



## INTERNATIONAL MIRE CONSERVATION GROUP

### Resolution on the preservation of intactness of the Olmany mire complex in Belarus

The International Mire Conservation Group (IMCG) is a worldwide organisation of mire (peatland) specialists with a particular interest in peatland conservation. The IMCG held its 18th biennial General Assembly in Utrecht, The Netherlands on 31 August 2018, attended by members from 23 countries and 6 continents. At that Assembly the following resolution was adopted.

IMCG expresses its concern about the on-going and planned construction of a system of roads on Olmany mires. IMCG noted that Olmany in Polesie, southern Belarus, is the largest transboundary Ramsar mire site in Europe preserved in a natural state. IMCG appeals to the Belarusian government to ensure that the extent of the mire ecosystems and their predominantly untouched natural character and integrity will remain intact.

It is with high concern that IMCG learnt about a system of roads currently being built across the mire complex. IMCG is concerned about the purposefulness of the investment. Its declared aim is to facilitate access for fighting wildfires. However, fires normally do not pose a serious threat to undrained peatlands, because of the permanent waterlogging of the peat soils. On the contrary, the damming effect on one side of the road may actually cause a drop of water levels on the other site, which - along with the enhanced access and car traffic - increases rather than lowers the risk of fires.

The last large mire complexes preserved in a natural state should, in any part of the world, be preserved as the heritage of humankind and for the sake of nature. Furthermore, their preservation is substantial for current and future scientific research, including as a reference for the conservation and restoration of mires, where they have been degraded by unsustainable use.

Mire scientists and conservationists associated in IMCG have reviewed the road construction plans on the basis of the available information and call for reconsideration of the plans and cessation of the project. The IMCG offers the experience and expertise available through its network to enable the Government to find a sustainable solution. We offer this support in recognition of the international importance of the Olmany mires.

## Annex

The high international values of the Olmany mire complex arise from the following unique features:

- The lack of human-caused fragmentation of the mire. In Europe large natural areas have become extremely rare and should be given special value and conservation priority. Large size and inaccessibility allow for the preservation of wildernesses where natural processes support the conservation of elsewhere threatened species in their natural environment, without the need to carry out costly conservation measures. Although some signs of early hydrological reclamation can be seen in Olmany, its impact is now very limited due to overgrowing of canals by vegetation.
- A unique diversity of mire types forming the largest European complex of poor fens (i.e. transition mires, reported to cover c. 66% of the area of the Olmany Ramsar site), rich fens (c. 32%) and raised bogs (2%), preserved in their natural zonation. The habitats are approved as an Area of Special Conservation Interest of the Emerald network (BY0000012 Olmanskiye bolota).
- The abundance of wildlife species that demand vast natural areas, such as wolf, lynx, and birds of prey, e.g. the globally threatened Spotted Eagle (*Aquila clanga*), as well as the general importance of the area for nesting birds, for which it has been recognized as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA BY018).

The roads, built on high sand dikes, are planned to extend several dozens of kilometres. They will facilitate access for people and possible further exploitation of the peatland. They are also likely to act as dispersal corridors for invasive species of non-native plants and animals. Moreover, it is probable that the roads will exert a significant negative impact on the ecological integrity of the mire complex, by modifying local eco-hydrological conditions. Dikes exert pressure on the peat body, obstructing water flow and thus acting as dams. Flow of water through the peat body is the key eco-hydrological process constituting ecosystem integrity, being expressed in its zonation.