based restoration is enabling them to regrow and recover these benefits. [Learn more.](#)

#### Pärnu catchment peatlands (Estonia)

Peatlands cover ~22 % of Estonia's territory, but healthy, functioning mires cover only up to 8 %. Besides recovering Natura 2000 habitats and populations of protected species like capercaillie, osprey and amphibians, peatland restoration through damming and blocking ditches recovers natural water regulation, **reducing fire and downstream flood risks** as well as greenhouse gas emissions. [Learn more.](#)

### Threat to values:

Loss of biodiversity, identity and trust



Wetland degradation leads to a **loss of biodiversity, cultural landscapes, local identity, and community relationships with land and water**. Restoration needs to be co-designed with affected stakeholders to build trust, gain broad support and prevent local conflicts.



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### Benefits to values:

#### Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC blanket bog (Ireland)

Building on Ireland's national CAP-funded ACRES CP results-based agri-environment payment scheme, WaterLANDS has restored more than 1,000 ha of peatland under agricultural use. For many farmers, this work has resulted in improved habitat condition and associated **higher agri-environment payments**. [Learn more.](#)

#### Dragoman Marsh (Bulgaria)

Bulgaria's largest karst marsh, home to almost 60 % of the country's bird species, **supports education and ecotourism** while contributing to groundwater recharge. Restoration has enabled cranes to nest again after 66 years and **involved hundreds of volunteers and pupils** through community engagement and environmental education activities. [Learn more.](#)

**To realise these benefits at scale, Europe must turn restoration commitments into coordinated, long-term delivery—through landscape-scale planning supported by broad public engagement, cross-sectoral governance, and sustained funding.**

# From restoration targets to investment:

Aligning National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) with National Restoration Plans (NRPs)

## The core policy ask



**Ensure that National and Regional Partnership Plans clearly support the delivery of National Restoration Plans**

Under the **2028–2034 EU budget**, National and Regional Partnership Plans should translate the Nature Restoration Regulation’s objectives into long-term funding, legal frameworks, and coordinated planning for wetland and peatland restoration across governance levels.



**Back this with a dedicated biodiversity spending target and transparent tracking**

A **dedicated biodiversity spending target** and transparent tracking framework are needed to ensure that the financing needs, implementation, and outcomes of National Restoration Plans can be clearly identified, assessed, and monitored.

## Four levers to scale up wetland restoration

1

**Long-term funding and implementation capacity**



Restoration needs predictable funding, skilled staff, advisory support, technical expertise, and monitoring and reporting capacity across government levels.

Aligning NRPPs with NRPs would ensure that restoration priorities are **funded beyond stand-alone environmental projects** and supported by the capacity needed for implementation.

2

**Governance that works in practice**

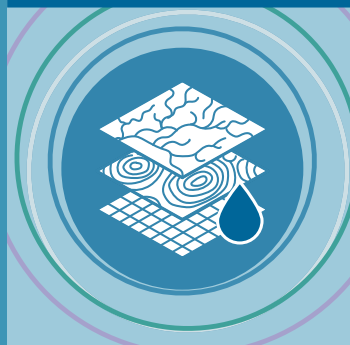


Restoration needs **clear responsibilities, planning permissions, and coordination across institutions.**

Aligning NRPPs with NRPs can help clarify tasks and roles, avoid administrative silos, and strengthen exchange across institutions.

3

**Landscape-level planning across sectors**



Restoration must be integrated with spatial planning, flood protection, agriculture, water management, climate adaptation, energy, forestry, and other land uses in the same **catchment area.**

NRPPs guide regional investment for territorial development, while NRPs define restoration priorities. Aligning the two helps **integrate restoration into wider land management and investment decisions.**

4

**Co-creation, public support and long-term stewardship**



Restoration needs **early engagement and sustained dialogue** with public authorities, communities, farmers, landowners, and economic stakeholders.

Aligning NRPPs with NRPs can ensure that funding and coordination support participation, local ownership, and long-term stewardship, while shifting the narrative from nature protection alone to resilience, security, and shared values.

# Wetlands, water and communities: Knowing and protecting what sustains us

Across Europe, across cultures and across generations, farmers, landowners, communities, scientists, public authorities, and businesses are working together to restore wetlands while sustaining livelihoods, local identity, and resilient landscapes.

## WaterLANDS Action Sites



1 Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC blanket bog, Ireland

A practical toolkit, regular farm visits, and tailored advice **engaged 145 landowners** in peatland restoration, while **pupils from five local schools** learned to assess bog health in the field.

Around 400 residents created a **shared vision** for a greener, more liveable coast. **Incorporated into the official policy**, this will guide the detailed planning for coastal protection and environmental restoration in the estuary.



2 Ems-Dollard estuary, Netherlands



3 Pärnu catchment peatlands, Estonia

Local residents and students planted cranberries to **maintain berry-picking traditions**, while visitors are able to explore and monitor the recovering mire through the **Kõrsa citizen science trail**, created together with the local community.



4 Great North Bog, UK

Films, guided walks, and creative workshops are **reconnecting communities with the peatlands**. The *Tenderbog* artist residency **links the recovery of degraded bogs with human health**, bringing new perspectives to restoration and One Health.



5 Venice Lagoon, Italy

Through citizen science, field trips, art, and games, the *Giants of the Lagoon* programme helped **over 800 pupils and teachers** understand how Venice and its lagoon are interconnected, **deepening community connections to wetlands**.



6 Dragoman Marsh, Bulgaria

Over two decades, educational activities, volunteering and bird-ringing camps have **connected thousands of students, children and parents** with Dragoman Marsh and inspired the community-based video *Swamp Song*, **selected for the 2026 Venice Biennale**.

Map source: European Wetland Map.<sup>7</sup>

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