SUSTAINABLE FARMING AMBITIONS: BETWEEN THE CAP AND THE GREEN DEAL

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After years of negotiations, there is finally light at the end of the tunnel for reaching a deal on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

However, much has changed in the EU policy landscape when it comes to the agrifood sector in the interim between the start of discussions back in 2018 and now.

Most notable of these is the publication of the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy.

Lying at the heart of the European Green Deal, the strategy is set to play a defining role in shaping the debate on the future of the European agri-food sector.

As we approach a crucial moment in the final talks on the CAP reform, the EURACTIV network took a closer look at the relationship between the Green Deal and the CAP across seven different member states and what lies ahead for the sector in this special report.
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Germany is considering ways to fund an increased ambition in animal welfare standards, including a new levy on animal welfare, but the idea has raised eyebrows among German farmers, who are concerned they will be exposed to unfair competition. EURACTIV Germany reports.

“Our society wants more animal welfare. Our farmers want more animal welfare. But more animal welfare in the stables and on the fields is not for free!” Germany’s agriculture minister, Julia Klöckner, said recently after the presentation of a study on the animal welfare-friendly conversion of livestock farming.

With these words, Klöckner defended the possible restructuring of livestock farming in Germany, highlighting that “economic efficiency must go hand in hand with greater animal welfare”.

Improved animal welfare is a key EU priority, featuring both as one of the CAP reform’s nine specific objectives as well as in the Commission’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy, which includes raising animal welfare as part of its aims to “deliver a healthier and more sustainable EU food system”.

Germany has been particularly vocal on the issue, with Klöckner spearheading the issue at the EU level.

This led to an agreement between the 27 agriculture ministers on an EU-wide animal welfare label in December, at the end of Germany’s EU Council presidency, and the minister called it “a big step forward”.

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However, the push to raise animal welfare standards comes at a price.

Several proposals on how to restructure and finance animal husbandry in Germany are currently on the table, according to the minister.

These have been explored in the above-mentioned feasibility study commissioned by Klöckner from the so-called Borchert Commission, whose results were published in March.

The study comes on the back of Berlin's ambition to bring German stables in line with animal welfare standards, projected to cost €2.9 billion by 2025 and €4.3 billion by 2030. The German government has promised €300 million towards the aim as part of its economic stimulus programme, but the study is designed to outline ways in which the deficit could be financed.

These include a higher turnover tax for animal products, a “supplementary levy on animal welfare” in addition to income and corporation tax, and the conversion of EU direct payments.

Such a tax, which Klöckner hopes to soon see an agreement on, would have “legislative leeway”, the study said, concluding that an independent animal welfare levy would be “unproblematic in terms of constitutional and EU law”.

When it comes to the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, EU lawmakers are hoping that 30% of direct payments under the new CAP will be earmarked for so-called ‘eco-schemes’, subsidies intended to help farmers switch to greener practices.

However, the study's authors found that if eco-schemes were to cover animal welfare measures, this would come “at the expense of the intended stronger orientation of the CAP towards environmental and climate protection.”

**ANIMAL WELFARE BUT NO PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT**

Germany's food and agriculture ministry cautioned that although it would like to see the country become a European pioneer in animal welfare matters, applying stricter standards to German farmers than minimum EU standards needs to be justified.

This means that a state animal welfare label would have to remain voluntary and its design should “not express any preference for products of German origin “, according to the Borchert Commission study.

Imposing stricter standards on German farmers would be compatible with the EU free movement principles if these are “not linked to a marketing ban or specific labelling requirements for products imported from other member states,” they added.

The ministry told EURACTIV that unilaterally raising standards without supporting farmers accordingly could lead to the import of cheaper foreign products “over whose production we have little influence”.

In other words, to prevent production from being outsourced and consumers from switching to cheaper products from neighbouring European countries, the welfare of German farm animals must be economically viable for all parties involved.

The ministry also hopes consumers will be willing to pay more for “animal-friendly” products.

A survey made by the German data company Statista found that 43% and 36% of Germans are respectively “very willing” and “rather willing” to pay more for animal welfare.

While the European Commission has stated that animal welfare “is clearly […] what citizens want”, the German animal welfare association has found that three-quarters of consumers would also like food labels to be more transparent regarding animal welfare standards.
The European Green Deal offers opportunities and challenges to Spanish farmers, stakeholders have warned, highlighting that Spain needs more support in the transition towards a more sustainable model of agriculture. EURACTIV’s partner EFE Agro reports.

The European Commission’s Biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies lie at the heart of the ambitious roadmap set out by the Commission in the European Green Deal, whose goal is transforming the EU into a climate-neutral economy by 2050.

The Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy, the EU’s flagship food policy, sets out concrete targets for greening the sector, including a 50% reduction in the use and risk of pesticides, a 50% reduction in the sales of antimicrobials, and a goal of reaching 25% of agricultural land under organic farming.

However, ten months after its release in May 2020, farmers’ organisations are optimistic about the future of the sector but also voice concern over the idea of “meeting more requirements with less funds”.

The association Por otra PAC (‘For another CAP’), a coalition of 30 sustainable farming organisations comprising farmers, environmental

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NGOs and food experts who campaign for a different vision of the EU’s farming subsidy programme, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), supports the strategy, calling it a “first step” towards a green transition.

Fernando Viñegla, the coalition’s spokesperson, underlined that there are many examples in Spain showing that the change is a reality.

“The strategy is a great opportunity for Spain, a country vulnerable to climate change. If we work fast on sustainable options, the impact will be lower”, according to Viñegla.

He added that the diversity of Spanish agriculture is also a key advantage.

“The current model of agriculture is about to collapse and does not solve problems such as rural areas depopulation. Solutions are needed”, Viñegla added.

But in terms of public support, he said, Spain is worse positioned than countries like France or Germany, because they “are betting more on green investments and on a CAP with more participation of the territories concerned”.

EU ‘SHOOTING ITSELF IN THE FOOT’

Meanwhile, the Alliance for Sustainable Farming (ALAS), a group representing a majority of Spanish farmers organisations, warned that new green demands coming from Brussels have fallen at an inappropriate time, given the difficulties facing the sector during the coronavirus crisis, adding that this threatens the competitiveness of EU agriculture.

According to the president of ALAS, Pedro Gallardo, the EU is “shooting itself in the foot” with proposals that “risk EU’s own capacity to ensure food security”.

Moreover, Gallardo said more support is needed for the environmental measures that the Spanish government is considering in preparation of its national CAP strategic plan, stressing that demands on farmers “cannot be increased” if they don’t receive further public aid.

Spain is the EU member state with the highest percentage of agricultural land under organic farming.

With 2.35 million hectares of organically farmed land, this puts the country in third place worldwide behind Australia and Argentina, according to the Spanish Professional Association of Organic Farming Ecovalia.

The regions of Catalonia, Andalusia and Navarra are already close to the 25% target set by the European Commission.

SPECIFIC CLIMATIC CONDITIONS

Regarding the F2F, Gallardo also noted that Spain needs more phytosanitary products than Finland or the Baltic countries due to climatic factors and the country’s geographic proximity to Africa, where “the same environmental requirements are not met”.

In that regard, he said, the reduction target set by the Commission for the use of phytosanitary products looks like “promoting a health policy that would mean a reduction of medicines available in a pharmacy”.

ALAS upholds that the EU should increase its productivity and promote “innovation tools” such as genetic editing.

In a similar vein, a report from PWC about agriculture in Spain concludes that “the use of new technologies, new varieties, genetic editing and a strong bet on research” are the right solutions for farmers.
Family farming is no easy task, but one young Bulgarian couple has shown that sustainable farming can be a successful business venture, while also helping to revive one of the EU’s poorest regions. EURACTIV Bulgaria reports.

The young Bulgarian farmers, Dimitar Stanchev and Ralitsa Kuneva, have been tending to their beehives located in the Strandzha Mountains, south-east Bulgaria, for more than 12 years.

The two young farmers produce and process 35-40 tonnes of organic honey annually, 18 tonnes of which is exported to the EU market.

As well as producing coveted products such as manna honey, registered as an EU protected geographical indication, and other novel honey products, the couple are also heavily invested in their local community.

Alongside their honey production, they run their own processing factory and grow 30 hectares of organic vegetables which supply their restaurant, where guests can sample food coming directly from the farm.

“Almost everything sold in our

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restaurant comes from our farm,” Stanchev said, adding that what is not produced in-house is bought from local farms, which they work to promote.

“Every item on the menu has an indication of its origin and which farm it comes from. Thus, each of our guests gets to know more about the produce of the local farmers”, he said.

Besides investing effort into their thriving business, the couple also invests in their local village, Indje Voivoda, paving its streets with their own money, building eco-trails and bike lanes, and also aiming to soon launch a festival to present the unique foods of the region.

In doing so, the couple exemplifies the key goals of the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy, which aims to shorten agricultural supply chains and, in doing so, offer better incomes for farmers.

Likewise, the reform of the EU’s farming subsidy programme, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), aims to prioritise small and medium-sized farms and encourage young people to join the profession.

To this end, the CAP reform puts forth a number of measures, such as offering a higher level of support per hectare for small and medium-sized farms and setting aside a minimum of 2% of direct support payments allocated to each EU country for young farmers.

So far, the two young Bulgarian farmers have successfully applied for two EU projects under the CAP’s rural development programme.

The first project was successfully completed in 2015. A subsidy of €90,000 helped fund a project for professional honey extraction.

However, Stanchev points out that the support offered could be improved.

Namely, he would like to see the rule that farmers should maintain machines subsidised by EU funds for five years abolished, due to the fast pace of technological change.

Highlighting that better machines come out every year and farms lose their competitive edge, he said that in only two to three years, the machines bought with this money have become “obsolete”.

The farming couple is now looking to implement a new project with a total investment value of €350,000, supported via the same programme.

This funding will help to grow the business even further, including a factory and 1,300 new hives and machines for the production of bee fodder.

THE PATH TO ORGANIC FARMING

Another key aim of the Farm to Fork strategy is for at least 25% of EU farmland to be farmed organically by 2030. But while Stanchev and Kuneva are already working towards this goal, meeting the same target will be a great challenge for Bulgaria.

Latest Eurostat data from 2018 shows that the country is one of the lowest-ranked in the EU in terms of land used for organic farming, with only 2.4% of agricultural land farmed organically.
Producing more while reducing the impact on the climate and the environment: this is the challenge facing the agricultural world today, presented as one of the keys to a successful green transition by the French and European public authorities. EURACTIV France explores the potential of agroecology in squaring this circle.

“We are faced with an emergency, with economic as well as environmental challenges,” Frédéric Lambert, head of the European and international department at the agriculture and food ministry, told the Forum for the Future of Agriculture (FFA) on 16 March.

Agriculture accounts for 11% of greenhouse gas emissions in the EU and 17% in France, according to a report from France’s leading agricultural union (FNSEA).

While the agriculture sector in France has been called upon to become greener, reduce the use of pesticides and meet growing public demand for healthy and sustainable food, the French government has also put forward during the pandemic the objective of achieving food sovereignty.

But the central question is: how can we produce both quantity and quality in a sector marked by low incomes, excessive debt, and daily suicides?

**AGROECOLOGY – A ‘SMART’ PRACTICE**

In its plans to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the EU is banking, among other things, on strengthening agro-ecological practices.

This involves a collection of farming practices that aim to reduce pressure on the environment, reintroduce biodiversity and preserve
natural resources through a systemic approach. These include organic farming, but also agri-environmental and climate measures in conventional farming and practices labelled as ‘high environmental value’.

"Agroecology reduces the carbon footprint of agriculture, promotes the recovery of biodiversity, restores soil fertility, prevents air and water pollution, and increases the economic resilience of farms producing healthy and affordable food," the EU’s Committee of the Regions (CoR) argued in an opinion published on 4 March.

This would be “intelligent” agriculture, in line with nature, which would in this way respond to the challenge of the “systemic transformation of agricultural production methods”.

This is needed to achieve the European objectives of “significantly reducing the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, as well as antibiotics, by 2030”, as outlined in the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy.

**TRANSITION COSTS, A ‘MAJOR OBSTACLE TO SYSTEM CHANGE’**

While agroecological practices can prove profitable in the medium term, the transition often generates significant costs in the short term.

These transition costs “are undoubtedly a major brake on the change of system”, according to a statement published last August by France Stratégie, the government’s advisory body that aims to shed light on collective choices on social, economic and environmental issues.

The institutional think tank also highlights a lack of correlation between the most environmentally friendly practices and the financial aid allocated to them. In the statement, they highlight that CAP subsidies are still “too disconnected from the environmental requirements” imposed on farms.

However, with the recently proposed eco-schemes, the Commission wishes to reward environmentally-friendly farming practices.

The European Parliament's position in the current CAP negotiations is in favour of having at least 30% of direct payments to farmers paid this way.

"Eco-schemes make it possible to better take into account the risks that farmers take by adopting more ecological practices," said Lambert. France is said to be “pushing very hard for mandatory eco-schemes” in the negotiations for the new CAP.

The Commission’s flagship F2F strategy relies on competitiveness and the will of European citizens to change their diets.

According to the Commission, the evolving expectations from citizens are causing significant changes in the food market, and these should be seen as an opportunity for farmers to make sustainability their trademark.

A sustainable food system, as laid out in the F2F strategy, would be “essential to achieve the climate and environmental objectives of the Green Deal while improving the income of primary producers and strengthening the competitiveness of the Union”.

**NO TRANSITION WITHOUT REMUNERATION**

Highlighting that agriculture is “first and foremost a productive economic activity, a profession from which the players must be able to earn an income, the 2020 orientation report from French FNSEA insists on a number of essential prerequisites to enable farmers to achieve the transition everyone is hoping for.

This includes public policies commensurate with climate ambitions, the lifting of innovation and development barriers for competitive agriculture, more attractive risk management tools, and “an external policy consistent with our climate commitments”.

Farmers should also be remunerated in line with their commitments in the fight against climate change, according to the report.

"It is not regulations, and even less so sanctions” that will enable farmers to start transitioning, the report says, adding that it will not be the CAP, “at least not with the current budget”, that will drive the movement in a sustainable way.

Ultimately, only a fair remuneration will enable farmers to engage – and succeed – in the agro-ecological transition, according to the FNSEA. “This will be done either through the price of their products or through a full remuneration for environmental services in the framework of a renewed contractual arrangement,” the report added.
Croatian organisations fight to preserve seed as a basic human right

By Iva Badanjak and Karla Juničić | EURACTIV.hr

Bolstered by its own commercial production of seeds, Croatia has become one of the top EU countries for organic agricultural production. But organic farmers now fear that the introduction of a new Seed Act may jeopardise this. EURACTIV Croatia reports.

The draft act, introduced in December, aims to simplify seed production and certification, especially for old and indigenous varieties. However, it has proven controversial, with detractors warning it could have far-reaching consequences for Croatian agricultural biodiversity.

Both the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy, as well as the Commission’s Biodiversity strategy, speak of the importance of preserving seed and the need to facilitate the access of indigenous varieties to the market.

“The Commission will take
measures to facilitate the registration of seed varieties, including organic farming, and to ensure easier market access for traditional and locally adapted varieties,” the strategy F2F reads.

Likewise, under the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), there is a provision on the “conservation and sustainable use and development of genetic resources in agriculture”.

However, the act includes a number of problematic elements, according to Croatian sustainable farming association Biovrt who, in cooperation with the Croatian Association of Organic Producers (HSEP) and the association of Croatian family farms “Život”, launched a campaign, the “Seed is our human right”, in January 2021.

The campaign calls for producers to have the right to select and grow seeds on their own farm, and has so far received the support of 135 Croatian associations and over 31,000 citizens.

Kolar-Fodor pointed out that the new act directly affects thousands of farmers, warning that it will significantly increase the price of production and risk of a further seed price increase.

"Croatian seed production is insufficient to meet needs and our country’s entire food system is dependent on imports. In 2019, seeds worth $11.9 million (€9.9 million) were imported”, Silvija Kolar-Fodor, president of Biovrt, explained.

One of the key issues is that the law aims to introduce the term “Seed from an agricultural holding” – the seed of a variety of agricultural plant produced and intended for sowing exclusively on one’s own farm – and prohibit these from being sold on the market.

The other controversy is brewing over the inclusion of Article 16, which restricts the use of these on family-owned farms.

“This term does not exist in any of the EU directives that regulate seed production”, Kolar-Fodor said, highlighting that the Seed Act applies exclusively to commercial use and the seed market.

“The draft law regulates seeds from agricultural holdings, which at the same time explicitly prohibits their placing on the market. Therefore, we believe that this term and all the provisions that apply to it should be deleted”, she stressed.

‘NO NEW RESTRICTIONS,’ SAYS AGRICULTURE MINISTRY

The Ministry of Agriculture claims that the new law does not impose any new restrictions on the seed production and certification system, but instead simplifies the introduction of old and indigenous varieties.

According to the ministry, the seed production sector has grown 23% in the past three years, but every year about 20% of seeds are of extremely low quality – which leads to a decline in production.

"Yields of unprocessed seeds are lower than certified seeds, and its processing increases yields to almost 3 tonnes", the Ministry pointed out.

Meanwhile, the Croatian Agency for Agriculture and Food (HAPIH) highlighted that by registering varieties in the National Variety List, all existing varieties will be gathered in one place, facilitating the production and marketing of old indigenous genotypes.

However, Sunčana Pešak, the secretary of HSEP, argues this is disputable, pointing out that article 16 states that farmers may grow only certified seed for their own use provided they can prove its origin.

Maja Žulj Mihaljević from the department of plant breeding at the faculty of agriculture in Zagreb said Article 16 is a “domestic idea of our legislators”, and has not been taken from EU marketing directives.

In this sense, legal measures related to the control of seeds for farmers’ own needs are stricter in Croatia compared to other EU countries, she said.

HSEP’s Pešak explained that producers in other EU countries are free to grow seeds without restrictions for their own needs, and use unregistered varieties.

“The only differences are whether they can exchange such seeds with each other and under what conditions,” she said.

For example, countries such as Austria, France, and recently Italy have recognised the importance of exchanges among producers as part of a “solidarity practice important for the conservation and development of agrobiodiversity”, she pointed out.

Biljana Borzan, the S&D rapporteur for the strategy F2F,
stressed the need to support seed development.

“Given the great growth of eco-production in Croatia and plans for the further increase within the strategy F2F, the ministry should intervene and take measures to start production,” Borzan said, warning that without seeds, there is “no independence in production”.

“But it seems that the opposite is happening,” he warned.

On 16 March, the Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Stella Kyriakides, on behalf of the Commission, responded to the question about the compliance with EU laws, saying she has not yet been informed on the Croatian law, so she could only refer to “EU legislation on seed marketing”.

At the request of the Council, the Commission is currently conducting a study on the possibilities of updating the law on seed marketing.

“Croatia has all-natural potential for sustainable agriculture. I believe that the new European strategy – the EU Green Deal, will enable us to make positive progress if we adopt consistent strategies and plans in time,” Žulj Mihaljević concluded.
EU must not risk becoming an ‘agricultural museum’, stakeholders warn

By Natasha Foote | EURACTIV.com

The EU must up the ante when it comes to innovation if it is to align high levels of agricultural production with the vision of a more sustainable future, as set out in the Green Deal, according to EU lawmakers, who warn that the bloc is “lagging behind”.

At a recent European Parliament AGRI Committee debate on enabling innovation and new technologies for sustainable farming, the head of the research and innovation at DG AGRI, Kerstin Rosenow, highlighted the importance of knowledge and innovation as “key drivers and enablers in accelerating the transition to sustainable, healthy and inclusive agri-food systems”.

“They can help develop and test new solutions that we really need to address today’s sustainability challenges also in relation to or much more accentuated by the Green Deal, and overcome barriers and uncover new market opportunities,” she stressed.

Likewise, speaking before reporters at his first AGRIFISH Council of EU-27 ministers as Italy's farming minister, Stefano Patuanelli also highlighted the importance of innovation in the green transition.

“I believe there are reasons to think that agriculture can make that leap towards greater productivity and income that could be then better distributed in the supply chain through innovation.”

This need to innovate is addressed in the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy, which highlights that research and innovation (R&I)
are key drivers in accelerating the transition to sustainable, healthy and inclusive food systems from primary production to consumption.

As part of this drive, the strategy proposes to spend €10 billion on R&I in the sector, as well as on the use of digital technologies and nature-based solutions for agri-food.

Fostering innovation is also a key priority of the reform of the EU’s farming subsidies programme, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

“The CAP of the future will both encourage increased investment in research and innovation and enable farmers and rural communities to benefit from it,” according to the Commission.

The Commission has also committed to work with member states to strengthen the role of innovation in their CAP national strategic plans, with the aim to “incentivise the structuring and organisation of the national innovation ecosystem”.

However, while the need to innovate to achieve these ambitious goals is clear, MEPs have flagged concerns that the EU is “lagging behind” in certain areas.

‘BOTTLENECK’ FOR INNOVATION

Speaking during the AGRI Committee debate, right-wing MEP Mazaly Aguilar raised a concern that, by imposing new restrictions on the agricultural sector without offering new opportunities, the EU risks becoming an “agricultural museum”.

Due to outdated and restrictive approaches, she added, there is a “bottleneck” for certain types of innovation, such as innovative approaches to genetic engineering.

Likewise, socialist MEP Juozas Olekas highlighted that Europe is “really lagging behind the rest of the world” when it comes to plant breeding innovations.

Stakeholders also raised the need for innovation in a range of other areas, including animal husbandry and innovative solutions to save on natural resources such as water and soil nutrients.

Renew Europe’s Adrián Vaquez Lazara highlighted that there is a gap between the Farm to Fork ambitions and the reality on the ground, querying whether the strategy includes sufficient tools to ensure that the primary sector can achieve the necessary technological transition.

EU ‘CANNOT MISS THE BOAT’

In response, Yvonne Colomer, executive director of the Triptolemos Foundation in Spain, which works towards the creation of a sustainable global food system, stressed that the EU “cannot miss the boat”.

“We cannot afford to fall behind. We will regret it if we do. And we’ll see it will have huge economic consequences,” she warned.

“To ensure the sustainability of our agriculture, farmers must have the freedom to choose the tools and practices that are best suited to their specific needs and agricultural environments,” she added.

According to Colomer, excluding tools that can help them do their job properly or contribute to this within a systems-based approach could prove "dangerous".
The EU is gearing up to slash the use and risk of pesticides in half by 2030, on the back of an increasing body of research pointing to their harmful effects. In Poland, the biggest eastern member state, alternatives are currently expensive and poorly promoted. EURACTIV Poland reports.

The EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy, aims to improve the quality and safety of food produced in the bloc while simultaneously reducing the sector’s negative environmental impact.

Within this mandate, the strategy sets out a goal for the use and risk of pesticides to be slashed in half by 2030.

Polish farmers have a range of biological and agrotechnical protective measures at their disposal and are increasingly engaging in integrated pest management (IPM).

This management system is based on the use of all protection methods while giving priority to non-chemical agents, so as to minimise the risk to humans, animals and the environment.

This involves various methods, such as installing pheromone traps to attract beneficial insects feeding on fruit trees, or the use of predatory organisms who feed on those that are harmful to crops.

For example, certain species of insect pests, like hymenoptera insects, whose larvae are parasites of other insects, are effective in combatting the larvae of the night butterfly that harms tobacco crops.
However, biological agents in Poland account for only 2% of all registered plant protection products, compared to 4% globally, according to a letter written in December by a team of scientists from Polish universities and research and industry institutes.

The letter calls on the minister of agriculture Grzegorz Puda, and the EU Agriculture Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski, who is also Polish, to take action on this front.

“State interference is necessary, and thus the creation of specific policy instruments that will help change the behaviour of farmers, leading to a reduction in the use of pesticides,” Małgorzata Bzowska-Bakalarz from the University of Life Sciences in Lublin argued in the letter.

**NOT ENOUGH EMPHASIS ON IPM**

IPM principles to keep the use of pesticides down at levels that are economically and ecologically justified are laid down in the 2014 review of the directive on sustainable use of pesticides.

However, according to a recent report from the European Court of Auditors, the Commission seems to have failed so far to either adequately enforce the implementation of such rules by EU member states or to adequately incentivise them, for example, as by mobilising the use of the Common Agricultural Policy’s (CAP) direct payments.

The analysts concluded that this could mainly be put down to a lack of precise data provided by EU countries. They also pointed out that the countries do not integrate the requirement to use integrated pest management into national law.

**PESTICIDES SALES GROWING IN POLAND**

Meanwhile, the use of chemical plant protection products in Poland has actually grown in the previous decade.

Although Poland is not at the forefront of pesticide users in the EU, according to data from Eurostat, Poland’s 2016 pesticide sales were 12.3% higher than in 2011, despite the fact that the area of planted crops increased by only 1.5% between 2011-2017.

In Poland, the average consumption of the active substance is 2.5 kilograms per hectare per year, compared to the EU average of 3.5 kg.

The problem is that the western part of the EU (such as the Netherlands, which consumes the most pesticides per hectare) may reduce its consumption faster than Poland, according to Marek Mrówczyński, director of the Institute of plant protection at the National research institute in Poznań.

Speaking at a recent Polish Agricultural Congress meeting, he said the barrier to the use of biological agents is their price, which is 3-5 times higher per hectare than the use of chemicals.

In Poland, biological agents are most often used in greenhouse crops, where it is possible to regulate the conditions prevailing undercover. This is not the case for open crops.

Therefore, without funds from the EU’s farming subsidy programme (the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP) for 2021-2027, changes in Polish agriculture will not be possible, he concluded.

The objectives of the new CAP were discussed at the end of February in the Polish Sejm at a meeting of the agriculture committee, where officials pointed out that these goals would be difficult to reconcile.

“The European Commission wants to increase farmers’ incomes, but at the same time reduce the use of artificial fertilizers and plant protection products, which may lead to a reduction in agricultural production,” said Dorota Niedziela from the Civic Platform.

Likewise, Miroslaw Maliszewski from the Polish People’s Party pointed out that non-chemical plant protection products or new cultivation technologies are still insufficiently available in Poland, stressing also that they come with a price tag.

However, Ryszard Bartosik, deputy minister of agriculture, offered assurances that the changes would be introduced gradually.

“When it comes to fertilisers and plant protection products, the point is not that we will not prohibit the use of such substances or such a number of fertilisers by some day-to-day decisions. Instead, we will persuade farmers to use the most environmentally friendly means, and to use fertilisers in a precise way,” he said.

He also promised that the Polish government would allocate funds obtained from the EU budget for this purpose.
Romanian farmers are naturally wary of cooperatives, which are often strongly associated with the country’s communist past and command economy. But thanks to young farmers and EU funding, more and more farmers are choosing to join forces. EURACTIV Romania reports.

For many villagers, the term ‘cooperative’ has a negative connotation, being heavily associated with the so-called ‘agricultural production cooperatives’ built on the model of the Soviet kolkhoz.

However, far from the classical cooperative model in which members decide, in these communist cooperatives farmers worked while top-down decisions were imposed by the state.

Farmers are therefore naturally wary of anything resembling this kind of structure.

However, attitudes are slowly starting to change in the country and, with the help of European funds, the next few years could see a boom in agricultural cooperatives.

“A large stimulus in the CAP, after 2022, will be for cooperatives,” says Ion Păunel, president of the Olt Agricultural Producers’ Union, referring to the EU’s farming subsidy programme, the Common Agricultural Policy.

Păunel is involved in setting up several cooperatives in Olt County in southern Romania.

“First of all, we help farmers get organised, we educate producers, we teach them how to run a cooperative and we help them in the application process for European funds,” he explained.

The farmers are able to apply for support from rural development funds, which includes several specific measures to offer farmers a helping hand in this area, according to Păunel.

Speaking during a debate on farmers’ co-operatives as a solution for greener agriculture, Romania’s agriculture minister, Adrian Oros, also promised there will be consistent support for farmers’ associations in the future.
Once the CAP reform is sealed by the EU legislators, member states will be expected to declare the environmental measures – the so-called eco-schemes – they intend to pursue in their national strategic plans, which the EU executive will ultimately have to approve.

“In our national strategic plan, we can include measures to encourage farmers to join cooperatives,” he said, stressing that there is “no other way” for small farmers to survive.

“We have looked everywhere in Europe and it is the only solution. We have had so far EU funding incentives, as the support in any measure would increase by 20% if the farmer joins the cooperative. We must maintain, or even increase this amount because we can only encourage them, we cannot force them,” he said.

A QUICK DEVELOPMENT

If other farmers remain sceptical about the development of cooperatives, Păunel is optimistic.

While he acknowledged that small family farms are disadvantaged in relation to the authorities and in contracts with retailers, he said Romania has “functional and viable cooperatives and more and more young people are attracted by association.”

Statistical data also shows an accelerated pace of development in recent years.

In Romania, there are more than 1,500 agricultural cooperatives, more than 200 of which were established in 2019, according to the Romanian Center for European Policies (CRPE), a think tank.

The number of new cooperatives peaked in 2018, with 280 agricultural cooperatives established, while CRPE estimates that fewer than 200 cooperatives were set up last year due to the pandemic.

But there is more than enough room for growth.

Only 1% of Romanian farmers are currently in an associative structure, much lower than the EU average of 34%, according to research conducted for Renew Europe.

“I have been following the evolution of agricultural associations for eight years and I believe that this is the solution for healthy development in rural areas. There are projects that have worked but we need consistent support in the future,” said Cristian Ghinea, a former Renew MEP who is currently the Romanian minister for Investments and European Projects.

In the first eight months of 2020, 18 agricultural cooperatives drew funds of over 38 million lei (about €7.7 million) to expand their operations, storage or processing abilities, according to data from the Agency for Rural Investment Financing (AFIR), the agency in charge of rural development funds.

"Agricultural cooperatives are a viable alternative to get European funds, and more and more Romanians succeeded in recent years to overcome emotional barriers and mistrust and chose to partner to ensure their survival on the market,” said Gabriel Dan Ieremia, an EU funding consultant.

INCREASING INTEREST FOR LOCAL PRODUCTS

In addition to financial aid, cooperatives also need consultancy help, especially in areas like marketing and processing.

“They don’t just need contracts with large retailers. One can also organise to sell at the gate, in their own stores or in local markets,” said Păunel, who is himself a vegetable farmer and supplier to stores of Mega Image, a chain owned by retail group Ahold Delhaize.

In fact, in recent years, more and more farmers are using social media to directly reach their consumers, and this trend intensified in the past year.

“The pandemic brought one good thing – Romans consume more Romanian products, both in traditional markets and in chain stores,” Păunel said. Shortening supply chains is one of the key aims of the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy.

Those who have turned online to sell directly to consumers have reaped the rewards.

“Consumers appreciate local products, and the trend will be more evident with the support of European funds,” Păunel said, adding that the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) aims to increase support for small farms.

In fact, Păunel grounds his optimism in EU support, saying that the transition funds alone hold the potential to help 2,500-3,000 young people to settle in rural areas.

Looking to the future, he hopes that a combination of generational change, the inflow of EU funds and know-how, shorter chains between producers and consumers and support for farmers will see a boost in both quality and quantity, which could in turn help to strengthen Romania’s position in world agri-food trade.