Optimising Energy and Empowering Nature' event underscores need for collaboration across sectors

Brussels, Belgium – A radical alliance is needed between the conservation and energy sector to meet the growing demand for renewable energy and related grid infrastructure, according to the Renewables Grid Initiative (RGI), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and ENTSO-E, which hosted a conference last week called 'Optimising Energy and Empowering Nature'.

Collaboration is essential to accelerate decarbonisation – largely with renewable energy sources – while speeding up restoration and protection of biodiversity, said the conference organisers.

The event highlighted the need for integrated planning to optimise increasingly scarce resources, such as land and raw materials, and the benefits of developing nature-based and community-based solutions to scale up successful projects in the long-term.

Other key messages included:

1. The climate and biodiversity crises are inextricably linked, and this must be reflected in policies.

A fast and robust transition to renewables is urgently needed, but we need to anticipate and avoid impacts of large-scale energy production and transmission on biodiversity, ecosystems and the people who depend upon them. TSOs, as well as all other project developers, have an important responsibility to ensure the natural environment is taken into account in infrastructure development. Creating healthy ecosystems and building the necessary infrastructure need to go hand in hand; they are fundamental for addressing the climate and biodiversity crises.

Robust environmental regulations are the foundation to enable deployment of infrastructure. When properly implemented, they can reduce risks and delays for project developers, and build trust with government institutions and communities. Facilitating an exchange of best practices and collaboration is also needed if governments, institutions, businesses and environmental sectors hope to achieve their common sustainable development goals.

2. There are already many solutions but further innovation is needed to accelerate a sustainable energy transition.

There are already many solutions, and they now need suitable incentives and frameworks to be deployed at scale. But there is still a need for innovation going forward. For this, a new mind-set is required, acknowledging that scarcity is the new normal and optimisation the new driver for planning and implementing thoughtful policies. Best practices on the use of space and coexistence of diverse economic

activities with nature need to be tested, discussed, deployed and monitored to assess their efficacy. This includes repurposing and retooling mechanisms and practices that have proven useful in other fields.

3. Planning a renewables-based energy system requires trust-building and collaboration.

In order to deliver solutions that can be deployed at scale, we need to understand the rationale and needs of different interest groups. Only through active collaboration can we find solutions that are sustainable in the long-run. Planning and delivering a renewables-based energy system is a joint effort that not only includes coordinated development of on- and offshore generation and transmission systems, but also the inclusion of all stakeholders that are affected by and/or part of these systems.

4. International coordination on data collection, spatial planning and nature restoration is imperative for a low-carbon future.

The inclusive approach to system planning that is based on best practices, as described above, needs to be underpinned by coordination and collaboration across borders, as energy systems from different countries are interacting with each other as well as the ecosystems they are built in. To bring all these systems together, we need science-driven and standardised data collection, starting with the definition of relevant criteria that should also be reflected in policies. We also need a joint coordinated approach to spatial planning and biodiversity mitigation and restoration that goes beyond local compensation and “do-no-harm” to actively contribute to global targets for nature positive outcomes.

Overall, the conference partners agree that it is imperative that society develops infrastructure in a way that protects nature, and restores ecosystems and habitats, while leading to a more resilient energy system. This conference underscored the need for radical collaboration across sectors.