# Starmer government’s plan to ease protected species rules risks breaching EU trade deal



The push by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's administration to dismantle environmental protections for species such as bats and newts, part of a broader initiative to stimulate housing and infrastructure development, has raised significant concerns regarding compliance with the existing EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). A recently leaked European Commission report indicates that these measures could potentially breach the TCA's “non-regression” clauses, which were agreed upon during Boris Johnson's tenure as Prime Minister. Such clauses aim to ensure that both the UK and EU do not lower their environmental protection standards below those in place at the time of Brexit.

This strategic pivot towards reducing regulatory barriers has been articulated frequently by Chancellor Rachel Reeves, who has publicly criticised the current environmental regulations as impediments to progress. In various media interviews, Reeves has highlighted the inefficiencies attributed to the presence of these species, painting a picture of bats and newts as major obstacles to economic growth—a narrative that conservationists argue is overly simplistic and misleading. The Bat Conservation Trust has responded strongly, insisting that Reeves’ rhetoric unfairly scapegoats these creatures for delays in construction, which are often the result of more complex regulatory frameworks rather than the animals themselves.

Starmer's government aims to address what it perceives as "red tape" surrounding development by reforming environmental planning rules, ostensibly to expedite construction projects that are seen as crucial for economic recovery. The government has claimed a commitment to finding a balance, asserting that while environmental protections are necessary, they must not come at the expense of essential infrastructure and housing projects. Speaking in January, Reeves outlined a vision where developers could focus on construction rather than being bogged down by concerns over wildlife.

However, environmental advocacy groups have raised alarms about the implications of these reforms. Critics stress that the government's measures risk undermining vital protections for species protected under both EU habitat regulations and the UK's Wildlife and Countryside Act. Observers point out the historic context of these regulations, which were designed to safeguard biodiversity and ensure that development does not come at a significant ecological cost.

The leaked report from the EU has stirred up a broader debate about the UK's post-Brexit environmental policy trajectory. Although the report did not suggest immediate actions from Brussels, the forthcoming TCA review next year suggests that the ramifications of these proposed changes could lead to significant diplomatic and regulatory challenges. As the TCA serves as a cornerstone of the UK's trade arrangements with the EU, any perceived backtracking on environmental commitments might provoke a response from European partners concerned about the integrity of the agreement.

The shadow of previous controversies looms large, including notable incidents where conservation efforts have seemingly clashed with development needs, such as the infamous £100 million allocated for creating a bat habitat for the HS2 rail project. Such expenditures have become rallying points for advocates calling for a more nuanced approach to infrastructure that integrates rather than negates environmental concerns.

In light of these tensions, the government has indicated a hunger for a reformed planning approach that not only addresses present environmental challenges but also secures future pledges for biodiversity and sustainability. Yet, the success of this strategy relies heavily on navigating the complexities of both public sentiment and international obligations.

As the government prepares to advance its agenda, the balancing act between development and environmental stewardship remains critical. The stakes are not just regulatory—they implicate broader issues of ecological integrity, public trust, and international relations in a post-Brexit landscape where the UK’s commitments to its environment will be closely scrutinised.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-starmer-newts-bats-reeves-b2748022.html)
2. Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-starmer-newts-bats-reeves-b2748022.html), [[2]](https://www.politico.eu/article/keir-starmer-great-crested-newt-housing-labour-government-protected-species-habitat-regulations-environment/)
3. Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-starmer-newts-bats-reeves-b2748022.html), [[4]](https://news.sky.com/story/politics-latest-pm-vows-to-stop-newts-and-bats-from-blocking-construction-12593360)
4. Paragraph 4: [[2]](https://www.politico.eu/article/keir-starmer-great-crested-newt-housing-labour-government-protected-species-habitat-regulations-environment/), [[3]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-climate-change-labour-environment-europe-keir-starmer-conservative-uturn-a7440626.html), [[6]](https://cieem.net/cieem-president-speaks-on-natural-environment-policy-post-brexit/)
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9. Paragraph 9: [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-starmer-newts-bats-reeves-b2748022.html), [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/green-brexit-a-new-era-for-farming-fishing-and-the-environment)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-eu-starmer-newts-bats-reeves-b2748022.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.politico.eu/article/keir-starmer-great-crested-newt-housing-labour-government-protected-species-habitat-regulations-environment/> - An article from Politico discussing how Keir Starmer's plans to reform Britain's planning system may conflict with environmental protections for species like the great-crested newt. The piece highlights the challenges of balancing infrastructure development with conservation efforts, noting that the newt is protected under both EU habitats regulations and the UK's Wildlife and Countryside Act. The article also mentions previous political attempts to address delays caused by environmental assessments and the potential for future conflicts between development and conservation.
3. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-climate-change-labour-environment-europe-keir-starmer-conservative-uturn-a7440626.html> - An article from The Independent detailing Labour's commitment to maintaining high environmental standards post-Brexit. Keir Starmer, the Shadow Brexit Secretary, emphasizes the need to enshrine existing EU environmental laws into UK legislation to prevent future weakening of protections. The piece also discusses concerns that leaving the EU could lead to a rollback of environmental regulations and highlights Labour's stance on ensuring that environmental standards are upheld in future trade deals.
4. <https://news.sky.com/story/politics-latest-pm-vows-to-stop-newts-and-bats-from-blocking-construction-12593360> - A Sky News article reporting on Prime Minister Keir Starmer's pledge to reduce legal challenges from environmental protections, specifically mentioning species like newts and bats, which have previously delayed construction projects. The article outlines the government's focus on infrastructure development and the intention to streamline planning processes by addressing what are perceived as obstacles posed by environmental regulations.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/green-brexit-a-new-era-for-farming-fishing-and-the-environment> - A government speech discussing the opportunities presented by Brexit to enhance environmental protections. The speech outlines plans to reform agricultural and fisheries policies to promote sustainability and conservation. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining and strengthening environmental standards post-Brexit, including support for farmers and land managers who protect wildlife habitats.
6. <https://cieem.net/cieem-president-speaks-on-natural-environment-policy-post-brexit/> - An article from the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) featuring the president's views on natural environment policy after Brexit. The piece discusses concerns about the implementation of environmental policies, particularly regarding species like bats and dormice. It highlights the need for careful planning and adequate funding to ensure effective conservation efforts and the potential challenges of applying different strategies across the country.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/leading-the-charge-for-the-environment> - A government speech introducing the Environment Bill, the first major environmental legislation in thirty years. The speech outlines the government's commitment to environmental protection, including setting legally binding targets for air quality, water, biodiversity, and resource efficiency. It also discusses plans to incorporate existing EU environmental regulations into domestic law and establish an independent statutory body to hold the government accountable for environmental standards.