

Brussels, 5 May 2010

Environment: Commission asks Finland to protect its endangered native seals

The European Commission is sending a first formal notice to Finland on the lack of adequate protection of the Saimaa ringed seal, one of the world's most endangered seals. The Commission is concerned for the declining population of this endangered species. There is an urgent need to protect it. The Commission is working closely with the Finnish authorities in order to ensure the adequate protection and implementation of nature protection law.

Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik said: *"We know that Finland has been working hard to implement nature protection legislation and we welcome the progress that has been made. However urgent action is necessary to safeguard this important species and to preserve another example of Europe's rich and precious biodiversity."*

First notice to Finland over failure to protect endangered seals

The Commission is sending Finland a first written warning for failing to implement adequate measures to protect the threatened Saimaa Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida saimensis*). Numbers of this threatened freshwater subspecies, found only in the Saimaa lake system in south-eastern Finland, are declining and there are only around 260 individuals left today.

The Saimaa Ringed Seal is listed as a priority for conservation action under the Habitats Directive¹ which requires the designation of special areas of conservation and strict protection.

A number of sites have been designated under Natura 2000 – the EU's network of nature protection areas – and both mandatory and voluntary fishing restrictions are in place in and outside of these sites. However, potentially harmful fishing methods are still authorised and the restrictions are not in force across the whole of the Natura 2000 areas.

Fishing nets are widely used for leisure fishing. Gillnets have been shown to be a particular danger to seals. Despite the restrictions, there is evidence that numerous young and adult seals are caught and drown in these nets every year. The seals are also significantly disturbed, particularly during the breeding season, and breeding sites are not adequately protected.

The Commission considers that – while sustainable fishing is in principle fully compatible with the Habitats Directive - in this particular case the current system is not coherent and complete and better targeted measures are needed to safeguard this important native species. It is therefore sending Finland a first written warning.

¹Council Directive 92/43 EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna.

For current statistics on infringements in general, see:

http://ec.europa.eu/community_law/infringements/infringements_en.htm