FACTSHEET: NATURE RESTORATION IN THE ALPINE REGION

Alpine initiatives and the European policy landscape

Meadow, forest and mountain landscape in Austria. Source: Unsplash

Nature and biodiversity are in alarming decline, with more than 80% of Europe's habitats in poor condition. Large scale nature restoration is not only essential to slow and reverse this decline, it can also protect against extreme weather events, and tackle the intertwined biodiversity and climate crises. Nature restoration is also an economic imperative, given that over half of global GDP depends on nature and the services it provides in terms of food security, medicines, fresh air, water, shelter, and a clean and healthy environment in which to live.

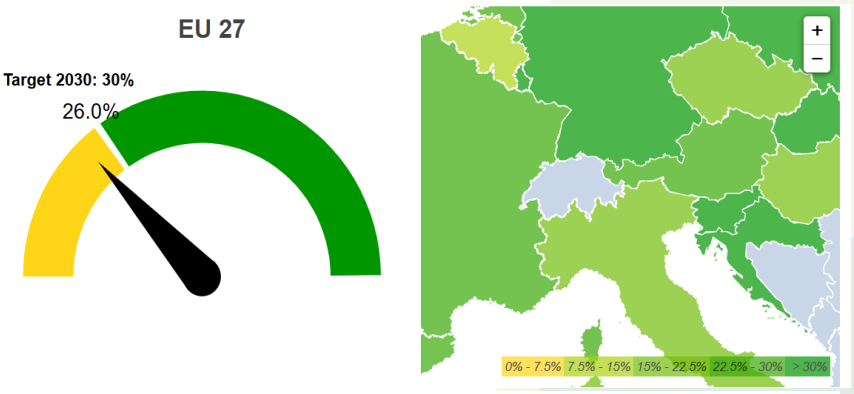
The new EU Nature Restoration Law should be a gamechanger, creating **the world's first continent-wide, legally-binding nature restoration targets**. But its success will depend on local action. As custodians of unique natural capital, Alpine regions play an important role in implementing nature restoration measures and in ensuring that overall biodiversity protection and restoration are well integrated into policy and investment decisions. For the fragile Alpine ecosystems cross-border cooperation on issues such as ecological and river connectivity, pollinating insects and forests will be especially important. Implementation will be boosted by regions taking a leading role, for example through capacity building, awareness raising and mobilisation of local stakeholders and citizens.

EU Policy, Initiatives and Funding

The **EU Nature Restoration Regulation** (also known as the 'Nature Restoration Law') entered into force in August 2024 and is the most significant piece of EU nature legislation for a generation. It has four overarching objectives: (1) to ensure the long-term and sustained recovery of biodiversity and resilient ecosystems, (2) to contribute to achieving the EU's objectives concerning climate change mitigation and adaptation, (3) to enhance food security and (4) to contribute to meeting international commitments.

To achieve its objectives, the Regulation introduces a series of legally binding targets and obligations. This includes restoring 20% of land areas and 20% of seas by 2030, and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. It also creates ecosystem-specific targets for: territorial, coastal and freshwater ecosystems, marine ecosystems, river connectivity and functional floodplains, pollinator populations, agricultural ecosystems, forest ecosystems and urban ecosystems. The targets cover habitats already protected under existing legislation (eg Natura 2000), as well as other ecosystems that have been heavily degraded. Each Member State will create National Restoration Plans, explaining in detail how they intend to meet the restoration targets. This will involve preparatory monitoring and research to identify urgent restoration measures to be carried out up to 2032, and the development of a long-term strategy up to 2050. The first draft of the national plans must be created by September 2026 and will then be assessed by the European Commission to ensure they adequately meet the targets. Guidance and recommendations for ambitious nature restoration plans can be found in the recent brochure of the Institute for European Environmental Policy.

The Nature Restoration Regulation is a key legal instrument to fulfil the objectives of the **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030**, which came into force back in 2020, and complements the **EU forest strategy for 2030**, and **EU Soil Strategy for 2030**. The EU's Biodiversity Strategy outlined 16 specific actions related to land protection and restoration and improved governance. An online actions tracker provides up-to-date information on the state of implementation, while the EU Biodiversity Strategy Dashboard shows progress towards the quantified targets. A recent study 'Delivering the EU Green Deal' reports that, while there are improvements in the preservation and health status of habitats and ecosystems, biodiversity in the EU continues to decline and shows deteriorating trends.



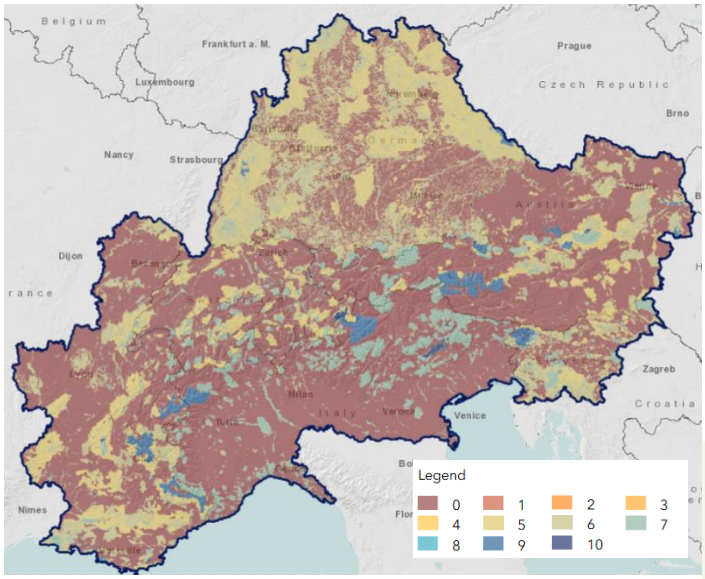
Progress towards 2030 targets on protected land at EU level (left) and national level (right) Source: European Environment Agency

For now, no single EU fund addresses nature restoration, therefore funding for the implementation of the Nature Restoration Law is expected to come from various sources, including EU programmes, national budgets and private financing. EU Cohesion policy funds will be an important stream, including from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund and Interreg programmes. This will complement other sources such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), Horizon Europe and the LIFE programme, which has just launched a new call for proposals (April 2025) within its Nature and Biodiversity sub-programme.

Nature restoration in the Alps

The Alps are synonymous with nature. Home to more than 30,000 animal species and 13,000 plant species, the region is a wonder of the natural world. Nonetheless, human activity continues to put pressure on nature and biodiversity, be it through the expansion of tourism and leisure, changing agricultural practices or infrastructure development.

Nature does not respect borders, meaning transnational cooperation is vital. Along with the Alpine Convention, the EU Strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP) is active on this issue, with Action Group 6 on Resources and Action Group 7 on Green Infrastructure actively working on nature restoration topics. Cross-border collaboration will be especially important during the creation of National Restoration Plans, to exchange knowledge and foster joint and coordinated restoration efforts.



Protected areas in the Alpine region
0 = no protection, 10 = strict conservation status
Source: Joint Ecological Continuum Analysing and Mapping Initiative

To this end, EUSALP Action Group 7 and the Alpine Biodiversity Board of the Alpine Convention co-organised a workshop on nature restoration in the Alpine region in November 2024 for representatives of national authorities, research institutions and NGOs from all eight Alpine states. A concept paper Nature restoration in the Alpine region: a challenge and an excellent opportunity for cooperation has been produced as a result of the workshop, highlighting the importance of interoperable and standardised biodiversity monitoring practices, regular data exchange, and technical guidance for Alpine restoration practices and measures. Participants also suggested that transnational aspects be added to each National Restoration Plan.

Alpine projects related to nature restoration

Following the adoption of the Nature Restoration Law, EUSALP Action Group 7 engaged with the DG Environment and DG Regio to highlight the Alps' critical role in ecosystem conservation. They launched a systematic mapping of over 150 projects, mainly related to river habitats and forests, funded by European programs like LIFE. The collection of projects was carried out through the members of AG7. This database aims to showcase the best practices, support national workplans, and position the Alps as a model for ecological transition. The Collection is ongoing, based on publicly available data, and designed to facilitate knowledge sharing and conservation efforts. Results are available at https://www.alpine-region.eu/action-groups-publications/ag7-nature-restoration-project-database.

The PlanToConnect project is mainstreaming ecological connectivity in spatial planning systems. Project partners will cooperate with stakeholders in pilot areas to develop and test an Alpine spatial planning strategy for ecological connectivity, and a capacity-building package for its implementation. The project aims to identify key cross-border areas for planning of ecological connectivity and to facilitate the upgrade of spatial planning systems and territorial policies to preserve or re-establish them. The final results of the project will be available in the Autumn of 2025.

AlpsLife will enhance monitoring practices for the conservation and restoration of biodiversity. Partners will establish a common framework to ensure interoperability between different datasets and their monitoring schemes, facilitating cross-national strategies. Through data-sharing and coordination, the project will assess Alpine biodiversity trends, creating a common understanding of biodiversity processes to ensure consistent conservation decisions across borders. By the end of the project (in 2027) partners will have established a Comprehensive Alpine Biodiversity Data Hub.

The I-SWAMP project supported the conservation of small Alpine wetlands, by integrating scientific knowledge with community engagement. The main outcome was the development of common guidelines for the evaluation and conservation of small Alpine wetlands, which can support local authorities in making well-informed decisions about wetland management. Partners also created educational materials (available in English, French, German, Italian and Slovene) to teach children about wetlands, biodiversity and conservation. All resources can be found on the project website.