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MEDIA RELEASE

0% set-a-side is environmental sabotage

BirdLife alarmed by Member States suggestion for Agriculture Council

Proposals put forward by Sweden to lower the set-a-side rate to 0%, due to be considered by the Agriculture Council on Monday 16 July, are premature, dangerous and should be resisted. BirdLife International is calling on the Ministers of Agriculture to retain set-a-side for at least one year until it can be replaced by another mechanism to keep its environmental benefits for Europe's wildlife.

Konstantin Kreiser, EU Policy Manager at BirdLife's Brussels office said "This is a test of Europe's commitment to its target for halting the decline of biodiversity by 2010. We are not arguing for set-a-side to be retained indefinitely. But to abort a measure which delivers so much for our rural environment with no notice, and no consideration of ways to retain the benefits, would be environmental sabotage

Set-a-side must continue for one more year and the 2008 Health Check of the CAP should be used to identify replacement measures which will retain its environmental benefits, before it can safely be phased out." Kreiser adds.

Set-a-side entitlements, derived from the compensation payments paid to farmers for taking land out of production, are now part of the Single Farm Payment. As part of the requirements for receiving their subsidy, most farmers need to set aside 8% of their arable land this year. With a total subsidy budget of Euro 40 billion across the EU 27 this year, set-aside can be linked to 3.2 billion Euros.

According to BirdLife Information several Member States, in particular Sweden, are pushing to free farmers from this set-a-side obligation, while continuing to pay them the same amount of subsidies as before.

Head of Agriculture Policy at the RSPB (BirdLife UK) Gareth Morgan said "Under these proposals, farmers will retain their Single Farm Payment set-a-side entitlements but will not be required to deliver anything to compensate for the environmental

loss. This is money for nothing and will damage the credibility of the CAP as well as damaging nature.”

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Notes for Editors:

The history of Set-Aside:

Set-a-side was introduced in 1992 with the aim of taking land out of production to reduce the EU's infamous grain mountains.

Recent changes to the way subsidies are paid to Europe's farmers now seem to have made set-a-side redundant and it is likely to be abolished during the forthcoming CAP Health Check in 2008/09.

The move proved an accidental boon to wildlife, including many birds, by providing a source of food in the winter and somewhere to nest free from disturbance. Set-a-side has also been used to protect water quality by creating buffer strips along watercourses. Thus set-a-side became an important measure to compensate at least partly for environmental damage done by agricultural intensification.

Biodiversity benefits of set-a-side across the EU:

In the breeding season, set-a-side holds high densities of many bird species, compared to other arable land-use types and provides important nesting opportunities for species of high conservation concern.

- The French population of Little Bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*) for example is critically dependant on sympathetically managed set-a-side.
- Research conducted by BirdLife Austria suggests set-a-side to be the single most important factor determining the density of wintering raptors, the diversity of farmland birds and the densities of several threatened or declining species such as the Great Bustard or Grey Partridge.
- Set-Aside is thought to have been one of the contributing factors to the recent levelling out of farmland bird numbers in England following a long-term decline. Sparrows, finches, buntings and gamebirds, for example, have significantly higher abundances on set-a-side land than on winter cereals in England in the summer, and 80% of the linnet population in the East Anglia area of the UK winters on set-aside, compared to only 1% on winter cereals.