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Mr. Marcelo Nuno Duarte Rebelo de Sousa
President of the Portuguese Republic

Reykjavik 14. April 2020

Impact of Montijo airport development on birds from Iceland.

Your Excellencies, President Rebelo de Sousa

With this letter we want to raise our concern with regards to the proposed development of a new international airport serving Lisbon - Montijo Airport – which would be located near the geographical centre of the Tagus Estuary. This matter is of concern to us because this estuary is one of the most important wintering and stopover sites for waterbirds that migrate along the East Atlantic Flyway, including many birds that we consider our very own and that we share with you and all other countries along this migratory route.

The Tagus estuary is the most important wetland in Portugal for waterbirds, and a major stepping stone for migratory species that breed in northern latitudes and migrate south to spend the winter in southern Europe and Africa. Every year, thousands of migratory birds use this estuary for resting and foraging during their migration, and thousands more stay throughout the entire winter period. More than 250 species are known to use this area, many of which are declining and some are already threatened with extinction.

Most birds that use the Tagus estuary feed on the vast intertidal areas during low-tide periods and move to roosting places during the high-tide. The suggested position of the airport will cause substantial disturbance to thousands of birds. Moreover, the constant movement of birds in the areas surrounding the proposed new airport, including large species like cormorants, flamingos, ducks and geese, overlaps with take-off and landing routes. This will lead to substantial risks to aircraft operations and safety because of the possibility of bird strikes, which in turn may be used to justify additional measures such as bird culls at a later time and once the airport is operational.

The Tagus estuary is classified as a Nature Reserve under the Portuguese network of protected areas, and as a Special Protection Area, Site of Community Interest, and RAMSAR Site under national law, European Union directives and international treaties. It serves a similar purpose as our very own Mývatn-Laxá, which is also a Ramsar Site, and a National Protected Area.

The effort and resources we in Iceland devote into safeguarding important sites in our country for the benefit of migratory birds, often in challenging circumstances, will be severely affected if a key site like the Tagus is destroyed – the birds need the entire chain of sites to survive, and it is extremely worrying and disappointing for us to conserve birds in Iceland if they will not be well taken care of in Portugal.



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Iceland has global responsibility for high percentages of breeding waders and waterbirds and the airport threat is a massive danger to these 'Icelandic birds'. Most of your Black-tailed Godwits stop in the Tagus on route to west Africa.

We therefore urge you to reconsider this decision and to suspend this damaging development, which will result in high levels of disturbance on this very fragile ecosystem.

Your sincerely

Hólmfríður Arnardóttir Executive Director

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