

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
THE CHAIR

Ms Dolors Montserrat
Chairperson
Committee on Petitions
ASP 10E101
Brussels

D 200099 29.01.2021

Ref.: IPOL-COM-AGRI D (2020)36529

Subject: Opinion on Petition No 1188/2019 on the management of the brown bears in Romania and Petition No 0074/2020 on the protected status of the wolf (Austria)

Dear Ms Montserrat,

The Committee on Petitions, by letter of 25 June 2020, forwarded the petitions in question to the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development for information. At their meeting on 7 July 2020, the AGRI Coordinators took good note of these petitions. Since the ID Group, however, stated that these petitions would require a reaction in the form of an opinion, AGRI Coordinators discussed them again at their meeting on 1 December 2020 and decided indeed to follow-up on them in the form of a letter.

Both petitioners complain about the presence of large carnivores (brown bears and wolves respectively) close to inhabited areas (in Romania and Austria), stressing that attacks against humans and livestock are on the rise, and so are damages to private property and agricultural production.

The petitioner in petition No 1188/2019 claims that although European legislation would in principle allow for interventions in order to protect humans and livestock, the Romanian Ministry of Environment rejects a great number of intervention requests submitted by hunting associations.

The petitioner in petition No 0074/2020 claims that although EU funding is available for preventive measures in order to protect livestock, such as construction of fences and training of shepherd dogs, these measures are not efficient in mountainous areas. The petitioner calls for a new scientific definition of the wolf population and consequently for an amendment of the relevant provisions in Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (Habitats Directive).

In response to both petitions, the Commission essentially replied that the current legal framework under the Habitats Directive, which lists the wolf and the brown bear as strictly protected species, but provides national authorities with the possibility to issue derogations in certain exceptional situations, was still appropriate. With regard to livestock farming, current State aid rules provide ample possibilities for Member States to cover fully the costs for investments into prevention or compensation of damages incurred. EU rural development programmes can also support various preventive measures for livestock protection.

In December 2019, the ENVI and PETI Committees, with the association of the AGRI Committee, held a joint public hearing on the revaluation of the wolf population. While the total number of wolves continues to increase across Europe, experts emphasised the need for preventive measures allowing for the co-existence of large carnivores and rural populations.

First of all, the Members of the AGRI Committee would like to express their full support to the farmers who have lost or who are under threat of losing livestock due to attacks by large carnivores. Although overall losses in the EU seem to be minimal, this should not hide the fact that the individual farmers concerned often suffer considerable losses since certain farms tend to be more in the range of carnivores than others.

The Committee on Agriculture calls on the Commission to submit an amendment to Directive 92/43 / EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora to move the species of wolf and of brown bear from the category of "strictly protected species" to a regime that allows to regulate the numbers of individuals of these species. We would like to stress the need of regular re-evaluation of the carnivore populations and their conservation status in the light of the Habitats Directive, given their current growth rates. Moreover, in the case of wolves, given their mobility, the EU-wide conservation status should also be taken into account.

Although the Commission is right in emphasising that the implementation of the exceptions foreseen by Article 16 of the Habitats Directive depends on national authorities, the EU should provide guidelines and support to national and local authorities, especially in cases where the measures taken seem to be insufficient, as was apparently the case in petition No 1188/2019 where several lethal bear attacks on humans have been reported. More flexibility concerning the removal of problematic individual animals could be necessary in order to effectively protect humans and livestock in acute situations. However, we acknowledge, as has been shown by studies, that in the long term, the removal of individual animals does not constitute a complete solution.

We would therefore like to stress the importance of the preventive measures protecting livestock from predator attacks, such as installing fences, using shepherds and guard dogs and night-time gathering of livestock into carnivore-proof enclosures. EU funding supporting these measures should be substantially increased given the difficulties of applying these measures in certain (in particular mountainous) regions, as mentioned by petition No 0074/2020. Moreover, the funding should be accompanied by appropriate technical assistance to the farmers in the implementation of the measures. In the event of livestock losses, the farmers concerned should be able to obtain full compensation without bureaucratic hurdles.

Given the fact that large carnivore populations are expanding across the EU, we consider that this question deserves constant monitoring and attention.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norbert Lins". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Norbert LINS