



NELUKE DE WEEDE

Amplifying land access

Rewilding Europe is ambitious when it comes to demonstrating rewilding at scale. By boosting access to land, our new Rewilding Land Facility will help us to realise that ambition.

Transforming land for nature and people

Across the world, farmland is transitioning as people living in the countryside migrate to urban areas, agricultural economies evolve, and traditional small-scale farming becomes less viable. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Europe, where rural depopulation could see over 56 million hectares of European farmland transition out of agricultural use by 2030, according to recent studies. This trend is particularly relevant for more marginal agricultural land, such as mountain slopes, rocky areas, steppe, floodplains, and other places where farming is especially challenging.

There are wide-ranging opportunities to rewild diverse landscapes at scale across Europe – not only in areas where land use is evolving away from agriculture, but also within many protected areas that encompass huge swathes of

land and water. Where these changes intersect with agricultural land, the focus is not on removing land from productive use, but supporting a shift in land management where traditional farming is no longer viable. In such places, rewilding can help regenerate ecosystems and support new forms of sustainable land stewardship that align with local socio-economic needs. This opens the door to large-scale restoration that works with natural processes, fostering resilient landscapes that provide meaningful benefits for people and nature.

For Rewilding Europe, accessing land at scale is critical, enabling us to demonstrate how nature recovery can deliver such benefits. It allows us to carry out a whole range of interventions – from rewilding forests and rivers, supporting wildlife comeback, and enhancing natural grazing, to rewetting peat-



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lands, restoring steppe vegetation, and removing obsolete infrastructure. This, in turn, helps us to inspire other land managers and landowners to follow our rewilding approach.

A strategic leap forward

Rewilding Europe's ambition is to reach 500,000 hectares of land and water under direct rewilding management across 15 rewilding landscapes by 2030. At the end of 2024, Rewilding Europe and our landscape partners had just under 65,000 hectares of land under such management, a more than three-fold increase over 2018.

Complementing this growth, we are also expanding the area of land where rewilding is happening in one form or another – within and outside our landscapes – through partnerships with landowners and land managers. This "land under rewilding influence" covered just over 811,000 hectares by the end of 2024, representing a 27% increase over 2023. Our ambition is to reach at least 1 million hectares by 2030.

Despite the significant progress we are making, there is a clear need to scale up and accelerate our access to land. To meet this challenge, Rewilding Europe will officially launch its "Rewilding Europe Land Facility" in 2025. Within the facility is a ring-fenced pool of capital – called the "Land Fund" – through which grants will be disbursed. These will enable local rewilding entities to access different types of land or user rights, from concessions and long-term leases to direct land ownership.

"Rewilding Europe is developing a lot of great rewilding showcases within our landscapes at grassroots level, but these are still small when you look at the bigger picture," says Rewilding Europe's Head of Wilder Nature, Carolina Soto-



Carolina Soto-Navarro.

Navarro. "We need access to larger scale areas. This means we need to be able to respond to opportunities that come up across our landscapes – such as the acquisition of management rights to a grazing or hunting concession, for example – in a flexible, rapid, and contextual way. The Rewilding Land Facility will help us do this."

Towards diverse ownership

Rewilding Europe's local partners – the landscape rewilding entities – always take the lead in rewilding land that is under their concession, lease, management responsibility, or ownership. The

Rewilding Land Facility will give them a stronger role in and control over their own rewilding goals, supporting the long-term growth of rewilding and nature-based economies within each landscape.

Carolina Soto-Navarro is keen to stress that the facility is not about prioritising the actual buying of land, but other types of management rights or ownership such as concessions, stewardship, and easements, which allow us to rewild the land without necessarily taking possession of it.

"To rewild at scale we want to access land via a patchwork model," she explains. "Land in Europe is typically very expensive, so purchasing it offers a very low return on investment in terms of scaling up rewilding. Owning land can also bring a lot of additional costs. Our aim is to access land through a multi-pathway approach, with the common goal of restoring landscapes for wildlife and people."

Quick thinking

Applications to the Rewilding Land Facility must demonstrate that accessing and rewilding the land in question will deliver significant positive impact for both the landscape and its communities, and that any land or building acquired will not become a major liability. The committee that oversees the fund evaluates and approves Land Fund grants within a very short space of time.



STAFFAN WIDSTRAND

"One of the challenges we have in terms of land access is reacting quickly to opportunities, so this agile set-up is critical," explains Carolina Soto-Navarro. "Having readily available and sizeable initial investment really helps with negotiations. Instead of acquiring grazing rights for three or four years, for example, we may be able to acquire them for 10 or 20 years."

Enhancing the value of land

Rural depopulation can lead to a range of challenges. Local economies decline and jobs become scarcer. Schools, shops and hospitals are forced to close. Cultural heritage is eroded. As land transitions and livestock disappears from the landscape, so a lack of grazing leads to encroachment by shrubs and other combustible vegetation. This not only lowers biodiversity, but heightens the risk of catastrophic wildfire outbreaks, which are becoming increasingly common in Europe's Mediterranean regions as our climate heats up.

In the face of these challenges, rewilding offers a game-changing opportunity to transform transitioning farmland into landscapes that are home to thriving wilder nature, where the revitalisation of natural processes such as natural grazing and the free flow of water enhance biodiversity and climate resilience.

Of equal importance, the rewilding of transitioning farmland can create new socio-economic value, changing the narrative for local communities and



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enabling people and nature to thrive together. Today, across Europe, Rewilding Europe and its partners are working to show how nature recovery, enabled by rewilding, can generate new business opportunities, jobs and income, enabling people to stay in and return to the landscape.

Scaling up rewilding successfully not only relies on acquiring more land, but transforming how it is managed by current landowners. Rewilding Europe is committed to working in partnership with local actors, supporting context-specific solutions that empower communities, while creating more space for wilder nature. This bottom-up, collaborative approach is central to achieving systemic change across European landscapes.

Essential intervention

In areas where intensive human influence has shaped the land for centuries, "passive rewilding" – leaving land to

evolve on its own – is often insufficient. Without early-stage interventions to establish the conditions for ecosystems to regenerate naturally, areas of transitioning farmland can develop into monotonous landscapes dominated by dense forest and scrub, leading to further biodiversity decline. Active rewilding is essential in these cases to help such areas move towards diverse, dynamic, self-sustaining ecosystems, enhancing both their ecological and socio-economic value.

Portugal's Greater Côa Valley, which is characterised by rural depopulation, is a case in point. Here the Rewilding Portugal team are reintroducing wild and semi-wild herbivores, with natural grazing by animals such as horses and Tauros helping to boost biodiversity and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The comeback of wildlife is also supporting the development of nature-based tourism and helping the Wild Côa Network – a rewilding-aligned association of more than 40 local enterprises created by Rewilding Portugal – to prosper.

Encouraging progress

Thanks to generous contributions from a growing number of donors, Rewilding Europe has so far raised 7.4 million euros for the Land Fund. Grants have already been disbursed to a number of landscape teams, boosting their access to land.

In the Iberian Highlands rewilding landscape in Spain, a 380,000-euro grant enabled the team to purchase a 190-hectare property called Cañada de las Pegueras in late 2024.

"This is an important piece of land because it contains the source of the Júcar River, one of the most important rivers in Spain," explains Rewilding Spain team leader Pablo Schapira.

"We will rewild the property, increase forest maturity, improve public access, and ensure that this source remains protected."

Moving forwards, Rewilding Spain's approach to scaling up access to land exemplifies the thinking behind the Rewilding Land Facility.

"Around 60% of the land in the Iberian Highlands is public, so we are concentrating our efforts on landowners such as municipalities and the provincial government," explains Pablo



Schapira. "In 2025, supported by the Rewilding Land Facility, we are switching our focus from securing five-year grazing rights to securing management rights for concessions over 10 or even 20-year timescales."

Critical purchases

While the main focus of the Rewilding Land Facility is to move away from direct property purchases, all the land purchased to date has been critical in terms of advancing rewilding efforts. In addition to Cañada de las Pegueras, Land Fund grants disbursed in 2024 enabled the Rewilding Rhodopes in Bulgaria to purchase land containing a souslik colony, and the Rewilding Apennines team to purchase land that contained an important source of white-clawed crayfish, which they are breeding and releasing in local rivers.

The largest and most exciting land purchase enabled by the Rewilding Land Facility to date has been Ultima Frontiera, a 766-hectare former fish farm concession located in the Romanian part of the Danube Delta rewilding landscape. The site, which hosts a stunning array of wildlife species – including white-tailed eagles, white and Dal-

matian pelicans, wildcats, and golden jackals – has more recently been used for wildlife photography, with a hotel and multiple hides. Moving forwards, the concession will be transformed through various rewilding measures, supporting wetland restoration and natural wildlife comeback.

"Grants from the Land Fund enabled Rewilding Romania to purchase the property and have also enabled ongoing repairs to the existing hotel that is part of the concession," explains Johannes Schreuder, Rewilding Europe's Head of Nature for People. "The main revenue driver here is sustainable tourism, so we need to ensure we invest in making the hotel and concession area an even more attractive place for tourists. Being

able to generate income from our land under management, from tourism or nature-related credits, for example, is essential for creating a financially sustainable outlook."

Taking rewilding to the next level

Looking to the future, Carolina Soto-Navarro is optimistic about the prospect of scaling up land access, with the Rewilding Land Facility playing a driving role.

"As one of Rewilding Europe's key objectives, accessing land is a challenge, but I'm confident we can take things to the next level. There are fantastic opportunities out there – particularly with the amount of transitioning farmland in Europe. We just need to be innovative, proactive, and reactive.

"This is a bold new phase for Rewilding Europe – moving beyond our pilot stage to really rewild at scale, in partnership with our dedicated landscape teams. By boosting access to land and changing the way it is managed in collaboration with local stakeholders, the Rewilding Land Facility will act as a powerful mechanism for amplifying the benefits rewilding delivers to people and nature."



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