DELIVERING ON CAP STRATEGIC PLANS

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The reform of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) aims to have a more flexible, performance- and results-based approach that takes into account local conditions and needs while increasing the level of EU ambitions in terms of sustainability.

A central part of how the Commission aims to do this is via national strategic plans put forward by member states.

Through these plans, the drafts of which should be submitted to the Commission by the end of the year, EU countries will set out how they intend to meet the nine EU-wide objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform.

But this is the first time that member states have drafted such a plan and, with the deadline for the submission of their drafts looming, a number of open questions remain.

In this Event Report, EURACTIV takes a closer look at how member states will deliver on these plans, including the transparency of the process and how the tight timeline may impact the delivery of the CAP reform.
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The European Commission has dismissed calls for more transparency in the drafting of the Common Agricultural Policy strategic plans, saying an excessive focus on this risks overburdening the process and missing the big picture.

Through these plans, the drafts of which should be submitted to the Commission by the end of the year, EU countries will set out how they intend to meet the nine EU-wide objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform.

These plans are also the key engine for delivering on the Commission’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy, which is currently not legally binding.

The drafting of these plans has been the subject of intense scrutiny, with stakeholders expressing concerns over the lack of transparency in the process.

Criticising the Commission’s “culture of opacity” in previous CAP processes, civil society organisations Birdlife and ClientEarth sent a joint letter earlier in October calling on the Commission to change its practice and greatly improve the transparency of the approval of the CAP strategic plans.

“Citizens have a right to follow the assessment and approval process of the future strategic plans, especially as the observation letters must be adequately taken into account by member states,” the letter said.

However, asked during a recent EURACTIV event what information the Commission is planning to share...
during the drafting of the CAP strategic plans, Tassos Haniotis, deputy director-general of the European Commission’s DG AGRI, said this focus on transparency was not “pertinent” and risked overburdening the process.

“If we go into the process where everything becomes available, the only thing is it will overburden the process without really helping,” he warned, adding that this focus on proceduralism risks getting “bogged down” and missing the bigger picture.

“What’s the point of getting stuck on issues like this and miss[ing] the big picture?” he questioned, adding that more energy should instead be given to a “very concrete and factual debate about what works and what doesn’t work”.

“We have to address very specific challenges we have in the public domain, the knowledge of what works, what doesn’t work, and how. And instead of that, we are bogged down again on how much money will go here and by which data we’re going to make an assumption,” Haniotis said.

As such, while it is clear that the strategic plans must be made publicly available, what is made available for scrutiny in the drafting of the strategies will have to be considered and shared on the basis of Commission guidelines, he said.

However, this answer was insufficient for Green MEP Thomas Waitz.

Pointing out that the CAP represents more than a third of the EU budget, he said there was an “obligation” for both the Commission and member states to be as transparent as possible, and this includes transparency on who is actually influencing the negotiation process.

“I think it’s not debatable. It’s an obligation,” Waitz stressed.

Likewise, Célia Nyssens, an agricultural policy officer at the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), remarked that transparency is “not just a nice thing” but is “crucial for citizens and civil society to be able to scrutinise decisions that are made by their elected representatives”.

“And so we really need the commission to live up to the commitments that have been made at the highest political level and really have full transparency,” she urged, adding that this is needed for citizens to know where the money is being put and “call out decision-makers when they are saying one thing and doing a different thing”.

“We really need better transparency and full commitment from the Commission on this at all levels,” she said.
European farmers’ leeway for planning the changes needed to implement the Common Agricultural Policy’s new green architecture is shrinking as it remains uncertain whether all member states will submit the national strategic plans on time.

Strategic plans are a new feature in the EU’s farming subsidies programme in which member states will set out how they intend to meet the nine EU-wide objectives and deliver the bloc’s sustainability goals.

In theory, EU countries should submit their national strategic plans by the end of the year, allowing a smooth assessment process by the Commission before the new CAP enters into force on 1 January 2023.

In practice, several member states have recently expressed their concern about that deadline, calling on the Commission to give them more time and flexibility.

For some countries, the situation might be even worse than it seems.

“For Hungary, Greece, Cyprus and Romania, NGOs don’t have any information at all on what’s going on with regard to eco-schemes. It seems the strategic planning process is not even happening”, Célia Nyssens, policy officer at the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), pointed out in a recent EURACTIV event.

While it is still unclear whether the Commission will grant delays to member states, timing is becoming a pressing issue particularly when it comes to addressing the climate emergency.

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“We know that this decade is absolutely crucial for tackling climate change and biodiversity loss”, said Alan Matthews, professor of European agricultural policy at the Trinity College Dublin.

“This CAP will run until 2027, so we really need to make progress,” he added.

AN ‘OVERLOAD’ FOR FARMERS AND ADMINISTRATIONS?

The question of timing is also a crucial practical matter for administrations and farmers.

National administrations, even where there is a desire to fulfil the spirit of the CAP reform, are under huge time pressure, according to Matthews, who pointed out that the future CAP is clearly a highly political process.

“Maybe it is a bit naïve and idealistic to think of strategic planning in this technocratic way of setting objectives and designing instruments,” he said, warning of a potential “overload in terms of what we’re asking administrations to do.”

Matthews also highlighted that the same is also true for farmers as “they need certainty at an early point in time.”

Likewise, Udo Hemmerling, deputy general secretary of the German Farmers’ Association (DBV), insisted that farmers need clearance by next summer so that they can plan their activities for 2023.

“2023 still seems far away, but it is not”, Hemmerling stressed.

He told EURACTIV that farmers were planning multiannual crop rotations, thus deciding on the use of their land long months in advance. Furthermore, they had to submit their applications for EU funding for the upcoming year by May of the year before.

“We won’t just be sitting around and waiting,” Hemmerling said.

In order to plan how to respond to the eco-schemes – the innovative system introduced by the new CAP to deliver environmental goals – farmers need a clear picture of the rules and details by early summer 2022.

“But for now, it’s not clear at all whether that will be possible,” Hemmerling said.

PLAYING IT SAFE V. LAST-MINUTE CHANGES

For Alan Matthews, some countries – like Germany – were ‘playing safe’ in terms of designing the new eco-schemes.

“I think we will see a lot of situations where farmers will be paid for practices that, by and large, they are already doing anyway,” he said.

The green ambition is generally low across EU member states, according to EEB’s Nyssens.

“We still have some time to try and steer the ship in the right direction,” she said, calling on the Commission to raise the bar, both on the technical and political level, to ensure that member states are really meeting their obligations.

That might however be more easily said than done as political variables keep changing. In Germany, for instance, the new government, once in place, might well decide to step up its ambitions for eco-schemes.

“I expect the new government to make adjustments”, Hemmerling told EURACTIV. Many of those would, however, need the preliminary agreement of the German federal states as they are responsible for planning and implementing the second pillar of the CAP.

At the EU level, the new CAP still needs the final approval by the European Parliament, scheduled for mid-November. Although it is considered a formality, several Green MEPs are still calling to ‘vote this CAP down’, blaming the reformed programme of failing to address pressing climate issues.
With the recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the European Commission wants to make the EU’s farming subsidy programme more performance-oriented. However, non-binding targets and national leeway might hinder the Commission’s quest to keep track of results.

The new focus on results and performance is enshrined in the CAP’s nine EU-wide objectives, such as climate and environmental action, generational renewal, or increased competitiveness, which the policy is set to deliver on during the next seven years.

In practice, these goals are set to be reached via so-called national strategic plans, in which member states set out which of the EU-wide objectives they will prioritise and how they plan to attain them.

This aspect is considered as a big change from what has happened in the past, according to Alan Matthews, professor of European Agricultural Policy at the Trinity College in Dublin.

Apart from the nine CAP objectives, the Commission has also set out various sustainability targets for the agrifood sector in its flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork Strategy.

These targets include a 25% target for organic agriculture by 2030, as well as reduction targets for the use of pesticides and fertilisers.

However, member states are not obliged to deliver on the Farm to Fork goals in their strategic plans, as they are not enshrined in the CAP legislation, but only mentioned in a
Concerning the 2030 goals of the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies, there is still an invitation to member states to actually include concrete national targets in their strategic plans,” Maria Rudolf, head of unit at the Commission’s directorate-general for agriculture, said when asked by EURACTIV.

However, she further highlighted that without a binding legal basis, this could be nothing more than an ‘invitation’ from the Commission’s part.

**MONITORING IMPACT**

“What the Commission wants to be able to do at the end of the process is to add up what all of the member states are individually promising to do and see if it comes anywhere near the overall EU-wide target,” Matthews told EURACTIV on the sidelines of the event.

However, whether member states will actually listen to the Commission and come up with specific targets remains an open question, he added.

While the F2F sets targets on the actual impact of policies on, for example, biodiversity or greenhouse gas emissions, Matthews said such results-based indicators are missing from the binding body of CAP legislation.

Instead, he explained, the strategic plans are set to focus on output indicators (such as a target for the number of beneficiaries of any specific scheme) and result indicators (for instance the amount of peatland that should be rewetted).

From his point of view, the missing focus on policy impact had “always been a weakness” of the CAP regulations, Matthews added.

Additionally, according to the researcher, keeping tabs on the impact of policy measures is rendered difficult by the setup of the so-called eco-schemes, the cornerstone of the CAP’s green architecture, which remunerates farmers for sustainable farming practices.

Each member state can offer farmers a catalogue of these voluntary schemes to choose from.

**COMPLEX PLANNING**

This freedom of choice, however, makes the eco-schemes difficult to plan, according to Matthews.

“Even if a member state wants to encourage the green transition, this process of strategic planning is proving extremely complicated,” he said, as it is unclear in advance how many farmers will take up any particular eco-scheme.

Considering the uncertainties around the impact of the CAP strategic plans, is there any chance for EU-wide monitoring of the progress towards agricultural policy goals?

From Matthews’ point of view, there are precedents for similar approaches of EU-wide, non-binding targets working out in the past, such as the renewable energy target.

Moreover, he added, in case the collective ambition of the national strategic plans should turn out to fall short of the EU’s targets, the Commission could always initiate measures through other pieces of legislation, such as the Pesticides Regulation.

“I see it as kind of an iterative process, rather than something that would be decided once and for all,” he concluded.

The Commission’s Rudolf, meanwhile, stressed that the EU executive would not limit itself to monitoring CAP performance indicators but would also assess Strategic Plans according to their “contribution to environmental and climate ambitions more widely”.

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