

Avoiding the death of LIFE

Why Europe's flagship environmental programme must remain part of the next EU budget



Photo: Canva

Introduction

The LIFE programme, a proven and effective resource for financing biodiversity, is widely regarded as one of the EU's best performing funds. Despite its importance, however, it risks being scrapped in the next EU budget. This would effectively remove the only fund dedicated to biodiversity in Europe.

Although the programme also provides financing for non-governmental organisations in the form of operational grants, this paper focuses exclusively on how the programme is used to finance environmental and climate-related activities.

LIFE has allocated more than EUR 3.4 billion in funding since 1992, supporting over 5,500 projects across various environmental sectors.¹ Figures from the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework reveal the allocations:

¹ Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission, [Programme for the Environment and Climate Action \(LIFE\)](#), *EU Funding and Tenders Portal*, accessed 10 February 2025.

For more information

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- EUR 2.15 billion for nature and biodiversity;
- EUR 1.35 billion for the circular economy;
- EUR 0.95 billion for climate mitigation and adaptation; and
- EUR 1 billion for the clean energy transition.²

Although these figures may seem substantial, they pale in comparison to the EUR 386.6 billion budget allocated to the Common Agricultural Policy in the same period. This makes LIFE one of the smallest EU programmes. Simply put, the Common Agricultural Policy accounts for around 30 per cent of the EU's total budget, whereas LIFE receives just 0.5 per cent.

Background

The LIFE programme is the only EU fund dedicated exclusively to financing climate and environmental activities. The programme is split into two main priorities: the environment, representing 75 per cent of the financial envelope, and climate action, representing 25 per cent. Each of these priorities consists of two sub-programmes, one being nature and biodiversity.

One of the main strengths of the programme is its highly targeted focus on the environment. Unlike other funding programmes, such as the cohesion policy or the Common Agriculture Policy, which integrate biodiversity funding into other thematic policy areas, LIFE has a narrow scope, meaning it directly finances the actions most needed to address biodiversity loss. It therefore avoids the sectoral competition and conflict for funding typical of other funding streams.

Why LIFE must continue and expand

LIFE is widely regarded as Europe's most successful programme for financing environmental projects, specifically those focused on nature and biodiversity. The following factors can be attributed to its success:

- **Efficient governance**

LIFE is one of the rare programmes under direct management (different to indirect or shared management). This means that the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA) – the body responsible for overseeing the fund – deals directly with project applicants in a centralised way without the need for Member State intermediaries.

Despite the challenge of dealing with these applications, the projects tend to be of higher quality, since they are protected from political influence and fall under expert supervision. Support is provided through grants, tenders and technical assistance.

² Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission, [Programme for the Environment and Climate Action \(LIFE\)](#), *European Commission*, accessed 10 February 2025.

- **Targeted funding in direct alignment with nature conservation needs and priorities**

LIFE is exclusively dedicated to environmental investments, which ensures there is no competition between different priorities. For example, LIFE often directly aligns with the measures outlined in Member States' prioritised action frameworks, which are crucial for the successful management of Natura 2000 sites and, more broadly, the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

As a highly targeted fund, LIFE is also more efficient at absorbing resources. And unlike other programmes that fund broad research or infrastructure, LIFE focuses on delivering practical, on-the-ground results that directly support regulatory frameworks.

- **No competition or conflict with other sectors for funding**

Other integrated financing approaches often lead to competition between and across sectors, such as agriculture, transport and water. In the case of cohesion policy, for example, biodiversity is typically overlooked, losing out due to competition with other sectors.

The EU's nearly EUR 800 billion recovery package was a major opportunity to finally support biodiversity and place it high on the agenda for Europe's recovery. However, it failed to do so. In fact, it has almost entirely neglected biodiversity and underachieved on its objectives, as was the case with the EU's 2020 target of halting biodiversity loss and restoring degraded ecosystem services. The LIFE programme avoids this pitfall by establishing a clear and defined financial scope, focusing only on the environment and climate.

- **Highly innovative and effective project financing**

Unlike many top-down funding mechanisms, LIFE provides flexibility to test new governance and conservation methods, encouraging experimentation and adaptive management. These strategies are often developed in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders representing many different interests, such as local authorities, organisations, academic institutions and citizens' initiatives. It also allows new knowledge, expertise and approaches to be developed in a multidisciplinary manner.

In light of the Nature Restoration Regulation, LIFE should be seen as a frontrunner in providing proven, successful approaches, and currently represents the most substantive database for cost indications. Therefore, LIFE can – and should – be regarded as the primary reference point for replicable best practices that can be transferred and applied to other funding streams. These results can also serve as small-scale pilot projects suitable for expansion into larger initiatives.

- **Strong focus on monitoring, reporting and evaluation**

The outcomes of LIFE-funded projects are subject to in-depth monitoring and evaluation. This is important for a variety of reasons, such as identifying whether projects are effective in achieving their objectives and evaluating which of these successes can be replicated in other geographic areas and funding streams, thus informing future EU policymaking.

Success of LIFE at the national level

The LIFE programme has proven its worth across the EU, financing an ever-growing catalogue of ambitious and innovative nature restoration and conservation projects. Numerous projects have been implemented throughout Bankwatch's countries of operation, including Croatia, Hungary, Estonia and Poland.

In Croatia, 21 nature and biodiversity projects have so far received funding from the LIFE programme, with a total budget of just under EUR 24.6 million. These projects are focused on wetland and forest restoration, management of invasive species, and conservation of protected habitat and species, such as vultures, other birds and large carnivores.

Hungary has implemented 85 LIFE-funded projects, 44 of which cover biodiversity, with a particular focus on grassland restoration. In Latvia, the programme has co-financed more than 69 projects since its launch in 2001. Of these, 35 projects focus on the protection of nature and biodiversity, including species-rich grasslands. Poland has implemented 69 projects, largely focusing on managing and protecting Natura 2000 sites. Lastly, Estonia has implemented 26 LIFE projects, totalling EUR 57.5 million. These include schemes focused on improving farming and forestry that adopt more ecologically sensitive and innovative approaches.

Resources

- [LIFE Public Database](#)
- [Winners of the Natura 2000 Award](#)



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