



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL
ENVIRONMENT

The Director-General

Brussels,
ENV/D3/FV/tt

Mr Juris Jātnieks
Chairman
Environmental Advisory Council

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Dear Mr Jātnieks,

Thank you for your letter of 26 January 2022, about the Latvian authorities' intention to remove approximately 300 rewilded "Tauros cattle" from several Natura 2000 sites in Latvia, descendants of bovine herds that had been released into these sites 20 years ago. Vice-President Timmermans asked me to reply to your letter on his behalf.

As you may know, the provisions of the EU Animal health law (Regulation (EU) 2016/429) apply to all bovine animals, irrespective of whether they are defined as kept or wild animals. However, in the context of that Regulation, supplemented by Delegated Regulation (EU) 2019/2035 and Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/520, stricter provisions apply to kept bovine animals: these shall be individually identified by two means of identification before they are 20 days old, and registered in the central database run by the competent authorities. By way of derogation, the Member States may authorise the operators to extend the maximum time period for identifying calves up to 9 months, under certain conditions. As long as the bovine animals are kept, the Animal health law does not provide for further derogations in this regard.

In addition to the rules for identification and registration of the kept bovines, the Animal health law provides for surveillance activities to ensure the animal health status for listed diseases, some of them of zoonotic nature. This includes testing procedures at regular intervals in all establishments¹ where bovine animals are kept.

¹ Establishment means: any premises, structure or, in the case of open air farming, any environment or place, where animals or germinal products are kept, on a temporary or permanent basis, except for households and veterinary practices and clinics (Regulation (EU) 2016/429, Article 4(24)).

It is for the Latvian competent authorities to determine whether the Tauros herds as described in your letter fall under the definition of “kept animals” or whether they can be considered as “wild”. Given that the definitions for wild and kept animals in the Animal Health law provide some margin of discretion to the Member States, we would expect that it is applied in a way that reconciles animal health and broader environmental goals.

From your letter, I have taken note of the fact that the decision taken 20 years ago to introduce these animals was aimed at restoring protected natural grassland habitats of EU Importance under the Habitats Directive in the concerned Natura 2000 sites. In case the announced removal of the rewilded bovine herds risked leading to a deterioration of protected habitats/species in the sites, it would require an appropriate assessment in view of the sites’ conservation objectives. In case the assessment confirmed a deterioration risk, the removal should not be authorised unless the exceptional circumstances provided for in Article 6 of the Habitats directive were demonstrated.

I would therefore advise you to draw the attention of the Latvian authorities to the legal provisions in Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, so as to ensure that any decision they take is fully in line with EU legislation, the objectives of the Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

Yours sincerely,

e-signed

Florika FINK-HOOIJER