

Analysis of the 2024-2029 EU institutional agenda priorities and its impacts for peatlands

On 1 December 2024, a new European Commission, led by re-elected President Ursula von der Leyen, began its second mandate to deliver the 2024-2029 work programme.

Introduction

The EU's priorities for each five-year cycle are set through a collaborative process involving EU leaders, national ministers, institutions, and political groups. The European Council's Strategic Agenda sets the framework for the European Commission's political guidelines, which shapes the policy direction for the term. Once adopted, these priorities are reflected in Annual Work Programmes, which turn priorities into legislative and non-legislative proposals for Parliament and the Council.

This briefing analyses the EU's 2024-2029 policy priorities, highlighting key differences from the previous mandate and their implications for peatlands. While sector-specific strategies are yet to be defined, this document highlights policies that will have an impact on peatlands in the new mandate.

EU priorities for 2024-2029

Setting the backdrop for the new mandate's priorities are the crises that have challenged the EU in recent years, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russian conflict, to the situation in the Middle East. The European Council has set out three pillars¹ to guide the work

of the EU institutions for the next five years, which are reflected in the European Commission priorities (fig 1.).² While the Commission's political guidelines feature seven priorities, there is notable convergence between the two agendas, with President von der Leyen highlighting three interconnected themes: prosperity, security, and democracy.³

Strategic Agenda	Priorities
A free and democratic Europe	1. A new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness
A strong and secure Europe	2. A new era for European defence and security
A prosperous and competitive Europe	3. Supporting people, strengthening our societies and our social model
	4. Sustaining our quality of life: Food security, water and nature
	5. Protecting our democracy, upholding our values
	6. A global Europe: leveraging our power and partnerships
	7. Delivering together and preparing our Union for the future

¹ [European Union priorities 2024-2029 - European Union](#)

² [Priorities 2024-2029 - European Commission](#)

³ [President von der Leyen on the next College of Commissioners](#)

At the core of the strategy lies the goal of enhancing Europe's competitiveness and resilience. The EU priorities focus on simplifying regulations, fostering innovation, and deepening the Single Market to bolster industrial self-reliance and support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Comparing 2024-2029 priorities to 2019 – 2024

The 2024-2029 agenda introduces notable shifts in the EU's priorities. For the first time, democracy is elevated as a top priority, with a strong emphasis on strengthening the rule of law as a daily responsibility. Reflecting the influence of recent crises and a shifting geopolitical landscape, external policies now deeply intertwine with internal strategies. Migration and internal security remain central, but with a broadened focus on addressing irregular migration alongside establishing legal pathways. Health, spurred by lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, also gains increased attention.

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Environmental and climate priorities

Environmental goals in the 2024-2029 agenda are increasingly integrated into a broader framework of economic competitiveness and industrial strategy. While the 2019-2024 agenda prioritised standalone initiatives like the European Green Deal, the new strategy points to a green and digital transformation, which are embedded within a competitive growth model.⁵

Key areas include advancing clean technologies, bioeconomy, and clean

mobility while fostering net-zero manufacturing and cross-border infrastructure for energy, water and transport.⁶

As it stands, ecological protection does not appear to be receiving the attention it deserves. The restoration and preservation of vital ecosystems, such as peatlands, is at risk of being sidelined in favor of prioritising economic competitiveness.

Implications for peatlands

The 2024-2029 agenda acknowledges the importance for climate adaptation and protecting natural ecosystems. However, it remains uncertain whether and how this will: a) be effectively integrated into the specific work plans of the Directorate-Generals, and b) translate into concrete actions for the protection and restoration of peatlands.

In presenting the political guidelines for the next Commission term, von der Leyen highlighted the intention to "support the competitiveness of the entire food value chain through investment and innovation on farms, cooperatives, in our agrifood businesses and many SMEs in the sector".⁷ She also announced the creation of a new EU Competitiveness Fund as part of a broader plan to enhance Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness, emphasising substantial investments in research and innovation as cornerstone of a "Clean Industrial Deal",

⁴ Drachenberg R, Baçal P., 2024, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: Continuity or paradigm change?*, EPRS, Post European Council Briefing, p. 4. Available at [*Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: Continuity or paradigm change?](#)

⁵ [Priorities of the European Union 2019-2024 | European Union \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶ Drachenberg R, Baçal P., 2024, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: Continuity or paradigm change?*, EPRS, Post European Council Briefing, p. 29. Available at [*Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: Continuity or paradigm change?](#)

⁷ [Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029](#) p. 21.

and a refined approach to competition policy.⁸

As such, the EU's priority on "Sustaining Quality of Life through Food Security, Water, and Nature" underscores the importance of resilient ecosystems, but frames environmental goals within the context of economic and agricultural strategies. It focuses on fostering competitive agricultural and blue economies, alongside protecting biodiversity and addressing climate challenges.⁹

This approach reflects a shift in how environmental protection is prioritised. The emphasis on economic competitiveness and industrial policy raises concerns about whether measures such as peatland protection and restoration will receive sufficient attention.

There is uncertainty about whether measures such as peatland protection and restoration will receive sufficient attention in the new mandate, particularly as the forthcoming Vision for Agriculture and Food—expected within 100 days of the new Commission's term—will likely draw heavily from the Strategic Dialogue on the future of Agriculture, where peatlands have been scarcely addressed. This makes it crucial to advocate for their recognition in relevant policy files as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post 2027, and leaves space to monitor the evolution of the Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming Certification Regulation, and the implementation of the Nature Restoration Law.

⁸ [Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029](#) p. 12.

⁹ [Quality of life - European Commission](#)

Conclusion

The analysis of the EU Commission's 2024-2029 priorities highlights a significant shift towards industrial growth, competitiveness, and resilience, with environmental protection taking a backseat. Although the strategic framework acknowledges the importance of natural ecosystems, the focus on economic and industrial goals raises concerns about the prioritisation of environmental issues, including the protection of peatlands. The decline in environmental focus undermines optimism for meaningful progress in ecosystem conservation and management. Alongside waiting and hoping for something coming from Directorate-Generals plans, it will be crucial to closely monitor key policy developments, such as the post-2027 CAP, the implementation of the Nature Restoration Law, and the Carbon Removals and Carbon Farming Certification Regulation. Persistent advocacy for the inclusion of peatland protection and restoration in these frameworks will be essential to ensuring the long-term ecological and climate benefits of peatlands are recognized and integrated into Europe's broader sustainability agenda.

Peatlands, despite covering only 3% of the Earth's surface, store vast amounts of carbon more effectively and for longer periods than any other terrestrial ecosystem, making them critical allies in global climate regulation. Beyond carbon storage, they play a vital role in the water cycle, enhancing water quality and mitigating droughts while supporting unique biodiversity, including rare and endangered species. However, when drained or degraded, peatlands shift from being carbon sinks to significant sources of GHGs, contributing disproportionately to environmental degradation per unit of land area. As such, their protection and restoration are essentials for achieving climate goals.

Sources

- Drachenberg R, Baçal P, 2024, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: Continuity or paradigm change?*, EPRS, Post European Council Briefing, p. 4. Available at [*Strategic Agenda 2024-2029: Continuity or paradigm change?](#)
- [European Union priorities 2024-2029 - European Union](#)
- [Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029](#)
- [President von der Leyen on the next College of Commissioners](#)
- [Priorities of the European Union 2019-2024 | European Union \(europa.eu\)](#)
- [Priorities 2024-2029 - European Commission](#)
- [Quality of life - European Commission](#)

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