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JUDGMENT OF THE COURT (Seventh Chamber)

12 April 2018 (\*)

(Reference for a preliminary ruling — Environment — Directive 92/43/EEC — Conservation of natural habitats — Special areas of conservation — Article 6(3) — Screening in order to determine whether or not it is necessary to carry out an assessment of the implications, for a special area of conservation, of a plan or project — Measures that may be taken into account for that purpose)

In Case C-323/17,

REQUEST for a preliminary ruling under Article 267 TFEU from the High Court (Ireland), made by decision of 10 May 2017, received at the Court on 30 May 2017, in the proceedings

**People Over Wind,  
Peter Sweetman**

v

**Coillte Teoranta,**

THE COURT (Seventh Chamber),

composed of A. Rosas, President of the Chamber, C. Toader (Rapporteur) and E. Jarašiūnas, Judges,

Advocate General: J. Kokott,

Registrar: A. Calot Escobar,

having regard to the written procedure,

after considering the observations submitted on behalf of:

People Over Wind and Mr Sweetman, by O. Clarke, Solicitor, O. Collins, Barrister-at-Law, and J. Devlin, Senior Counsel,

Coillte Teoranta, by J. Conway, Solicitor, S. Murray, Barrister-at-Law, and D. McGrath, Senior Counsel, the European Commission, by C. Hermes and E. Manhaeve, acting as Agents,

having decided, after hearing the Advocate General, to proceed to judgment without an Opinion,

gives the following

### Judgment

This request for a preliminary ruling concerns the interpretation of Article 6(3) of Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (OJ 1992 L 206, p. 7; 'the Habitats Directive').

The request has been made in proceedings brought by People Over Wind, an environmental NGO, and by Peter Sweetman against Coillte Teoranta ('Coillte'), a company owned by the Irish State that operates in the forestry sector, relating to the works necessary to lay the cable connecting a wind farm to the electricity grid.

#### Legal context

##### EU law

The 10th recital of the Habitats Directive states:

'... an appropriate assessment must be made of any plan or programme likely to have a significant effect on the conservation objectives of a site which has been designated or is designated in future.'

Article 2 of the Habitats Directive provides:

'1. The aim of this Directive shall be to contribute towards ensuring bio-diversity through the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora in the European territory of the Member States to which the Treaty applies.

2. Measures taken pursuant to this Directive shall be designed to maintain or restore, at favourable conservation status, natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest.

3. Measures taken pursuant to this Directive shall take account of economic, social and cultural requirements and regional and local characteristics.'

Article 3(1) of the Habitats Directive is worded as follows:

'A coherent European ecological network of special areas of conservation shall be set up under the title Natura 2000. This network, composed of sites hosting the natural habitat types listed in Annex I and habitats of the species listed in Annex II, shall enable the natural habitat types and the species' habitats concerned to be maintained or, where appropriate, restored at a favourable conservation status in their natural range.

...'

Article 6 of the Habitats Directive states:

'1. For special areas of conservation, Member States shall establish the necessary conservation measures involving, if need be, appropriate management plans specifically designed for the sites or integrated into other development plans, and appropriate statutory, administrative or contractual measures which correspond to the ecological requirements of the natural habitat types in Annex I and the species in Annex II present on the sites.

2. Member States shall take appropriate steps to avoid, in the special areas of conservation, the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species as well as disturbance of the species for which the areas have been designated, in so far as such disturbance could be significant in relation to the objectives of this Directive.

3. Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site and subject to the provisions of paragraph 4, the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and, if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public.

4. If, in spite of a negative assessment of the implications for the site and in the absence of alternative solutions, a plan or project must nevertheless be carried out for imperative reasons of overriding public interest, including those of a social or economic nature, the Member State shall take all compensatory measures necessary to ensure that the overall coherence of Natura 2000 is protected. It shall inform the Commission of the compensatory measures adopted.

Where the site concerned hosts a priority natural habitat type and/or a priority species, the only considerations which may be raised are those relating to human health or public safety, to beneficial consequences of primary importance for the environment or, further to an opinion from the Commission, to other imperative reasons of overriding public interest.'

#### *Irish law*

The High Court (Ireland) explains that development consent is regulated by the Planning and Development Acts and regulations made thereunder. The competent authority is the local planning authority and an appeal lies to An Bord Pleanála (the Irish Planning Board).

Certain types of development are classified as 'exempted development' and, subject to certain exceptions, do not require consent under the Planning and Development Acts. Thus, an example of exempted development is 'the carrying out by any undertaker authorised to provide an electricity service of development consisting of the laying underground of mains, pipes, cables or other apparatus for the purposes of the undertaking'.

Nevertheless, 'exempted development' projects may be subject to other types of consent or a process of adoption. The European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 ('the 2011 Regulations') apply to projects other than developments requiring development consent within the meaning of the Planning and Development Acts. Furthermore, a development which comes within 'exempted development' must nevertheless be subject to consent under the Planning and Development Acts where appropriate assessment under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive is required.

Regulation 42 of the 2011 Regulations provides:

'1. A screening for Appropriate Assessment of a plan or project for which an application for consent is received, or which a public authority wishes to undertake or adopt, and which is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site as a European Site, shall be carried out by the public authority to assess, in view of best scientific knowledge and in view of the conservation objectives of the site, if that plan or project, individually or in combination with other plans or projects is likely to have a significant effect on the European site.

2. A public authority shall carry out a screening for Appropriate Assessment under paragraph (1) before consent for a plan or project is given, or a decision to undertake or adopt a plan or project is taken.

...

6. The public authority shall determine that an Appropriate Assessment of a plan or project is required where the plan or project is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site as a European Site and if it cannot be excluded, on the basis of objective scientific information following screening under this Regulation, that the plan or project, individually or in combination with other plans or projects, will have a significant effect on a European site.

7. The public authority shall determine that an Appropriate Assessment of a plan or project is not required where the plan or project is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site as a European Site and if it can be excluded on the basis of objective scientific information following screening under this Regulation, that the plan or project, individually or in combination with other plans or projects, will have a significant effect on a European site.'

#### **The dispute in the main proceedings and the question referred for a preliminary ruling**

The main proceedings relate to the assessment of the effects that the laying of the cable connecting a wind farm to the electricity grid potentially has on two special areas of conservation under the European ecological network Natura 2000, one of which is that of the River Barrow and River Nore (Ireland). That river constitutes a habitat for the Irish subspecies of the freshwater pearl mussel (*margaritifera durrovensis*; 'the Nore pearl mussel'), which is included in Annex II to the Habitats Directive. The extant

adult population of this pearl mussel is, according to the estimates mentioned by the referring court, as low as 300 individuals, having been as high as 20 000 individuals in 1991. The life span of each individual is said to be between 70 and 100 years, but the Nore pearl mussel is said not to have reproduced itself since 1970. According to the referring court, it is apparent from recent monitoring surveys that this species is threatened with extinction, on account of the high level of sedimentation of the bed of the River Nore, to which the species is particularly vulnerable, sedimentation which inhibits the successful restocking of the river by juveniles.

The consent required for developing the wind farm at issue in the main proceedings, with the exception of its connection to the grid, was dealt with in previous procedures. The consent granted by An Bord Pleanála in 2013 was subject to various conditions. Thus, according to condition 17 of that planning permission, 'the construction of the development shall be managed in accordance with a Construction Management Plan, which shall be submitted to, and agreed in writing with, the planning authority prior to commencement of development. This plan shall provide details of intended construction practice for the development, including ... (k) means to ensure that surface water run-off is controlled such that no silt or other pollutants enter watercourses ...'.

Following the grant of that permission, the developer addressed the question of connecting the wind farm concerned to the electricity grid by means of a cable. The dispute in the main proceedings concerns that connection.

The applicants in the main proceedings submit that river pollutants resulting from the laying of the connection cable, such as silt and sediment, will have a harmful effect on the Nore pearl mussel.

Coillte contends that the cable laying at issue in the main proceedings is 'exempted development' not requiring consent, within the meaning of the applicable national planning legislation. However, it accepts that, if the project were to require appropriate assessment of the environmental implications, planning permission would have to be obtained from the local planning authority.

In order to determine whether it was necessary to carry out such appropriate assessment, Coillte instructed consultants to conduct the examination ('screening').

The screening report drawn up by those consultants concluded, *inter alia*, as follows:

In the absence of protective measures, there is potential for the release of suspended solids into waterbodies along the proposed route, including directional drilling locations.

With regards to [the Nore pearl mussel], if the construction of the proposed cable works was to result in the release of silt or pollutants such as concrete into the pearl mussel population area of river through the pathway of smaller streams or rivers, there would be a negative impact on the pearl mussel population. Sedimentation of gravels can prevent sufficient water flow through the gravels, starving juvenile [Nore pearl mussels] of oxygen.'

It is apparent from the file before the Court that 'protective measures' were also analysed by that report.

Subsequently, on the basis of that report, the following recommendation was drawn up for Coillte by the 'programme manager':

'As set out in detail in the ... appropriate assessment screening report, on the basis of the findings of that report and in light of the best scientific knowledge, the grid connection works will not have a significant effect on the relevant European sites in light of the conservation objectives of the European sites, alone or in combination with the Cullenagh wind farm and other plans or projects, and an appropriate assessment is not required. This conclusion was reached on the basis of the distance between the proposed Cullenagh grid connection and the European sites, and the protective measures that have been built into the works design of the project.'

Adopting the above reasons and recommendation, Coillte, as a public authority referred to in Regulation 42 of the 2011 Regulations, determined that no appropriate assessment, within the meaning of Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive, was required in this instance.

The referring court considers that the decision that appropriate assessment was not required is based on the 'protective measures' referred to in the screening report. That court makes clear that the protective measures proposed and taken into account by the authors of that report are not as stringent as those required in condition 17(k) of the planning permission for the wind farm concerned.

In the light of the foregoing, the High Court decided to stay the proceedings and to refer the following question to the Court of Justice for a preliminary ruling:

'Whether, or in what circumstances, mitigation measures can be considered when carrying out screening for appropriate assessment under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive?'

#### **Consideration of the question referred**

First of all, it should be noted that Article 6 of the Habitats Directive imposes upon the Member States a series of specific obligations and procedures designed, as is clear from Article 2(2) of the directive, to maintain, or as the case may be restore, at a favourable conservation status natural habitats and, in particular, special areas of conservation (judgments of 11 April 2013, *Sweetman and Others*, C-258/11, EU:C:2013:220, paragraph 36 and the case-law cited, and of 21 July 2016, *Orleans and Others*, C-387/15 and C-388/15, EU:C:2016:583, paragraph 31).

According to the Court's case-law, the provisions of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive must be construed as a coherent whole in the light of the conservation objectives pursued by the directive. Indeed, Article 6(2) and Article 6(3) are designed to ensure the same level of protection of natural habitats and habitats of species, whilst Article 6(4) merely derogates from the second sentence of

Article 6(3) (see, to that effect, judgment of 14 January 2016, *Grüne Liga Sachsen and Others*, C-399/14, EU:C:2016:10, paragraph 52 and the case-law cited).

Thus, Article 6 of the Habitats Directive divides measures into three categories, namely conservation measures, preventive measures and compensatory measures, provided for in Article 6(1), (2) and (4) respectively. It is clear from the wording of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive that that provision contains no reference to any concept of 'mitigating measure' (see, to that effect, judgment of 21 July 2016, *Orleans and Others*, C-387/15 and C-388/15, EU:C:2016:583, paragraphs 57 and 58 and the case-law cited).

It follows that, as is apparent from the reasoning of the request for a preliminary ruling, that the measures which the referring court describes as 'mitigating measures', and which Coillte refers to as 'protective measures', should be understood as denoting measures that are intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of the envisaged project on the site concerned.

Thus, by its question, the referring court asks, in essence, whether Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive must be interpreted as meaning that, in order to determine whether or not it is necessary to carry out subsequently an appropriate assessment of a project's implications for a site concerned, it is possible, at the screening stage, to take account of the measures intended to avoid or reduce the project's harmful effects on that site.

The 10th recital of the Habitats Directive states that an appropriate assessment must be made of any plan or programme likely to have a significant effect on the conservation objectives of a site which has been designated or is designated in future. That recital finds expression in Article 6(3) of the directive, which provides inter alia that a plan or project likely to have a significant effect on the site concerned cannot be authorised without a prior assessment of its implications for that site (judgment of 7 September 2004, *Waddenvereniging and Vogelbeschermingsvereniging*, C-127/02, EU:C:2004:482, paragraph 22).

As the Court has pointed out, Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive refers to two stages. The first, envisaged in the provision's first sentence, requires the Member States to carry out an appropriate assessment of the implications for a protected site of a plan or project when there is a likelihood that the plan or project will have a significant effect on that site. The second stage, which is envisaged in the second sentence of Article 6(3) and occurs following the aforesaid appropriate assessment, allows such a plan or project to be authorised only if it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned, subject to the provisions of Article 6(4) of the directive (judgment of 21 July 2016, *Orleans and Others*, C-387/15 and C-388/15, EU:C:2016:583, paragraphs 44 and 46 and the case-law cited).

It should be added that Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive also integrates the precautionary principle and makes it possible to prevent in an effective manner adverse effects on the integrity of protected sites, resulting from the plans or projects envisaged. A less stringent authorisation criterion than that set out in that provision could not ensure as effectively the fulfilment of the objective of site protection intended under that provision (judgment of 26 April 2017, *Commission v Germany*, C-142/16, EU:C:2017:301, paragraph 40 and the case-law cited).

In the present instance, as the parties to the main proceedings and the Commission agree, the uncertainty of the referring court concerns only the screening stage. More specifically, the referring court asks whether measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of a plan or project on the site concerned can be taken into consideration at the screening stage, in order to determine whether it is necessary to carry out an appropriate assessment of the implications, for the site, of that plan or project.

Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive sets out clearly that the obligation to carry out an assessment is dependent on both of the following conditions being met: the plan or project in question must not be connected with or necessary to the management of the site, and it must be likely to have a significant effect on the site.

It is apparent from the file before the Court that the referring court considers the first of those conditions to be met.

As regards the second condition, it is settled case-law that Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive makes the requirement for an appropriate assessment of the implications of a plan or project conditional on there being a probability or a risk that the plan or project in question will have a significant effect on the site concerned. In the light, in particular, of the precautionary principle, such a risk exists if it cannot be excluded on the basis of objective information that the plan or project will have a significant effect on the site concerned (judgment of 26 May 2011, *Commission v Belgium*, C-538/09, EU:C:2011:349, paragraph 39 and the case-law cited). The assessment of that risk must be made in the light inter alia of the characteristics and specific environmental conditions of the site concerned by such a plan or project (see, to that effect, judgment of 21 July 2016, *Orleans and Others*, C-387/15 and C-388/15, EU:C:2016:583, paragraph 45 and the case-law cited).

As the applicants in the main proceedings and the Commission submit, the fact that, as the referring court has observed, measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of a plan or project on the site concerned are taken into consideration when determining whether it is necessary to carry out an appropriate assessment presupposes that it is likely that the site is affected significantly and that, consequently, such an assessment should be carried out.

That conclusion is supported by the fact that a full and precise analysis of the measures capable of avoiding or reducing any significant effects on the site concerned must be carried out not at the screening stage, but specifically at the stage of the appropriate assessment.

Taking account of such measures at the screening stage would be liable to compromise the practical effect of the Habitats Directive in general, and the assessment stage in particular, as the latter stage would be deprived of its purpose and there would be a risk of circumvention of that stage, which constitutes, however, an essential safeguard provided for by the directive.

In that regard, the Court's case-law emphasises the fact that the assessment carried out under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive may not have lacunae and must contain complete, precise and definitive findings and conclusions capable of removing all reasonable scientific doubt as to the effects of the proposed works on the protected site concerned (judgment of 21 July 2016, *Orleans and Others*, C-387/15 and C-388/15, EU:C:2016:583, paragraph 50 and the case-law cited).

It is, moreover, from Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive that persons such as the applicants in the main proceedings derive in particular a right to participate in a procedure for the adoption of a decision relating to an application for authorisation of a plan or project likely to have a significant effect on the environment (see, to that effect, judgment of 8 November 2016, *Lesoochranárske zoskupenie VLK*, C-243/15, EU:C:2016:838, paragraph 49).

In the light of all the foregoing considerations, the answer to the question referred is that Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive must be interpreted as meaning that, in order to determine whether it is necessary to carry out, subsequently, an appropriate assessment of the implications, for a site concerned, of a plan or project, it is not appropriate, at the screening stage, to take account of the measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of the plan or project on that site.

#### **Costs**

Since these proceedings are, for the parties to the main proceedings, a step in the action pending before the national court, the decision on costs is a matter for that court. Costs incurred in submitting observations to the Court, other than the costs of those parties, are not recoverable.

On those grounds, the Court (Seventh Chamber) hereby rules:

**Article 6(3) of Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora must be interpreted as meaning that, in order to determine whether it is necessary to carry out, subsequently, an appropriate assessment of the implications, for a site concerned, of a plan or project, it is not appropriate, at the screening stage, to take account of the measures intended to avoid or reduce the**

#### **harmful effects of the plan or project on that site.**

Rosas Toader Jarašiūnas

Delivered in open court in Luxembourg on 12 April 2018.

A. Calot Escobar A. Rosas

Registrar President of the Seventh Chamber

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\* Language of the case: English.