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MEDIA BRIEFING: EU LEADERS' AGENDA PUTS PUBLIC HEALTH AND NATURE AT RISK



WWF, Friends of the Earth Europe and Grandparents for Climate in front of Alden Biesen's castle in Limburg, Belgium.

Why this briefing

On 12 February, all 27 EU leaders will gather for an informal retreat at the Castle of Alden Biesen in Belgium's Limburg region. Officially targeting competitiveness goals, the meeting is set to focus on accelerating the rollback of EU laws designed to protect nature, public health and communities across the bloc.

The talks follow a joint Italian-German position outlined last month and come amid an unprecedented attack on social and environmental legislation in the aftermath of the 2024 European elections. Policy-makers are now increasingly framing environmental protection as an [economic burden](#) rather than a public necessity for communities around the EU. **The impact of deregulation will be severe on EU citizens. From long-term health issues to higher insurance premiums and increased exposure to climate-related risks, it's people who will pay the price of laxer environmental laws.**



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A currently running European [citizens' petition](#) supported by environmental NGOs has gathered to date already 150,000+ signatures in just a week, showing that citizens are really worried about the weakening of environmental laws.

An intergenerational fight

Ahead of the leaders' retreat, [WWF EU](#), [Friends of the Earth Europe](#) and the European network of Grandparents for Climate (including [European Grandparents for Climate](#), [Grands-Parents pour le Climat](#) and [Grootouders voor het klimaat](#)) gathered in front of the retreat's location, in Limburg, Belgium, to protest Europe's reckless policy agenda. The organisations firmly reject deregulatory measures that sacrifice public health, social justice, and environmental safety for the convenience of polluting companies and their political allies. EU governments must put the well-being of citizens ahead of short-term economic gains and rise above corporate lobbying pressure by standing up for people and committing to protect nature and the environment.

"I am here because I want the political decisions that are taken today to protect a world where my grandchildren will be able to live with dignity, and have a bright future." said **Thérèse Snoy**, founding member of **Grands-Parents pour le Climat**.

"Due to increasing global warming, we are experiencing many periods of drought and there are already several villages where cracks are starting to appear in houses. So yes, these are developments that we don't like to see happening. And we would like Europe to take decisive measures to prevent this." said **Wim Aerts**, member of **Grootouders voor het Klimaat**.

"We need European leaders to protect and fight for funds and regulations that benefit people in the short-run and the long-run, rather than buy into the EU Commission's smokescreen of cutting existing programmes and legislations to redirect resources towards dirty industrial priorities. Most importantly, this retreat must be used to ensure that the Commission upholds its own democratic values of transparency and equity". said **Mute Schimpf**, campaigner at **Friends of the Earth Europe**.

Data & figures

Why citizens pay the cost of EU rules' rollback

Policy-makers claim that weakening environmental laws is about saving money and protecting Europe's economy. But the numbers tell a different story: a handful of powerful players will benefit, while the rest of society bears a huge cost.

Delays in environmental legislation cost Europe at least [€180 billion every year](#), driven by air and water pollution, waste and nature degradation. The postponement of the implementation of EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) in 2025 alone will cause [the loss of nearly 50 million trees](#), and the emission of 16.8 million tonnes of CO₂ in the atmosphere, equivalent to the annual emissions of more than [3.5 million gasoline-powered vehicles](#). Making sure governments



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respect EU laws would save at least 60 billion EUR every year: implementation is estimated to cost around €122 billion annually.

Evidence shows that the cost of inaction far outweighs the cost of implementing environmental rules. Protecting nature is crucial to mitigating the effects of climate change on our economy. Economic losses from climate change have quadrupled since 2006, as extreme weather events become more frequent and more severe across Europe. Only last year, droughts, floods, and forest fires across the union caused damages for a total of € [43 billion](#). According to a study by [economist Sigrid Stagl](#), climate inaction will cost Europe € 5.6 trillion by 2050 if current political trends persist. Rather than addressing these escalating risks, European institutions are delaying climate adaptation to protect the very industries responsible, at enormous costs for society.

*“Investing in nature is not a luxury; it is a high-yield economic strategy, yet EU leaders are turning away from laws that enhance public health and quality of life,” said **Sabien Leemans, Biodiversity Manager at WWF EU**. “Specifically, nature degradation and climate change should be treated as a public health emergency. One in 10 premature deaths in Europe are still linked to pollution”.*

The EU rollback agenda risks harming the health of citizens across the bloc. Today, [one in five Europeans](#) is vulnerable to natural disasters like wildfires, earthquakes, and floods. And chances of exposure are higher for vulnerable groups of people, including older people and children. The European Environment Agency reports that over the past 40 years, extreme weather events have caused up to [145,000 deaths in Europe](#), mostly from heat waves. Crucially, the majority of casualties are largely preventable.

The Demer Valley: a case study on the tangible returns of EU investments on nature

The EU leaders' retreat is taking place in the region of the Demer Valley, a natural reserve protected under [EU environmental law](#). The area, crossed by the Demer River, was once highly vulnerable to flooding, posing significant risks to surrounding communities.

According to [a study](#) by WWF Belgium, and conservation groups [Natagora](#) and [Natuurpunt](#), **every euro invested in the region has generated eight euros in economic returns**. EU investments in the Demer Valley region have so far prevented 1.19 million euros in flood damage, generated 743,000 euros in tourism revenue and boosted local property values.

The benefits for residents extend beyond economic considerations. Improved air and water quality and higher carbon storage have reduced pressure on local health systems, **cutting doctor visits and saving an estimated 40,000 euros in healthcare costs**, WWF-Belgium experts say.



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More about the political context

When the European Commission published its very first [Omnibus proposal](#) in February 2025, it became clear that EU policy-makers had begun pursuing full scale deregulation. The purpose of this obscure policy mechanism is to weaken, or in some cases kill altogether, sustainability directives holding companies accountable for the harm their business activities cause to nature, climate, and people.

Crucially, EU institutions approved the proposal without public consultation nor involvement of civil society and stakeholders. [The EU institutions watchdog](#) harshly criticised the Omnibus I, concluding it violates fundamental principles of good administration, including transparent, inclusive, and evidence-based law making.

There are now [10 known Omnibus proposals](#) on the table, constituting a direct threat to the safeguards we need to ensure a liveable planet to the next generations. These initiatives also signal the emergence of a political culture increasingly indifferent to the EU's democratic norms and principles. As a result, swathes of democratically approved environmental legislations are being delayed and watered down. Some might be abandoned altogether.

Timeline

2024

- 20 Feb — **Antwerp Declaration** | 73 industries demand a "European Industrial Deal" at first 'European Industry Summit'
- 18 July — **Re-election Ursula von der Leyen by the European Parliament** | Strong focus on competitiveness and re-industrialisation while upholding commitment to European Green Deal
- 1 Dec — **European Commission takes office** | Deregulation and industry demands take centre stage in five-year mandate ahead

2025

- 26 Feb – **European Commission launches Clean Industrial Deal**
- 26 Feb — **First Omnibus proposal sees light of day** | Commission proposal to weaken rules for corporate sustainability
- 20 Mar — **EU Leaders call for more simplification initiatives and burden reduction** | European Council conclusions refer to arbitrary burden reduction targets
- 27 Nov — **EU Ombudsman finds maladministration in how the EU Commission handled its first omnibus proposal** | Commission failed to respect its own rules on evidence-based law-making



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- 10 Dec — **Release of the environmental Omnibus proposal** | announcement by Commission to “stress test” biodiversity rules and revise the EU’s water rules
- 16 Dec — **Release of the food and feed Omnibus proposal** | Commission suggests weakening some of the EU’s most fundamental protections against pesticides that pollute our food, water, and nature.

2026

- 11 Feb — **Third European Industry Summit in Antwerp** | just a day ahead of a crucial meeting, EU leaders meet with EU business leaders
- 12 Feb — **EU leaders’ retreat** | Organised by European Council President Antonio Costa, to discuss competitiveness and further simplification initiatives

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More about [WWF EU](#) and [Friends of the Earth](#) work on Brussels’ deregulation agenda.