

For Immediate Release:

One million birds fly free – EU extends the temporary ban on wild bird trade

Conservation and animal welfare groups support the European Commission's decision yesterday (24 January) to extend the ban on commercial wild bird imports until 31 May 2006. The decision came in response to the re-emergence of avian influenza, H5N1, in Turkey and Asia. "By imposing a precautionary moratorium on the wild bird trade, the EU recognises the serious risks these imports pose to the health and livelihoods of all Europeans" **said Daniela Freyer from Pro Wildlife.**

Conditions in which wild birds are traded have been regularly found to support carriage of infectious diseases, providing a route by which diseases can circle the globe – a threat that national quarantine measures have proven inadequate to control.

The import of an average 1.7 million wild birds into the EU every year poses not only a serious disease risk, it has also created a conservation and animal welfare crisis. According to the CITES figures from the last 10 years, the EU imported 87% of the worldwide recorded trade in wild birds (8.8 million birds)¹. More than 240 non-governmental organisations from around the world have called on the European Union to permanently halt the import of wild birds.

"This decision is a prudent move to help combat the threat of avian flu. But it is also great news for the conservation of heavily traded species like the grey parrot. The import ban needs to be made permanent if wild birds are to be protected from over-exploitation" **said Duncan McNiven, Senior Investigations Officer for the RSPB.**

The wild bird trade threatens the survival of many species due to the sheer number of birds that are harvested for the EU. More than half of these birds die before arriving in markets, thus the EU is responsible for the capture of some 3.5 - 4 million wild birds every year. Current control measures such as the CITES and the EU's own wildlife trade regulations have failed to curb over-exploitation of wild bird populations for the European market. Until the Commission's decision in October, massive numbers of exotic birds were being imported for the pet trade, largely untracked and unregulated.

"Since October, the ban has already spared nearly a million wild birds" commented **Dr. Jamie Gilardi Director of the World Parrot Trust**, referring to the bird trade counter at www.birdsareforwatching.org. "Preventing hundreds of thousands of birds from entering European homes is not only a sound biosecurity measure, but we're also relieved to learn that there is no indication that recent trade measures have caused any increase of illegal smuggling as some have feared" added Dr. Gilardi.

A similar ban enacted in the United States in 1992 is estimated to have saved over 8.5 million birds that would have legally or illegally entered the U.S. market. **Carroll Muffett, Senior Director for International Conservation at Defenders of Wildlife** – an NGO instrumental in the passage of the WBCA – applauded the Commission's decision, "As we have found in the U.S., a permanent ban in the EU would close existing loopholes, simplify controls, and reduce illegal imports² in addition to protecting against threats to the public health."

Following an initial motion by Belgium in 2005 and pressures from national governments Environment Commissioner, Stavros Dimas, assured Environment Ministers at their regular December meeting that the Commission would review the trade as a matter of urgency. The permanent extension of this ban would bring the EU up to standards found in the US, Australia and New Zealand.

Editors notes:

1 CITES is the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (www.cites.org), their trade data are archived and accessible at the UN's World Conservation Monitoring Centre at (<http://www.unep-wcmc.org/>).

2 After the US Wild Bird Conservation Act was passed, poaching rates declined by over 50% in key species.

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High resolution photos for media use are available at

<http://www.birdsareforwatching.org/press/photos.html>

Defenders of Wildlife is a leading nonprofit conservation organization recognized as one of the nation's most progressive advocates for wildlife and its habitat. With more than 490,000 members and supporters, Defenders of Wildlife is an effective leader on endangered species issues.

World Parrot Trust is a UK based charity working around the globe for parrot conservation and welfare.

The International Fund for Animal Welfare works to improve the welfare of wild and domestic animals throughout the world by reducing commercial exploitation of animals, protecting wildlife habitats, and assisting animals in distress. IFAW seeks to motivate the public to prevent cruelty to animals and to promote animal welfare and conservation policies that advance the well-being of both animals and people.

LRBPO - Bird Protection Belgium, a large national animal welfare organization in Belgium founded in 1922, works to improve the protection of wild animals and birds in Europe and the conservation of their habitats through education, emergency rescue and promotion of policy changes for better conservation efforts

The Born Free Foundation is an international wildlife charity working with compassion to prevent cruelty, alleviate suffering and encourage everyone to treat all individual animals with respect. Born Free believes wildlife belongs in the wild and is dedicated to the conservation of rare species in their natural habitat, and the phasing out of traditional zoos.

Pro Wildlife is a non-profit organization in Germany committed to the protection of the world's wildlife from over-exploitation, habitat destruction and abuse.

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