

Policy brief for Decision-Makers in North Savo

This policy brief has been prepared by the University of Eastern Finland and the Priodiversity LIFE project of the Economic Development Centre of Eastern Finland together with the North Savo network of nature stakeholders.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Human well-being depends entirely on nature. However, biodiversity in North Savo is in decline.**
- **Urgent action is needed to strengthen nature conservation, restore habitats and improve ecological connectivity across the region.**
- **Regional programmes play an increasingly important role in guiding development, as they must integrate biodiversity, sustainable land use and vitality.**
- **North Savo needs strong cooperation, expertise, actors and clear strategic and political leadership that respects biodiversity in the efforts to build a carbon-neutral and nature-rich region.**
- **Nature in North Savo can only be protected through actions taken within the region.**
- **Biodiversity also has intrinsic value, entirely independent of its benefits to people.**

We are fortunate to live in the blue-green region of North Savo. However, planetary boundaries also affect our province. The climate is changing, nature is declining and becoming more chemicalised, and biogeochemical changes and land use are shaping the environment. At the same time, diverse nature is essential for primary production, the economy, people's well-being, and overall security.

The North Savo network of nature actors is a growing community established through the Priodiversity LIFE project. It aims to integrate consideration of nature into regional activities and promote nature-positive development. This policy brief has been prepared in collaboration following the network's second meeting.

EFFECTIVE AND WIDE-RANGING IMPLEMENTATION OF REGIONAL PROGRAMMES

The state of nature in North Savo is characterised by declining biodiversity and many habitats in the region have been altered by human activities and changes in land use, particularly construction, drainage, and forestry. At the same time, active efforts are underway to improve the state of nature through restoration and conservation projects, as well as regional programmes (the LUMO Programme, the North Savo Regional Forest Programme 2026–2030,

and the Climate Programme). The effective and wide-ranging implementation of these programmes across the region is essential for the shared well-being of both people and nature.

The regional LUMO Programme brings together information, objectives and measures to halt biodiversity loss and reverse the trend in the region. It is prepared in cooperation with key regional stakeholders during 2025–2027 and

is based on voluntary participation. The programme identifies biodiversity clusters in the region, with a particular focus on increasing voluntary conservation as well as restoration and management measures both within and outside protected areas. Regional land use planning must be aligned with the biodiversity clusters and ecological connections identified in the LUMO Programme, and no new land use allocations that fragment these areas should be introduced.

The North Savo Regional Forest Programme 2026–2030 has been developed through broad stakeholder cooperation and supports the objectives of the National Forest Strategy (KMS2035) at the regional level. Its key vision for 2030 is: *“Forests in North Savo are diverse, strengthen climate resilience, and are sustainably managed.”* The programme will move from preparation to implementation in spring 2026.

The Savo Climate Programme aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, support adaptation to climate change and promote climate-friendly business opportunities and the sustainable use of natural resources. The region’s particular strengths lie in its expertise in renewable energy, bioenergy, and climate technology.

These three regional programmes have been developed in coordination and are designed to support one another. The same cooperative approach should be maintained during their implementation.

INCREASING PROTECTED AREAS

There is a clear need to increase both the number and diversity of protected areas in the region, as well as enhance ecological connectivity. Expanding voluntary protection is considered a key strategy, but it requires the active involvement of landowners through communication, training, guidance, and, above all, adequate funding. Our remaining valuable and endangered habitat types - such as grove forests, steep ridgeline slopes, natural bogs, and old-growth forests - must be protected. For private forests to be properly protected, conservation efforts must remain voluntary, and adequate funding must be ensured. Nature restoration should take place not only within nature reserves but also in surrounding areas. Funding should be prioritized, particularly for the management of herb-rich forests and traditional biotopes. Clear, measurable regional targets must be established for both protected areas and restoration activities.

WATER PROTECTION AND SAFEGUARDING WATERFOWL HABITATS

According to the North Savo Water Management Implementation Programme (2022–2027), 80% of the region's lakes are in good condition. Although the ecological status of the region's large lakes is generally good, special attention is needed for the restoration of small water bodies and flowing waters, addressing the overall darkening of waters, reducing the impact of forestry on waterways—especially in small and sensitive water bodies—improving the status of waterfowl, and protecting endangered fish species such as landlocked salmon and lake trout.

The restoration of the Palokki rapids is of paramount importance. Although the rapids are located in North Karelia, their impacts extend to the Juojajärvi and Kermajärvi waterways in North Savo.

Many waterfowl species in North Savo have declined sharply in recent decades due to habitat changes, eutrophication, and an increase in small predators. Declining species particularly include ducks. It is essential to monitor waterfowl populations and support the development and restoration of wetlands by local landowners and hunting clubs, as these have a significant impact on bird populations in nesting areas. Restrictions on hunting for declining species should also be considered. Hunting quotas and/or limits on feeding would help support the recovery of waterfowl populations. Hunting clubs should also promote the control of small predators and invasive alien species, such as mink and raccoon dog. Without action, there is a risk that already endangered populations will decline rapidly. Urgent measures are needed to reverse this trend.

It is important to support, monitor, and ensure the continuity of the North Savo Water Management Action Plan (2022–2027).

TOWARDS MORE NATURAL MANAGEMENT OF COMMERCIAL FORESTS

Active nature management in commercial forests plays an increasingly important role in improving biodiversity. Habitat management, restoration, strengthening the expertise of forest professionals and owners, increasing biodiversity-supporting structural features, continuous-cover forestry, and promoting the attractiveness of the forest sector and related education are key elements of the regional forest programme. It is important to ensure that information on sustainable nature management reaches forest owners, as it is often conveyed through large timber purchasing companies.

Only 4.7% of forests in North Savo are protected, which is low compared to the national average (13%). The protected forest area is expected to increase through the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the implementation of the Helmi and METSO programmes. As a result, the importance of voluntary protection is growing, and efforts must be made to accelerate it

through various societal measures. The role of old trees should be better understood—not only in terms of ecosystem functioning but also for human health and well-being.

Forestry is a significant source of nutrient and sediment loading in the region's waterways. Its impact is greatest in Upper Savo, where drained peatlands are most extensive. Nearly four-fifths (285,000 hectares) of peatlands in North Savo have been drained, along with almost 100,000 hectares of water-affected mineral soil forests (Natural Resources Institute Finland, 2025). The negative impacts of drained peatlands on water quality have been long-lasting.

Currently, the restoration of peatland drainage systems is limited, while drainage measures in peatland forests have been - and will continue to be - carried out in connection with forest regeneration. During the 2026–2030 period of the Regional Forest Programme, special attention will be given to water protection measures and the sustainable management of peatland forests. However, progress could be accelerated by completely prohibiting new drainage and addressing the negative impacts of existing drainage where feasible and economically justified, with an emphasis on ecological values.

SAFEGUARDING THE DIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND SMALL FARMS

An increase in farm size and a decline in the number of farms are not favourable developments from a biodiversity perspective. Our region is a significant producer of milk and beef, and the share of agricultural land is high, including both crop and grain cultivation. North Savo produces nearly a quarter of the country's berry yield.

Efforts must be made to create economic incentives that promote more diverse agricultural production, support the vitality of small farms, strengthen domestic seedling production, enhance local food security and the production of local food, and improve the overall attractiveness of agriculture. The opportunities presented by a warming climate for crop production should be explored more boldly, including the use of winter vegetation cover.

Agricultural environments also include important traditional biotopes that have become endangered. Therefore, we must learn to value and protect the small-scale features of agricultural landscapes. The diversity of these environments is essential for pollinators, which play a crucial role in securing food production. Grazing livestock also remains an integral part of the rural landscape.

THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL PROGRAMME IN THE EU'S NATURE AND CLIMATE FUNDING

In the next EU funding period, the allocation criteria for funding will change significantly. In the future, biodiversity and climate funding will be channelled more strongly through regional

councils as part of a broader national framework. At the same time, the previously separate financial instruments are likely to expire or undergo substantial changes.

This means that the policies and priorities of regional programmes will play a decisive role in determining how much EU funding for nature and climate is directed to the region, which themes and projects receive support, and how cross-regional cooperation is taken into account. Therefore, the regional programme must:

- highlight biodiversity and climate change preparedness as key themes guiding EU funding.
- ensure that projects promoting biodiversity and climate resilience are aligned with the instruments of the new funding period.
- recognise that nature and climate do not follow administrative boundaries and therefore enable cooperation between regions in both objectives and funding. If these themes are not placed at the core of the programmes, there is a risk of significant funding losses for the region.
- acknowledge that nature and biodiversity are inherently place-based. The natural environment of North Savo can only be protected and enhanced within North Savo.

NATURE POSITIVITY AS PART OF PEOPLE'S EVERYDAY LIVES AND BUSINESS

Since halting biodiversity loss and improving the state of nature require fundamental changes across administrative, economic, political, social, and technological systems at all levels (local, regional, national, and international), nature-related work must be mainstreamed across all areas of activity. At the regional level, the North Savo action plans mentioned above are key tools for identifying, guiding, and supporting measures that promote biodiversity, as well as for fostering innovation, nature-based solutions, technological development, well-being, and comprehensive security.

It is important to engage businesses in the region in strengthening biodiversity, with an emphasis on natural values in line with evolving national regulations (e.g. carbon and biodiversity footprint accounting obligations, biodiversity offsetting, ecosystem accounting, and the mitigation hierarchy). Bold business models, the involvement of local communities in planning and implementing environmentally impactful projects, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research collaboration, improved use of open environmental data, and the development and application of digital technologies all offer significant potential for advancing nature-related work in the region.

North Savo can also position itself as a pioneering region in environmental matters, building on the strong expertise of the University of Eastern Finland in environmental technology and biology.

Concrete actions to benefit nature could include, for example, removing plastic packaging from biowaste in retail stores to reduce micro- and nanoplastics in soils, as well as establishing new meadows in built environments across cities, municipalities, and urban areas. It is also important to support municipalities in identifying and mainstreaming LUMO programmes and other measures that promote biodiversity.

CONTEXT

In August 2025, the Economic Development Centre of Eastern Finland's Priodiversity LIFE project invited regional nature stakeholders to the first network meeting, and in February 2026, the University of Eastern Finland's eNaBIS project invited the network to a second meeting. Both meetings were attended by around fifty participants from approximately 25 different organisations, including:

- educational institutions (University of Eastern Finland, Savonia UAS, Savo Consortium of Education)
- regional administration (Economic Development Centre, Regional Council)
- state expert organisations and state-owned enterprises (Natural Resources Institute Finland, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Metsä hallitus)
- development companies (SavoGrow)
- interest organisations (MTK)
- companies (berry farms, camp centres, landscape maintenance companies)
- associations and networks (nature and water protection, environmental education, climate advocacy, regional development)
- the city of Kuopio

The aim of the meeting in February was to bring together nature stakeholders, discuss training needs, cooperation opportunities and project ideas related to the theme, connect students and nature stakeholders through thesis topics focused on local development, and influence regional nature policy. As a result of the discussions at the meeting and the subsequent survey, a joint recommendation for a nature-positive regional policy was prepared by nature stakeholders in North Savo.

APPENDICES

The slides presented at the North Savo nature stakeholders' network meeting on 24.2.2026 can be found at the bottom of the eNaBIS project page.

LEARN MORE

LUMO programme

North Savo Forest Programme 2026–2030

Savo Climate Programme 2025

North Savo Water Management Action Plan for 2022–2027

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