

# In Conservative Bavaria, Citizens Force Bold Action on Protecting Nature

*Alarmed at steep declines in insects and wildlife, Bavarian voters backed a referendum aimed at changing destructive farming practices and repairing damaged ecosystems. Now, Bavaria's initiatives are inspiring other German states to move to stem the loss of biodiversity.*

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Bavaria is known around the world for its Munich Oktoberfest, beautiful alpine panoramas, old castles, and cars from the Bavarian Motor Works (BMW). But within Germany, Bavaria is known for something else: It is by far the most conservative of the country's 16 federal states. Bavaria's staunchly traditionalist governing party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), has been in power continuously since 1946, pursuing a conservative agenda relating to family, bioethics, immigration — and the environment. Over the years, it has restricted the construction of wind farms, thwarted new environmental regulations for farmers, and blocked imposing a speed limit for cars on autobahns.

In recent months, however, Bavaria has taken a surprising detour from its traditional path. Responding to a grassroots citizens campaign and overwhelming support for a state referendum, the Bavarian government agreed earlier this month to implement one of Europe's most progressive laws on protecting nature and restoring biodiversity, primarily through changing industrial farming practices.

The about-face began in earnest in February when Bavarian citizens — increasingly concerned about the loss of natural areas, destructive farming [techniques](#), and widely publicized reports that the populations of flying insects in Germany had plummeted — overwhelmingly supported a “[referendum for biodiversity](#)” that called for the state government to implement fundamental changes in nature conservation. State law required that 10 percent of Bavaria's 9 million registered voters support the referendum for it to become the basis for negotiations on a new nature conservation law. In fact, nearly double the required number of voters — 1.75 million Bavarians —

showed up at their town halls to support what had become known as the “save the bees” initiative.

**“The times when it was enough for politicians to pay lip service to biodiversity are over,” says one conservationist.**

The CSU, backed by farming interests, at first tried to [water](#) down the stated goals of the referendum. But strong public pressure forced party leaders to abandon their position and formally support the proposals set forth in the referendum and enact them as laws. Now, Bavaria plans to implement a sweeping set of conservation measures, including setting aside 13 percent of the state in special ecological zones, committing to establishing organic agriculture on nearly a third of all Bavarian farmland, and taking steps to protect wetlands, waterways, and threatened insect populations. On May 8, the state parliament in Munich is slated to pass what Bavarian Prime Minister and CSU leader Markus Söder calls “the most sweeping nature protection law in the whole of Europe.”

Already, environmental groups in three other German states — Brandenburg, Baden Wuerttemberg, and North Rhine-Westphalia, with a combined population of 31 million — have started preparations for their own versions of biodiversity referendums. [Norbert Schäffer](#), president of Bavaria’s Association for the Protection of Birds and one of the masterminds behind the referendum, said he also has received requests from Sweden, Australia, and other countries about how to launch similar referendum campaigns.

“Biodiversity conservation has arrived in the middle of society as a top priority,” said Schäffer. “The times when it was enough for politicians to pay lip service are over.”

Zoologist Josef Reichholf, a prominent conservation scientist, describes the outcome of Bavaria’s referendum as the realization of a long-held dream. In his vision of Bavaria in 2030, after the new law will have begun yielding results, the landscape is full of butterflies, crickets, wild bees, and skylarks. “Corn still grows in the fields here and there, but no longer from horizon to horizon” on industrial-scale farms, he says. Reichholf expects that hundreds of millions of euros in agricultural subsidies will be reallocated for conservation across Europe, as Bavaria has a strong say in European Union negotiations in Brussels.

In Brandenburg, the state surrounding Berlin, numerous groups — including environmentalists, farmers, landowners, and hunters — are working on varying versions of referendums similar to Bavaria's. One major proposal would require that a large portion of the EU's massive agricultural subsidies be spent on the protection of biodiversity. Noting the growing societal concern over steady declines in the richness of nature, Friedhelm Schmitz-Jersch, president of the Brandenburg office of the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU) — Germany's largest conservation association — said, "Only strict legal measures can achieve a turnaround and stop the dramatic decline of biodiversity."

The movement all began with bees. Beginning in January, pictures of honeybees appeared on posters and in social media forums all over Bavaria. They smiled from invitations to evening meetings in pubs and from billboards in small cities and villages. Despite not being in imminent danger itself, the charismatic, domesticated honeybee was used as a symbol for wild bees and other insect species increasingly threatened in Germany and Europe by modern farming practices. The bee served as the mascot of an alliance of dozens of environmental NGOs and two political parties, the left-leaning Bavarian Greens and the more conservative Ecological Democratic Party.

Referendums are a rarely used instrument in German politics, and in Europe they have caused political havoc in recent years, from Britain to Catalonia. Elsewhere, they have failed to advance environmental causes. On the Mediterranean island of Malta, a referendum against the traditional spring hunting of wild birds didn't attract sufficient support in 2015. In Switzerland, known for its tradition of direct democracy, an attempt to limit building activity for environmental reasons failed in February, whereas an initiative by farmers to restrict the expansion of wolves and lynx was successful, to the dismay of conservationists. In 2016, a referendum to [create](#) a second Swiss national park also failed.

**Voters were surprisingly moved by a landmark study showing steep declines in flying insects in Germany.**

But Schäffer, a biologist with decades of experience in conservation policy and campaigning, saw a window of opportunity. He says that not only had Bavarians become increasingly aware that their native landscapes were becoming more monotonous, developed, and empty of life, but citizens voters

had been surprisingly moved by a landmark 2017 report known as the [Krefeld insect study](#). That study, conducted by German researchers and citizen scientists, showed a 75 percent decline in the biomass of flying insects in a large number of nature reserves in Germany over a period of 25 years.

“Vanishing insects is something that makes many people feel very concerned,” says Schäffer. “People realize that our landscapes have become devoid of birds and other animals in recent years, and they want farmers to change course.”

Scientists from Bavaria’s leading state-sponsored research institutions backed the referendum. Gerhard Haszprunar, director general of the Bavarian Natural History Collections, said he was hopeful that the referendum would “trigger a massive reduction in the use of insecticides and herbicides in our agriculture,” which should in turn boost insect populations. The Munich-based Max Planck Society, one of the world’s leading scientific institutions, also backed the ballot measure, with its president warning that “with the worldwide loss of animal and plant species, countless adaptations created by evolution over millions of years are disappearing.”

Despite frigid weather during the two weeks of voting in the first half of February, support for the referendum surpassed all expectations. The initiative mandated that the government take a host of environmental measures, including:

- Setting aside 13 percent of Bavaria to create a tightly knit “ecological infrastructure network” composed of hedgerows, meadows, wetlands, and other habitats, all designed to help rebuild populations of animals, birds, and insects.
- Immediately introducing organic agriculture and cutting fertilizer use on all state-owned farm areas in order to reduce [nitrogen pollution](#).
- Introducing organic agriculture on 30 percent of privately owned farms by 2030.
- Outlawing the drainage of wetlands and the removal of hedgerows and other habitats.
- Strictly protecting the banks of rivers and creeks from intrusive farming practices.
- Reducing insect mortality from artificial sources of light.

For conservative Bavarians, such an intrusion into the lives of farmers sounded unthinkable, and the CSU strongly opposed the proposed law, with Söder warning that the referendum “will massively harm farmers.” Walter Heidl, president of the 150,000 members of the Bavaria’s Farmers Association, claimed that farmers needed no new restrictions to safeguard biological diversity. But these arguments did not resonate strongly among Bavaria’s citizens, with nearly as many supporting the referendum in rural areas as in cities.

After the referendum, the CSU and its leader, surprised by the results, changed their tune: “We need to leave the trenches and find a solution that benefits all,” Söder said.

He convened a round table and appointed a veteran conservative lawmaker as a mediator. When negotiations began, the CSU still hoped the referendum’s organizers would eventually agree to some sort of compromise. But after their hard-won victory, environmentalists had no plans to compromise. “We are here to implement what the Bavarian people asked for,” Schäffer said.

Soon, CSU leaders began to fear that not accepting the outcome could be politically dangerous and turn even more CSU voters into supporters of the Green Party. Within the ranks of the CSU, the new direction is still controversial. But Josef Göppel, who has long advanced environmental causes from within the powerful party, hopes that the referendum will trigger a fundamental change. “We should rediscover that conserving the diversity of life is what being conservative is all about,” he says.

On April 3, after extensive deliberations within the ranks of Bavaria’s political establishment, something of an environmental miracle occurred: Söder went in front of the press to announce that not only would the CSU fully accept the proposed law, it would even go further and add extra measures to require city councils and garden owners to improve biodiversity. Söder announced that 100 new government jobs would be created to help put the law into practice, and that 50 to 75 million euros would be spent additionally for nature conservation each year.

**Environmentalists empowered by the Bavarian referendum are asking for bold**

## changes from other conservative governments.

Bavaria's actions are now reverberating throughout Germany. The federal environment minister, Svenja Schulze, a Social Democrat, announced that the government would begin nationally implementing measures from the initiative's list of demands. For example, she plans to propose a dedicated "insect protection law" with a budget of 25 million euros annually for research into the causes of insect decline and possible solutions.

In North Rhine-Westphalia — Germany's most populous state, with 18 million inhabitants — environmentalists empowered by the Bavarian referendum are asking for bold changes from its conservative government. Heinz Kowalski, deputy president of the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union in North Rhine-Westphalia, says he hopes "that politicians have heard the loud signal from Bavaria and will stop their attacks against nature reserves and threatened species." Kowalski is confident that a referendum process would yield the necessary number of votes — even more so as the Krefeld insect study originated in North Rhine-Westphalia.

NABU's spokeswoman Birgit Königs says that talks are under way involving the influential Social Democrats, the Green Party, and Friends of the Earth to trigger a referendum process.

In Brandenburg, two plans are competing for support for what's called a "popular initiative" similar to the Bavarian referendum. One initiative was started by land owners, hunters, and farmers who want to take the lead; they have proposed a long list of measures to counter insect decline, including the creation of large areas with ample diversity of wild flowering plants. The other initiative, being put forth by environmental groups, has even more ambitious goals, including a ban on pesticide use in nature reserves and strict rules that EU agricultural subsidies must be spent for environmental purposes.

Schäffer hopes that both politicians and environmentalists will be encouraged by Bavaria's example and stop assuming that preserving biodiversity is a fringe topic. "We have seen that nature conservation is a top priority for people," he says. "The goal of saving biodiversity can't be ignored any longer."