

Austria's support gets EU biodiversity law over the line

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Austria's environment minister, Leonore Gewessler, went against her government's chancellor, Karl Nehammer, to support the nature restoration law.

EU member countries on Monday gave final approval to a key biodiversity measure, a bloc-wide nature restoration law, after Austria's

climate minister defied her chancellor to back it.

The about-face by the minister, Leonore Gewessler, gave the law the majority support it needed to be adopted, confirmed Belgium, which holds the rotating EU presidency.

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer declared her decision "unlawful".

The law is a central part of the EU's ambitious environmental goals under its Green Deal, which aims to have the bloc become carbon-neutral by 2050, and ecological groups hailed its definitive adoption.

Belgium issued a statement saying EU environment ministers had validated the law, which had already received European Parliament assent in February.

The approval means protecting EU "biodiversity and the living environment of European citizens," said Alain Maron, environment minister for the Brussels region, who chaired the meeting.

"It is our duty to respond to the urgency of the collapse of biodiversity in Europe, but also to enable the European Union to meet its international commitments," he said.

The legislation requires the European Union's 27 member states to put in place measures to restore at least 20 percent of the bloc's land and seas by 2030.

It focuses particularly on tracts with the most potential to capture and store carbon and to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters.

Its passage has sparked anger from some farmers' groups who warn it will threaten their livelihoods and add to what they say is excessive

regulation at a time of heightened competition from importers outside the bloc.

The conservative European People's Party—the main grouping in the European Parliament which emerged strengthened from EU elections just over a week ago—had echoed the farmers' complaints and called the law badly drafted.

But after the parliament passed it 329 votes to 275, it was Austria that remained the final obstacle, preventing a weighted majority of EU member states signing off on it.

Vienna had threatened [legal action](#) against the law at the European Court of Justice.

Impasse broken

The impasse endured until Monday, when Gewessler, a member of the Greens party in Austria's ruling coalition, added her country's backing.

Nehammer, who belongs to the conservative Austrian People's Party partnered with the Greens in government, slammed his minister's move.

Ahead of Monday's vote, his office said it had "informed the Belgian Council Presidency (of the EU) that federal minister Gewessler's approval of EU renaturation would be unlawful".

The Brussels minister Maron said that was viewed as an "internal controversy in Austria" and he emphasized the vote was final.

Gewessler said her decision to support the bill was legal.

"I'm deeply convinced that today is the day for action... It's a decisive

day for nature and our planet in Europe," she told reporters before the vote.

Pro-environment groups welcomed the majority vote by EU member states.

Greenpeace called the law's adoption "a ray of hope for Europe's nature, future generations and the livelihoods of rural communities".

A coalition of organizations comprising WWF, ClientEarth, EEB and Birdlife Europe said, "Today's vote is a massive victory for Europe's nature and citizens who have been long calling for immediate action to tackle nature's alarming decline."

It said that, following "one of the most tumultuous journeys in the history of EU legislation... we are jubilant that this law is now reality—this day will go down in history as a turning point for nature and society".

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