

# ClientEarth's contribution to the Consultation on the draft amendments to State aid Implementing Regulation and State aid Best Practices Code as regards access to justice in environmental matters (HT.6062)

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ClientEarth<sup>1</sup> welcomes this new public consultation on draft amendments to provide for access to justice for the public in State aid matters at EU level, pursuant to the findings of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee in communication ACCC/C/2015/128, as well as the commitments made by the European Commission in its communication of 17 May 2023 (COM(2023)307 final) and in its progress reports to the Compliance Committee.

**We are confident that the new internal review procedure proposed by the Commission will significantly improve access to justice for EU state aid decisions.**

Moreover, we support the Commission's commitment to adopt new rules in the second quarter of 2025. Although this timeline is beyond the limit of October 2024 set by the Compliance Committee, it should enable the Union to endorse with confidence the findings of the Compliance Committee and hopefully remedy non-compliance before the Meeting of the Parties of November 2025.

We are submitting observations on elements in the proposal that, in our analysis, will greatly improve access to justice in state aid matters and contribute to aligning Union law with Article 9(3) of the Aarhus Convention, as recommended by the Compliance Committee; as well as elements that we consider should be improved to this end.

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<sup>1</sup> ClientEarth is a not-for-profit environmental law organisation, comprising legal, scientific, policy, and communications experts working to shape and enforce the law to tackle environmental challenges.

## 1. Elements that will significantly improve access to justice in state aid matters

ClientEarth welcomes most of the proposed amendments submitted to public consultation.

### Internal review

Pursuant to the second option set out in its communication of 17 May 2023, the Commission is proposing to create a new internal review procedure in the implementing regulation and the Code of best practices for the conduct of state aid control (hereafter the 'Code'). **We generally welcome the new possibility to submit an internal review request of certain state aid decisions.**

### Access to the CJEU

The new regime provides that applicants can challenge a Commission review decision before the CJEU (new paragraph 99 of the Code). We understand from our exchanges with the Commission that the Commission's negative replies to requests will have the character of decisions with legal effects, both when the Commission rejects a request as inadmissible or as ungrounded, similarly to review decisions issued under Article 10 Regulation No 1367/2006. **This would guarantee judicial review of Commission internal review decisions.**

### Design of the procedure

The eligibility conditions for environmental NGOs and the general features of the internal review procedure (process for submitting a request, time-limits for lodging the request and for the Commission to reply, right to access the CJEU) are essentially similar to those featuring in Regulation No 1367/2006 as amended in October 2021. **These features are clear, well-known by environmental NGOs and essential for ensuring a wide and effective access to justice, in line with the requirements of paragraphs 3 and 4 of Article 9 of the Aarhus Convention.**

### Notification forms

The proposal to amend notification forms in order to require Member States to confirm that the beneficiary activity or the aid measure does not contravene environmental law that is indissolubly linked with the aid measure objective is also useful. This will facilitate the compliance assessment in state aid decisions. **Further guidance on how the Commission interprets the 'indissoluble link' or 'inextricable link' criterion would be very helpful**, subject to the Court's authoritative interpretation.

Nevertheless we stress that pursuant to established case law (*Ianelli & Volpi*, *Matra*, *Hinkley Point C*, *Paks II*), the Commission remains responsible for assessing compliance of aid measures with Union law that is indissolubly linked to the objective of the measure and cannot simply rely on Member States' statements in notification forms, notwithstanding the principle of sincere cooperation (Art. 4(3) TEU).

## 2. Particular points of concern

### 2.1 Contravention of environmental law and burden of proof

ClientEarth welcomes that the definition of ‘environmental law’ (the contravention of which should be demonstrated) refers to the definition in Article 2(1)(f) Regulation No 1367/2006 as amended. This is aligned with the Aarhus Convention and the findings of the Compliance Committee.

However, the burden of proof expected from applicants in the proposal is not entirely clear. New paragraph 92 of the Code would provide that *“The Commission should verify that the evidence put forward by the non-governmental organisation shows that one or several specific provisions of Union environmental law have been breached by the aided activity or by any aspects of the notified State aid measure that are indissolubly linked to the objective of the aid.”*

This wording appears to place the burden of proof on the applicant NGO. This seems to stand in contrast to the procedure for internal review requests under Regulation No 1367/2006. In this context, the CJEU has recognised that there are asymmetries of information between the Commission and the public and therefore clarified that the applicant NGO only needs to raise **sufficient or serious doubts** to trigger the obligation of the Commission to investigate further. In the words of the Court:

“15 In order to set out the grounds for conducting the review in the manner required, a party requesting the internal review of an administrative act under environmental law **is required to put forward the facts or legal arguments of sufficient substance to give rise to substantial or serious doubts** as to the assessment made in that act by the EU institution or body (see, to that effect, [case law cited]).

16 Where the Commission concludes that the evidence adduced by a party requesting an internal review is substantial and **liable to raise serious doubts** as to the formal or substantive lawfulness of the grant of that authorisation, **it is required to examine all relevant information of its own motion** ([see case law cited]). At the end of its review, the Commission may withdraw or amend the authorisation decision, thereby granting in whole or in part the request for review, or maintain the authorisation as it was granted, by rejecting the request.”<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added)

**In ClientEarth’s view, it would be crucial to clarify in paragraph 92 that the same considerations apply in the context of an internal review directed at state aid decisions.**

This is even more important because the asymmetry of information between the Commission and the applicant NGO is particularly pronounced in state aid matters. It is settled case law that the Commission is entitled to presume that a state aid file is confidential and that documents must be disclosed if there is an overriding public interest in disclosure.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the public has limited information on the objectives and design of the aid measures other than what the Commission

<sup>2</sup> Judgment of 18 October 2023, *TestBioTech v Commission*, T-606/21, para. 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> First established in judgment of 29 June 2010 (Grand chamber), *Commission v Technische Glaswerke Ilmenau*, C-139/07, paras 55-57. See also judgment of 13 March 2019, *AlzChem v Commission*, C-666/17 P, para. 32; judgment of 14 July 2016, *SeaHandling v Commission*, C-271/15 P, para. 41; judgment of 2 October 2024, *Sara Soares v Commission*, T-606/23, para. 43.

would disclose in opening and final decisions. So far, the CJEU has never held that there has been an overriding public interest in a case.

Moreover, the wording in paragraph 92 of the Code and in the form for submission of a request suggests that applicants will have to demonstrate as well *the indissoluble link* between the specific provisions of environmental law contravened and the objective of the aid.<sup>4</sup> We fear that this would further exacerbate the burden of proof.

An unrealistic evidentiary burden on the applicant amounts to a barrier of access to justice and would therefore not be compatible with Article 9(3) and (4) Aarhus Convention, as well as the fundamental right to effective remedies (Article 47 Charter of Fundamental Rights).

**ClientEarth therefore recommends to refer explicitly, in the preamble to the implementing regulation and/or in the Code, to the CJEU's case law cited above with regard to the respective burden of proof weighting on applicants (demonstrating doubts) and the Commission's duty to examine all relevant information on its own motion.**

**This would clarify that the asymmetry of information is duly being taken into account and that the new internal review regime for state aid decisions is not more burdensome on applicants than the general internal review regime set under Regulation No 1367/2006.**

## 2.2 The 10 page limit may unduly restrict applicants' right to a remedy

The Commission is proposing that requests should be limited to 10 pages (new paragraph 86 of the Code) or 5500 words (in the form for submission) and that the Commission can revert to the applicant should it need more information (new paragraph 93 of the Code). For comparison, applicants to an internal review request under Article 10 Regulation 1367/2006 can submit up to 50 pages and are required to provide all arguments and evidence at once.<sup>5</sup>

**ClientEarth takes issue with this strict 10 page limit, which is unduly restrictive.**

We appreciate that the internal review procedure would be limited to decisions to open formal investigations, for which third parties would already have had an opportunity to submit comments and where it is expected that the Commission will analyse in-depth whether (a) there are contraventions of environmental law and (b) there is an inextricable link between the activity or the object of the aid and the aspects of the aid that contravene environmental law. As mentioned in the previous section, we encourage the Commission to provide very detailed assessments in this regard, given the asymmetry of information between the Commission and the Member States on the one hand, and third parties on the other hand, aggravated by the presumption of confidentiality of state aid files.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Proposed form for the submission of requests, p.4: "*Please explain why they are indissolubly linked to the objective of the aid and/or the aided activity.*"

<sup>5</sup> Article 1(2) of Commission Decision (EU) 2023/748.

<sup>6</sup> See case law cited under footnote 3 above.

We welcome the request form included in the consultation documents, which will greatly help to structure requests and to ensure that relevant elements are being included by applicants. We also welcome that there is no limit on the size of annexes (new paragraph 86 of the Code) – which otherwise would unduly restrict the amount of evidence an applicant can provide.

Nonetheless, **applicants must be given the opportunity to develop their legal arguments and to explain how they are supported by evidence in a clear and detailed manner.** We do not believe that referring to relevant extracts of annexes in the request, as required by new paragraph 87 of the Code and the submission form, will always sufficiently enable applicants to demonstrate that there are doubts about compliance of a decision with environmental law. This has practical and legal consequences:

- New paragraph 93 of the Code enables the Commission to request additional information from the applicant. The proposal is that the period within which the applicant should reply suspends the Commission's time-limits of 16-22 weeks to reply to the internal review request. Going back and forth with the applicant because the Commission considers the request is incomplete risks posing an **administrative burden** on the Commission as well as on applicants. Moreover, suspending the time-limit is questionable in light of (a) stakeholders' concerns, expressed in previous consultations, that the procedure should be **dealt with efficiently and speedily** and (b) the Commission's legal **duty to investigate on its own motion** when doubts are raised (see *TestBioTech* case T-606/21 cited above) – at which point the Commission is in control of its own timeline.
- The case law of the CJEU on Article 12 Regulation No 1367/2006, which will certainly apply by analogy, is strict as to the possibility for applicants to bring new arguments or evidence before the CJEU when challenging a Commission's decision. It is established that applicants shall only challenge the decision replying to their internal review requests<sup>7</sup> (and not the underlying act) but that **arguments and evidence that were not already included in the internal review request are inadmissible**.<sup>8</sup> Should applicants be precluded from demonstrating the illegality of a Commission's decision before the court on the ground that they did not raise certain arguments in their request, whereas they did not have the space for doing so, would be an undue restriction on their right to an effective judicial review and their right to a remedy in contravention of Article 9(3) and (4) and Article 47 of the Charter.

**ClientEarth therefore kindly requests the Commission to reconsider the limit of 10 pages and to bring it up to 50 pages, in alignment with the internal review regime under Regulation No 1367/2006.**

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. recently judgment of 18 October 2023, *TestBioTech v Commission*, T-606/21, para. 24.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. judgment of 4 April 2019, *ClientEarth v. Commission* (DEHP), T-108/17; judgment of 21 February 2024, *PAN Europe v. Commission* (cypermethrin), T-536/22.

At the very least, the Commission should allow applicants to submit more than 10 pages in particularly complex cases, notably (but not limited to) when applicants identify contraventions of provisions of environmental law that were not assessed by the Commission in the state aid decision, or when the Commission had not assessed compliance of the measure with environmental law on the ground that there was no inextricable link with the activity or the object of the aid.

## 2.3 Suspension of time-limits

ClientEarth strongly supports the time-limits of eight weeks to submit a request, and of 16 to 22 weeks for the Commission to reply. These time-limits are the most practical and effective to ensure that applicants and the Commission respectively have sufficient time to lodge a request and deal with it in a timely manner, in line with Article 9(4) of the Aarhus Convention.

However, we note that the procedure of potential consultation with the applicant and of consultation with Member States set in new paragraphs 93 and 94 of the Code, would **suspend the Commission's time-limits to reply to a request<sup>9</sup> potentially by 60 days** if both procedures are triggered; and up to additional 30 days if the procedure at new paragraph 95 is triggered as well non-concomitantly.

We question whether prolonging the Commission's time-limits to reply to a request – and by ripple effect, the timeline of the whole case including potential actions for annulment against the Commission's reply or failure to do so<sup>10</sup> – adequately addresses stakeholders' concerns that the procedure may delay the grant of aid (if Member States suspend granting aid) or would create legal uncertainty.

Our recommendations are the following:

- **Let applicants submit more than 10 pages, so they can adequately elaborate their legal arguments and evidence.** We refer to section 2.2 above.
- **Consult Member States as early as possible and issue a reply to the request within the prescribed time-limits of 16 to 22 weeks.** When dealing with requests for internal review relating to the approval of active substances for instance, the Commission is used to consult EFSA and ECHA and does not need to suspend the legal time-limits.<sup>11</sup> It is unclear to us why state aid matters would be so peculiar that consulting Member States should delay the Commission's assessment of requests. This should be even less needed given that (a) Member States would have confirmed compliance of the aided activity or the

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<sup>9</sup> Whereas paragraphs 93 to 95 mention a suspension of the time-limits set under new paragraphs 107 and 108 of the code, we understand that the correct reference would be paragraphs 97 and 98 relating to time-limits.

<sup>10</sup> See our recommendation under section 2.4 below to include access to the CJEU in case the Commission fails to comply with its obligations under the new procedure.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. point 3 of the annex to the Commission's reply to PAN Europe and others' request for internal review of Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/2660 of 28 November 2023 renewing the approval of the active substance glyphosate, ref. Ares(2024)4618938-26/06/2024.

aid measure with environmental law in the notification form<sup>12</sup>, so that they should have at least some information necessary to make an environmental law compliance assessment; and (b) the proposal is to grant access to justice only in relation to decisions not to raise formal objections, which supposes that (i) interested parties have had the opportunity to submit comments, (ii) an in-depth assessment has been performed and (iii) doubts have been cleared as per the Commission's assessment, including (iv) after thorough exchanges with the granting authorities. The Commission and the Member States should thus be able to assess the merits of a request in a timely manner.

In respect of Member States' comments, ClientEarth recommends that applicants are entitled to receive a copy of the Member States' comments and that Member States' analysis is integrated into the review decision as part of the decision's statements of reason (Article 296(2) TFEU) – as the Commission usually does with EFSA and ECHA's comments on requests relating to the approval of active substances under Article 10 Regulation 1367/2006.

**ClientEarth therefore recommends to amend new paragraphs 93 and 94 of the Code in order to delete the provision according to which the time limits set under paragraphs 97 and 98 [numbered 107 and 108 in the draft] would be suspended pending a responses from applicants and Member States to the Commission's request for additional information or comments.**

## 2.4 Access to justice for omissions to act

The proposal is missing a regime of access to justice in cases of omissions.

Firstly, it is essential, in light of Article 9(3) of the Aarhus Convention, to provide for access to the CJEU in case the Commission omits to reply to a request within the prescribed time-limits.

**ClientEarth therefore recommends to add a new paragraph**, modelled on Article 12(2) Regulation No 1367/2006<sup>13</sup>: *“Where the Commission fails to act in accordance with paragraphs 97 or 98, the non-governmental organisation or other members of the public that made the request for internal review pursuant to paragraph 79 may institute proceedings before the Court of Justice in accordance with the relevant provisions of the TFEU.”*

Secondly, the new procedure does not explicitly include the right to challenge the Commission's failure to (a) monitor compliance with its decisions, (b) monitor compliance of aid measures with

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<sup>12</sup> Draft section 6.8 of annex I, part I of regulation amending the state aid implementing regulation (EC) No 794/2004, submitted to public consultation.

<sup>13</sup> Article 12(2) Regulation 1367/2006 as amended: *“Where the Union institution or body fails to act in accordance with Article 10(2) or (3), the non-governmental organisation or other members of the public that made the request for internal review pursuant to Article 10 may institute proceedings before the Court of Justice in accordance with the relevant provisions of the TFEU.”*

block exemption regulations<sup>14,15,16</sup>; or (c) investigate unlawful (non-notified) aid. In 2022, the Commission seemed uncertain whether such omissions, in particular the omission to monitor schemes under the GBER, would amount to omissions in the sense of the Aarhus Convention.<sup>17</sup> ClientEarth is not aware of any further assessment conducted by the Commission and the Member States in this respect.

Providing for a regime of review of omissions to monitor aid schemes or to withdraw the benefit of notification exemption to a scheme that contravenes environmental law (which is a criteria for compliance with block exemption regulations) would significantly enhance remedies available to the public in relation to contraventions of environmental law. Indeed there is currently no remedy in the sense of Article 9(3) and (4) of the Aarhus Convention for the public when the Commission does not withdraw notification exemptions, does not withdraw a decision that eventually proves to be uncompliant or fails to investigate unlawful aid.

### 3. Recommendations for further improvement of access to justice within the proposed regime

#### 3.1 Entities eligible to request an internal review

ClientEarth welcomes that the eligibility criteria for environmental NGOs are similar to those applicable under Regulation No 1367/2006 as amended and under Commission Decision (EU) 2023/748.

However, we note that other members of the public would not be eligible to submit a request for internal review. In its findings on communication ACCC/C/2015/128, the Compliance Committee recommended that the Union “*clearly provide **members of the public** with access to administrative or judicial procedures to challenge decisions on State aid measures taken by the European Commission under article 108 (2) TFEU that contravene European Union law relating*

<sup>14</sup> Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty, as amended.

<sup>15</sup> Commission Regulation (EU) 2022/2473 of 14 December 2022 declaring certain categories of aid to undertakings active in the production, processing and marketing of fishery and aquaculture products compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, OJ L 327, 21.12.2022, p. 82–139.

<sup>16</sup> Commission Regulation (EU) 2022/2472 of 14 December 2022 declaring certain categories of aid in the agricultural and forestry sectors and in rural areas compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, OJ L 327, 21.12.2022, p. 1–81.

<sup>17</sup> See minutes of the ad-hoc meeting of the Commission's expert group on Aarhus Implementation (E00390) of 12 September 2022, p. 2: “*The Commission notes that omissions by the EU institutions, in situations where they should have acted, are also covered by the EU Aarhus Regulation. This triggers questions by one delegation of whether aid under the General Block Exemption Regulation (“GBER”) could amount to an “omission” in the sense of the Aarhus Convention. Commission replies that this is a grey zone, e.g., could absence of monitoring be an “omission” in the sense of the Aarhus Convention? In the Commission’s view, only individual decisions appear to be at stake, but the Commission relies on Member States’ input to help calibrating the solutions.*”



to the environment, **in accordance with article 9 (3) and (4) of the Convention**” (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

We note that this does not mean that there is a requirement to establish an *actio popularis*. As for the amendment to Regulation No 1367/2006, certain criteria can be tied to the exercise of access to justice rights by private persons.

**Therefore, the proposal would be greatly improved and further aligned with the findings of the Compliance Committee by giving the possibility for other members of the public to request an internal review of state aid decisions.**

### 3.2 State aid decisions in respect of which a request for internal review may be submitted

The Commission is proposing to limit the scope of the new procedure to Commission’s state aid decisions adopted after a formal investigation (Article 108(2) TFEU), which find their legal basis under Article 107(3), with the exception of 107(3)(b), second part (disturbance in the economy).

This wide scope recognises that a vast range of aid measures or schemes have the potential to contravene environmental law regardless of the category of aid and their legal basis.

Nevertheless, it is unclear, in the absence of publication of the Staff Working Document, why aid authorised under Article 107(3)(b), second part (disturbance in the economy) is excluded from the scope of reviewable state aid decisions. From a legal perspective, there is no ground for excluding decisions closing the formal investigation procedure when the legal basis for such decision is Article 107(3)(b), second part.

ClientEarth would also like to take this opportunity to stress that access to justice for the public in relation to decisions not to raise objections, which constitute the very large majority of state aid decisions, is still not clearly guaranteed in the EU. This should remain a point of attention for improving the EU’s global compliance with Article 9(3) of the Aarhus Convention overtime. In this respect, **we recommend that the first recital of the implementing regulation aligns with new paragraph 2 of the Code as proposed, by acknowledging that “State aid decisions adopted by the Commission are exempt from the scope of Regulation No 1367/2006”**, not only state aid decisions adopted on the basis of Article 108(2) TFEU.

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<sup>18</sup> See also by analogy Advice by the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee to the European Union concerning the implementation of request ACCC/M/2017/3, 12 February 2021, point 93; Report of the Compliance Committee on compliance by the European Union on request ACCC/M/2017/3, 26 July 2021 (ECE/MP.PP/2021/51), point 117.<sup>19</sup> [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/law-and-governance/aarhus/requests-internal-review\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/law-and-governance/aarhus/requests-internal-review_en)

## 4. Additional recommendations

### 4.1 Applicability of the new procedure

Pursuant to point 10.2 [numbered 9.2 in the draft] of the draft communication, the Commission will apply the new regime of requests for internal review “to final Commission decisions under the new Section 11.4”. An applicability criterion *ratione tempore* is missing (compare with point 10.3 [9.3] of the draft communication).

ClientEarth understands from its exchanges with the Commission that the new procedure would apply to (a) decisions that are adopted pursuant to notifications submitted to the Commission after the entry into force of the new procedure, and to (b) decisions adopted pursuant to investigations on unlawful aid when the opening decision was adopted after the entry into force of the new regime.

We would like to underline that this would considerably delay applicability of the new procedure, sometimes by more than a year due to the length of formal investigations. In our analysis, it is irrelevant from a legal perspective that Member States have confirmed compliance of the activity or aid measure with environmental law in notification forms for triggering an internal review procedure. This is because the Commission’s duty to check compliance of measures with environmental law that is inextricably link to the activity or the object of the measure already applies as per established case law of the CJEU – see above.

**ClientEarth therefore recommends that the new procedure applies to final Commission decisions that will be adopted after the publication of the amendments in the Official Journal of the European Union, regardless of the date of notification of the aid measure or the date of an opening decision in case of unlawful aid.**

### 4.2 Information of the public

Article 4(5) of the Aarhus Convention requires that “*In order to further the effectiveness of the provisions of this article [9], each Party shall ensure that information is provided to the public on access to administrative and judicial review procedures and shall consider the establishment of appropriate assistance mechanisms to remove or reduce financial and other barriers to access to justice.*”

**In addition to publication in the OJEU, ClientEarth recommends to inform the public about the new internal review procedure on the Commission’s website dedicated to the internal review procedure under Regulation 1367/2006<sup>19</sup> and on DG Competition’s website<sup>20</sup>, accompanied by a press release and an update of the initiative on the Have Your Say portal.**

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<sup>19</sup> [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/law-and-governance/aarhus/requests-internal-review\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/law-and-governance/aarhus/requests-internal-review_en)

<sup>20</sup> [https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/state-aid\\_en](https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/state-aid_en)

## 4.3 Transparency

ClientEarth would like to reiterate its previous recommendations that transparency is enhanced when a measure or scheme is notified to the Commission.<sup>21</sup>


Whereas we appreciate that decisions opening formal investigations contain a detailed description of the measure and explanation of doubts relating to the compatibility of the aid, third parties only have one month to submit observations at this stage. Publishing information on the essential features of aid measures and schemes when they are notified would leave more time for third parties to gather relevant information for the compliance and compatibility assessments. This would also help identify potential doubts, despite the Member States' confirmation in notification forms that the measure complies with Union law.<sup>22</sup>


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<sup>21</sup> ClientEarth response to the previous public consultation, submitted on 5 October 2022. See also <https://www.clientearth.org/media/lqhb4c1p/access-to-justice-in-state-aid-legal-q-a-clientearth-august-2024.pdf> , at page 6.

<sup>22</sup> ClientEarth refers to its complaints and market information letters to the Commission on cases SA.102163, SA.59974 and SA.53625 as examples of information provided about compliance of aid measures with environmental law that we believe were useful for the Commission's assessment, regardless of the outcome of that assessment.

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