

The Aggregates Industry & Natura 2000

KEY MESSAGES

UEPG supports the objectives of the Birds and Habitats Directives and is committed to contribute to Nature and Biodiversity conservation. UEPG Members are convinced that responsible aggregates production is compatible with a favourable conservation status of habitat types and species.

Aggregates extraction is not only compatible with biodiversity, but has the potential to create it. A number of Natura 2000 areas have been designated on former extraction sites, which demonstrates this.

UEPG welcomed very much the European Commission Natura 2000 Guidance for the Non-Energy Extractive Industry. We have witnessed a great variety of situations from one country – or one region – to another, leading to uncertainties for business. We believe that there is potential for improvement, in particular with Natura 2000, often considered as “no go areas” and how to deal with protected species on-site.

In the light of the better regulation policy, UEPG rather prefers a more flexible and proportionate implementation based on the European Commission Guidance for the Non-Energy Extractive Industry (NEEI) because we believe that the European Aggregates Industry operates sustainably and can make a net contribution to biodiversity.

In this respect, UEPG wishes to submit some points which would make the implementation more efficient and would take socioeconomic requirements more into account.

▶ **Take into account the need for quarries, sand and gravel pits**

At EU-level, the importance of the reliable longer-term supply of minerals and aggregates in the national and European economic contexts needs to be clearly recognised. Member States should be strongly encouraged to ensure the longer-term supply from national or local resources. The Raw Materials Strategy needs to be integrated into other policy areas, including environmental ones.

▶ **Take into consideration the concept of temporary activity**

The fact that extractive operations are only temporary is not sufficiently acknowledged. The obligation to restore the extraction site after operation could, in any case, guarantee the maintenance of a favourable conservation status of habitat types and species. Therefore, temporary activities should be considered specifically in the environmental impact assessment.

▶ **Adopt a more evolutionary approach towards biodiversity management**

Biodiversity protection can benefit from a more dynamic management. Although pits and quarries, by their very specificities, can be natural biodiversity havens, an ad-hoc management (e.g. Biodiversity Management Plans) helps by creating new habitats and attracting pioneer species. Concepts such as the Dutch “Temporary Nature” are relevant as they allow for both nature protection and economic development.

▶ **Harmonised interpretation of concepts**

Some challenges met with the implementation of the Birds and Habitats Directives come from an over-precautionary approach which could be partly solved by the clarification of some key concepts of the Directives, such as “imperative reasons of overriding public interest”, “significant effects” and “alternative solutions”.

National (or regional) interpretations, European Court rulings and European Guidance, have led to several interpretations and therefore discrepancies. Sectoral Guidance is helpful, but often disregarded, sometimes caused by a lack of resources of the competent authorities.

▶ **Innovative ways for a better implementation**

Some competent authorities may focus too much on the protection of individuals, while the important objective is the integrity of the population or of the habitat. One way to improve this would be to develop methodology/technical guidance on evaluation of impacts on the populations of a selected number of protected species, relevant to our industry (e.g. great crested newt) and develop practical documents for minimisation of these impacts so that favourable conservation status can be achieved. A policy level working group on ‘solutions’ to implementation barriers of the nature directives (EC/NGOs/Industry) might resolve several difficulties.

BACKGROUND

Aggregates are crushed rock, sand and gravel, used to construct Europe’s essential infrastructure including homes, roads, railways, schools and hospitals. Some 2.6 billion tonnes per year of aggregates are produced by 15,000 companies (the majority of which are SMEs) on 25,000 extraction sites, providing jobs for more than 200,000 direct and indirect employees. UEPG now represents national aggregates associations and producers in 29 European countries.

Good practices and best techniques are applied to manage biodiversity: more than 150 biodiversity cases studies available online (www.uepg.eu) demonstrate the compatibility of aggregates extraction, environmental protection and biodiversity management.

FACT & FIGURES

- ▶ In the extractive industry it can take up to 10-15 years to get a permit, or for example, 5-10 years just to extend the site for existing installations.
- ▶ The treatment of aggregates, which are inert materials, is mechanical.
- ▶ Aggregate operations are normally subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment and complex administrative processing: rehabilitation is planned in advance and there are financial guarantees if needed.