

Commission presents policy options for EU strategy on invasive species

The European Commission presented a series of policy options for developing a strategy to deal with species from abroad which are threatening European biodiversity. Invasive species are a major threat to native plants and animals in Europe. One such example is the Harlequin ladybird, originally from Asia, which poses a deadly threat to native ladybirds in the UK, as well as to butterflies and other insects. Invasive species can disrupt local flora and fauna and cause considerable damage to nature and human health. They can also have significant economic impacts: controlling invasive species and repairing the damage they do is estimated to cost European economies at least €12 billion each year. Although some EU countries have legislation to protect their national biodiversity, there is no harmonised approach across the EU. The Communication puts forward a number of policy options for a coordinated approach and measures that can be put in place immediately, including a Europe-wide early warning system to report new and emerging species.

European Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said: "Invasive species are a major threat to biodiversity. Halting the loss of biodiversity in the EU will not be possible without tackling the problem of these unwelcome visitors. Given the way that these become quickly established and spread, measures taken by one Member State can have no effect if neighbouring countries fail to take action or respond in an uncoordinated manner. The ecological, economic and social consequences of the spread of invasive species for EU countries are serious and need a harmonised response."

The problem of invasive species

Invasive species have been brought to Europe either accidentally or intentionally for a variety of purposes such as agriculture and forestry. The constant growth in international and European trade and transport activities and the increasing movement of people around the world means that the number of these species is rising.

The coypu and the musk rat, both brought to Europe from the Americas for their fur, are now established throughout Europe and cause significant damage to dams, canals, irrigation and flood protection systems. One of the most notorious invasive species is the zebra mussel, which as well as causing significant ecological damage, also causes major problems for industry by fouling intake pipes for water extraction.

The DAISIE¹ project, supported under the EU's Sixth Research Framework Programme, has identified 10,822 non-native species present in Europe. 10-15% of these are expected to have a negative economic or ecological impact.

¹ DAISIE (Delivering Alien Invasive Species Inventories for Europe), www.europe-aliens.org

Isolated islands with high biodiversity are exceptionally vulnerable to invasion, which can have a disproportionate impact on local livelihoods, culture and economic opportunities.

Current methods for tackling invasive species in Europe

Existing EU legislation and policies, such as those covering nature, plant and animal health, water and trade regulations, already provide part of the solution to the problem of invasive species. However, there is no harmonised system or consistency of approach between neighbouring countries to monitor and control invasive species and their effects on European biodiversity.

The need for coordinated action has been expressed at the highest political level and a commitment to an EU strategy is included in the EU's Action Plan to halt biodiversity loss by 2010 and beyond.

Earlier this year the Commission launched a public survey to gather suggestions on how to tackle the issue effectively at EU level.

Proposed options for an EU strategy on invasive species

The Commission proposes a number of possible options. These include maximising the use of existing legislation together with voluntary measures. This would involve carrying out risk assessments using existing institutions such as the European Food Safety Authority. Voluntary measures proposed include regular border control checks by Member States and voluntary codes of conduct to encourage responsible behaviour by retailers and consumers.

The Commission is proposing the immediate setting up of a Europe-wide early warning and information system to report new and emerging species. This is in line with an internationally agreed three-stage approach to tackle invasive species which is based on prevention, early detection and eradication, and control and containment measures.

Another option is to amend existing legislation to cover a broader range of potentially invasive organisms. The list of species banned under trade regulations for wildlife could also be extended.

The last option is to develop a new legal framework for tackling invasive species with independent procedures for assessment and intervention. A dedicated agency could also be set up to deal with technical aspects. Mandatory monitoring and reporting procedures and rapid response mechanisms could also be established.

Next steps

Feedback from stakeholders and other EU institutions will be taken into account by the Commission in finalising its proposal for an EU strategy which it intends to bring forward in 2010.

For more details visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/invasivealien/index_en.htm

<http://www.tvlink.org/home.cfm?dg=env>