This area of approx. 25,700 ha described by the Council Directive 92/43/EEC largely corresponds to the large Landscape Protection Area Bernstein-Lockenhaus-Rechnitz (Provincial Law Gazette No 19/1972) and includes three Nature Protection Areas: “Gößbachgraben“, (9,26 ha), “Galgenberg“ (9.25 ha) and “Trockenbiotop beim Friedhof in Rechnitz“, an arid biotope near the Rechnitz cementary (2.86 ha).

It comprises the hills of the “Bernsteiner und Günser Bergland” with about 30 cadastral communities.

The area is characterized by dense forests that are very rarely interrupted by settlements. Due to rich serpentinite resources the “Bernsteiner Bergland” is overgrown with vast areas of natural red pine forests, with rocky or arid grassland clearings on stony and shallow soil sites. Growth conditions favour extensively widespread oak and hornbeam forests changing to beech-fir-spruce forests before all in higher regions of the ‘Günser Bergland’. Ravine forests and meadow forests along brooks occur in wooded valleys. Fragmentary sites of xerophilic oak forests with Downy Oak (Qercus pubescens) and Sweet Chestnut (Castanea sativa) can be found. In the transitional area between forest and tillage, open orchard meadows and remaining parts of former arid grassland for grazing have been preserved between Rechnitz and Markt Neuhodis. Mesophilic meadow communities (False Oat meadows, Arrhenatherion) are widely common in the “Bernsteiner Bergland”. The current condition of the wooded areas in the pSCI varies greatly. The beech and fir tree forests in higher sites have been largely replaced by spruce forests and are therefore no longer relevant for the pSCI. The remaining beechfir forests are characterized by a low percentage of fir and a largely homogenous stand structure. Due to high vitality there is sufficient natural regeneration of the Red Beech so that the still existing stands are not threatened substantially if the present forest management is maintained. The same applies to oak-hornbeam forest sites which, unless they have been converted into pine, locust or spruce forests, provide endemic and in their species composition largely complete forest biocoenoses in spite of their relatively short rotation time and the commonly used clear-cutting practices. Current forest economy developments show extensification of timber use in low and medium height forest stands so that in the short or medium term forest

management will presumably not endanger forest ecosystems. The most urgent measures prominently taken in the forests that are still close to a natural state should be natural regeneration of autochthone tree species, a partly transition from low forest management to medium and high forest management and the promotion of standing old wood and deadwood. In general, changes in the tree species composition should aim at creating site-adjusted and autochthone tree stands.

Protected Features:

This area comprises a great variety of Council Directive-relevant habitats, which, in relation to the total size of the area, are mostly fragmentary and often widely separated from each other. Fir and beech forests in the “Günser and Bernsteiner Bergland” correspond to the habitat types 9110 Luzulo-Fagetum beech forests, 9130 Asperulo-Fagetum beech forests and 9170 Galio-Carpinetum oak hornbeam forests. The thermophilic oak stands with Turkey and Downey Oak are to be allocated to types 91G0 *Pannonian woods with Quercus petraea and Carpinus betulus and 91H0 *Pannonian woods with Quercus pubescens. Furthermore, fragmentary forests of ravines, slopes and alluvial forests of the categories 9180 *Tilio-Acerion forests of slopes, screes and ravines and 91E0 *Residual alluvial forests with Alnus glutinosa and Fraxinus excelsior (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae) can be found. The rock sites and arid grasslands correspond to a great variety of different habitat categories. The mesophilic meadows of the “Bernsteiner und Günser Bergland” are mostly stands of the type 6510 Lowland hay meadows (Alopecurus pratensis, Sanguisorba officinalis). The lean dry grasslands at the south edge of the Günser Bergland Mountains correspond to category *6210 Semi-natural dry

grasslands and scrubland facies on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia) (*important orchid sites). On the banks of the brooks Zöbernbach, Güns and Tauchenbach, Council Directive-relevant Limosella aquatica and tall herb stands have developed: 3270 Rivers with muddy banks with Chenopodion rubri pp and Bidention pp – type vegetation as well as 6430 Hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities of plains and of the montane to alpine levels.

There are remarkable, nationally important occurrences of Lesser Horseshoe Bat (Rhinolophus hipposideros) and Geoffroy's Bat (Myotis emarginatus). In addition to that the area is an important habitat for occurrences of the Barbastelle Bat (Barbastella barbastellus), the Lesser Mouse-Eared Bat (Myotis blythii), the Greater Mouse-Eared Bat (Myotis myotis) and Bechstein's Bat (Myotis bechsteini). The European Otter (Lutra lutra) is again present in the running waters of this area. Among the beetles, smaller but still significant occurrences of the Annex II-species Stag Beetle (Lucanus cervus) and Great Capricorn Beetle (Cerambyx cerdo) have to be mentioned. In addition to that, there are local occurrences of the Large Goldenringed Dragonfly (Cordulegaster heros), an endangered dragonfly species. Another specialty of that area is the Ladder Spleenwort (Asplenium adulterinum).