Lying at the heart of the European Green Deal, the Farm to Fork and the Biodiversity strategies play a key role in shaping the debate around the future of the European agri-food sector.

In its flagship food policy, the EU executive has set out its vision for food systems that are viable and sustainable, while the biodiversity strategy proposes a far-reaching nature restoration plan.

But achieving these environmental ambitions requires coherence in priorities and policies in order to address challenges without running the risk of undermining the EU’s green goals, potentially to the detriment of the farming sector.

In this special report, EURACTIV takes a closer look at what lies ahead in the implementation of the Green Deal in agriculture as we approach a crucial moment in the final talks on the reform of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).
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Portuguese presidency to handle agriculture ‘with eyes on the future’

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com

The outgoing German presidency is leaving you the tough task of the CAP reform. Will you work for having an agreement within your presidency?

In the next six months, we will be committed to the conclusion of the CAP negotiations, started by the German presidency, that is currently going on between the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament materialised in three regulations: on the strategic plans, the horizontal regulation and the regulation about the common organization of agricultural markets. This is a fundamental goal: to ensure the agricultural sector’s resilience and a transition to a greener architecture, with more revenue to farmers and fair prices to consumers.

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At the same time, the threat of a CAP withdrawal by the Commission is still hanging over the heads of negotiators. Have you been reassured by the EU executive they will avoid using this ‘nuclear’ option, or is it something that could happen?

We deeply believe in everybody’s commitment to lead these negotiations to a good conclusion. The CAP will be fundamental in the transition to a sustainable food system and reinforce the European farmers’ ambition to help the EU goals in climate and environment protection. It’s undeniable that the CAP has strengthened, throughout the years, the integration of environmental objectives and goals related to food supply and farmers revenue. The reform under discussion increases CAP’s environmental goals, alongside the Green Deal.

We’re all committed to that goal, in a transparent and predictable process. We started a structured dialogue, in which the European Commission sends recommendations to member States, as strategic CAP plans are concerned, namely to evaluate each State’s contribution to the European Green Deal’s goals. We will do everything to conclude these negotiations. We all want a greener, more inclusive, more efficient and more sustainable agriculture.

What’s your take on the work done so far regarding the Green deal implementation in the agrifood sectors and what will be your focus?

The general agreement of the Council of agriculture ministers of 19-20 October on the CAP’s reform, has made it possible to achieve special importance, namely due to the positive and balanced balance between economic and environmental objectives.

The F2F strategy is at the heart of the Green Deal, and its objectives are to make the EU’s food system more autonomous and sustainable. This strategy involves changing the way Europeans produce food and eat, respecting natural resources and preserving biodiversity, and their importance has been reinforced by the context created by the pandemic of COVID-19.

In this transition, towards a truly sustainable and resilient Europe, European farmers will have a very important role, as will the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which will be a fundamental instrument to help farmers achieve more sustainable production systems.

When it comes to the Farm to Fork, the public opinion has so far been more focused on targets, but what kind of innovation do you think the EU should invest on in this transition?

The goals are inevitably associated with a perspective of agriculture with eyes on the future, which is agriculture that wants to be innovative, which combines technology and the transfer of knowledge with digitalisation, in order to ensure the sustainable management of resources and the conservation of different ecosystems.

All of this will accelerate the inevitable, but the needed, climate and digital transition, so important and necessary for the new generations’ strategic autonomy and a united Europe that wants to be global and socially responsible.

Food labelling was another tricky issue under the German presidency. Are you planning to return to this subject in the next six months?

Food labelling is a matter of great concern to our presidency and will have the follow up needed, so we can find a balanced and fair collective vision, where the goal is always to find a system that allows consumers to make the informed choices.

The Portuguese one will be the first EU presidency that has to deal effectively with the potential disruption caused by Brexit. Are you planning anything in particular on this aspect?

Brexit is an important dossier in our presidency. The agreement reached on 24 December between the EU and the United Kingdom has been in provisional application phase since 1 January, while the necessary steps for its ratification are taking place. The presidency will prioritise the EU’s future relations with the UK, committing itself to a comprehensive, equitable and balanced partnership, respecting the interests of the Union and the Member States. The United Kingdom will continue to be an essential European partner, of great relevance in the agricultural and agri-food sector.

You’re not the first presidency that has to deal with the pandemic though. Are you satisfied with the measures taken so far?

Working together for a more resilient Europe, one that promotes European cohesion and values is the best way to continue to guarantee the future and resilience of agriculture, particularly in the pandemic context that we all live in. This pandemic has emphasised the need to respond to crises and structurally reinforce the European agri-food system. We have the ambition to guarantee strategic autonomy and to strengthen Europe’s position in the world.
Green Deal makes its mark on EU crop protection sector

By Natasha Foote | EURACTIV.com

The EU’s leading crop protection association has expanded its mandate in efforts to be better equipped for the EU Green Deal. [CropLife Europe]

The increased focus on sustainability in the agrifood sector has seen the leading EU crop protection association rebrand and expand its mandate to encompass a more holistic approach to plant protection.

In an interview with EURACTIV, Géraldine Kutas, director-general of the newly launched CropLife Europe, formerly known as the European Crop Protection Agency (ECPA), said the move was part of an effort to be better equipped for the Green Deal,

“Although this is in the line of our thinking for a while, the Green Deal has accelerated this change and made the need for a more holistic, horizontal approach clear,” Kutas said.

Stressing that there is no one crop protection solution, Kutas explained the move was intended to bring “all the tools and solutions under one roof” in order to respond to the rapidly changing demands from society and evolving policy frameworks.

But while the Commission has set a clear direction of travel in both its Biodiversity and Farm to Fork strategies, questions remain over how these ambitions will be implemented.

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“We believe that producing enough food sustainably cannot be achieved by simply reducing the availability of solutions to farmers. Instead, we need to accelerate the development of new, better solutions and enhanced farming practices that utilise more technology to produce our food while using fewer resources,” she said.

“You cannot just leave farmers with no tools – there must be a replacement,” she stressed, adding that these replacements are never a direct substitution.

Besides conventional pesticides, CropLife Europe will now include tools to make better use of currently available pesticides, such as digital and precision farming, as well as plant biotechnology and biopesticides to offer alternatives tools.

“We are fully conscious that it is one minute to midnight,” she said, stressing the need to drive the transformation of the sector.

However, she warned that this will not happen overnight, pointing to the fact that the average time to take a new product to market is 11 years, which takes us far beyond the 2030 target.

She therefore highlighted the need to accelerate the authorisation process of lower risk profile plant protection products, such as biopesticides.

**EU ‘NOT THE PLACE TO INNOVATE’**

This transformation of the sector must be rooted in science, Kutas stressed, highlighting how problematic the “static situation” was on certain scientific developments, such as new plant breeding techniques.

Although she advocated advancing with caution, she praised the fact that the UK looks open to the new technology after England recently launched a consultation on gene editing.

She said she hoped the EU would follow the example of its neighbours across the channel and embrace gene-editing technology, but warned that this also throws up other issues of “access to the EU market and compliance with the EU regulatory system”.

“We hope that the EU will embrace the gene-editing technology because otherwise, it will really mean that the innovation principle doesn’t mean much in Europe, and that Europe is not a place to innovate,” she said, adding that this would send the wrong signal to the industry and mean that innovation is advanced in other markets.

“The fact that this kind of innovation is not welcome in the EU is a pity because the EU can really reap some benefits for the sustainability of agriculture, for protecting the environment, through biotechnology”.

Kutas added that she hoped that the acceptance of biotechnology in the healthcare sector, for example in the creation of vaccines, may spill over into the agricultural sector.
Snubbed European Parliament enters final laps of Farm to Fork race

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com

The EU’s new ambitious food policy is ready to face tough parliamentary scrutiny from lawmakers who feel being pushed aside by the European Commission.

Since the start of 2021, the European Parliament has been taking the long path to give its contribution to the agri-food part of the Commission’s flagship Green Deal.

Although it might have been somewhat overshadowed by the recent focus on the ongoing negotiations to reform the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy remains a crucial blueprint to test the level of ambition for making Europe’s food systems more sustainable.

The set of measures included in the strategy, as well as targets – for some welcome, for others controversial – represents the vision for European agriculture in the decades to come.

The vote in the two relevant parliamentary committees is provisionally scheduled for early May, but according to an EU source, MEPs are planning on having the final approval at the June plenary.

The European Parliament’s environment committee (ENVI) agreed to share the competence on the file with their colleagues on the agriculture committee (COMAGRI), in a sign of appeasement after recent bickering over the reform of the EU’s farming subsidies programme.

BAD MOOD

Two joint debates have been already dedicated to the many outstanding...
issues, but F2F's main topics continue to pop up in other hearings as well.

The most recent was a debate on the revision of the EU's agriculture promotion policy, in which COMAGRI chair Norbert Lins publicly complained about the fact that the Parliament was not properly consulted on the strong push on organic farming that the Commission is putting in every policy, and which derives from the F2F.

“You have always told us that the F2F strategy is an open debate, that you wanted to hear out at our arguments, and yet the Parliament has not really spoken to this file as yet,” he told the director-general of Commission’s DG AGRI, Wolfgang Burtscher, in a hearing.

The majority in the European Parliament voted against the inclusion of the F2F objectives and targets in its mandate to negotiate the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), currently in the so-called trilogue talks between MEPs and EU ministers.

Lawmakers of the three biggest groups – Christian-democrats, socialists, and liberals – have repeatedly affirmed the lawmaking competence of the Parliament, stressing that the F2F is a Commission strategy and, as such, represents a political commitment for the coming years, but is not a binding text.

THE ‘AMENDMENT’ BATTLE

The first hardship lawmakers have to face is the impressive amount of amendments – a ground total of 2,297 – that have been filed so far.

“I guess a lot of them will be identical so the number will be reduced,” Herbert Dorfmann, one of the Parliament’s two rapporteurs on this sensitive dossier, told EURACTIV.

According to an EU source, the first screening showed that over 200 amendments are references to other documents in a clear attempt to slow down the process, but more clarity is expected in the next weeks with a verdict from Parliament’s legal service.

“More than 2,000 is a lot. We will try to deal with it,” Dorfmann said, putting this huge number of amendments down to the fact that the F2F covers many interests, from farmers to the processing industry, to the retailers to the consumers.

This will be the main task of the two rapporteurs on the file, Dorfmann and German MEP Anja Hazekamp, the ENVI rapporteur.

The two have different personalities and different worldviews: Hazekamp is a member of the Dutch Party for the Animals and keen on topics such as environment and animal protection, while Dorfmann is an agronomist perceived as much closer to farmers’ interests.

WHAT TO EXPECT?

The diversity in the rapporteurs is, however, key to ensuring that all sides get heard.

Over the past few months, in the focus of this F2F battle were several specific bones of contention; the targets on pesticide, the possible shift toward more plant-based diets, or the never-ending row over mandatory front-of-pack labelling.

But also the farmers’ role in this transition toward more sustainable food systems is so far being highly considered in the debates among the MEPs.

Although the Parliament is ready to send its contribution, there is a caveat: MEPs are not going to change the strategy itself.

“We do not have this capacity, so the strategy will remain as it is,” explained Dorfmann.

According to the Italian lawmaker, the final report should make clear to the Commission for which ideas there is a majority in the European Parliament.

The main goal of the lawmakers is, therefore, not to influence the strategy, but the 37 pieces of legislation that will come after to implement the strategy in the next years.
Beyond Farm to Fork: the ‘agricultural’ side of EU’s biodiversity strategy

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com

The European Union’s bid to tackle biodiversity loss goes hand in hand with the new ambition of making the food system more sustainable, involving several farming aspects.

The agricultural side of the Biodiversity strategy has been somewhat overshadowed by its policy sibling, the Farm to Fork, as both of the Commission’s blueprints were presented on the same day.

However, the part of the Biodiversity strategy concerning farmers is a substantial one. And it cannot be otherwise: the threat of biodiversity loss is directly affecting food production, while many drivers of ecosystem degradation are associated with certain farming practices.

One of the most ambitious targets set in the strategy is about bringing back at least 10% of the EU’s farming areas under high-diversity landscape features, which include buffer strips, rotational or non-rotational fallow land, and non-productive trees.

Another core aspect is the EU’s nature restoration plan, aiming at restoring damaged ecosystems and ensuring their sustainable management. The cornerstone of this restoration plan is expected to be a legislative proposal to establish legally binding nature restoration targets at the EU level.

In the Commission’s preliminary assessment that kicked off the debate on nature restoration targets, land managers and farmers have been listed among the stakeholder groups that would need to adapt their management practices and probably suffer negative social impacts.

“Exclusion of land from active use
can create additional pressure on the economic performance of farmers,” said Nenad Peric, senior policy adviser at European farmers’ lobby COPA-COGECA.

European farmers are calling for a voluntary approach when it comes to the introduction of landscape features in the agricultural land and the inclusion of productive features, as they can provide more benefits in some cases than a simple fallow land.

But environmental NGOs have rejected the voluntary approach and favour legally binding restoration targets. “The experience with the voluntary restoration target in the 2020 Biodiversity Strategy has clearly shown that voluntary approaches are not working,” said Sabien Leemans, senior policy officer at the WWF.

The EU’s landowners association (ELO) believes it is beyond question that numerous targets proposed in the Biodiversity Strategy will most probably affect land management.

“The question is rather: to which extent? And this, we don’t know yet,” said Delphine Dupeux, ELO’s director of European affairs.

POTENTIAL FRICTIONS

Farmers and landowners are on the defensive, assuming a cautious stance that could lead to frictions with NGOs and with the ‘environmentalist’ fringe of the EU executive represented by its vice-president, Frans Timmermans.

But all parties involved would rather avoid a scenario reminiscent of the difficult climate surrounding the reform of the EU’s farming subsidies, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

“We would hope not [to have frictions with farmers]. With the right incentives, nature restoration is an opportunity for landowners,” said Harriet Bradley from the NGO Birdlife.

In many cases, she added, nature restoration is about good use of land that is getting more and more threatened by extreme weather like drought or flooding.

“Restoring rivers’ flood plains, or forests and peatlands in the uplands builds resilience and can create knock-on opportunities like agro-tourism and recreation,” she said.

Last October, a coalition of NGOs published a joint position paper highlighting the importance of taking into account local livelihoods and the importance of effective stakeholder participation, as well as the existing social dynamics.

However, NGOs are worried that the debate could focus on what they consider a false dichotomy between saving nature and ensuring food security.

Farmers, on the other hands, require an impact assessment of the overall biodiversity strategy.

“When it comes to the objectives and policy options, it is very important that the impact assessment assesses the current state of play,” COPA’s Peric told EURACTIV.

He referred to the ongoing and upcoming restoration efforts in all EU member states, as well as existing EU legislation such as the Birds and Habitats directive, the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and the CAP.

Likewise, landowners feel the practical elements have not yet been really thought through.

Therefore, they welcomed the impact assessment that will be made on the restoration targets, even with all its limits such as time constraints, the choice of the methodology or the number of stakeholders to be consulted.

WHICH LEGAL FRAMEWORK?

The other open question concerns the legal framework for the ambitious 10% target of fallow land and particularly whether it can fall into the nature restoration targets.

For landowners, having the 10% target under the legally binding EU nature restoration targets is likely to create unnecessary complexity, since the high-diversity landscape features will be part of the enhanced conditionality under the CAP reform.

Likewise, NGOs like Birdlife do not see the 10% target on agricultural land falling into the nature restoration targets.

“We would like to see the restoration target being about setting land and sea aside for ‘real nature’, not about improving farming practices,” said Birdlife’s Bradley.

According to COPA-COGECA, the impact assessment should consider the possibility of developing an action plan or other non-legal policy tool, instead of a legal instrument, that would guide these restoration efforts.
A new Corteva Agriscience project to reverse depopulation in Spain’s rural areas is sowing the seeds for a brighter future, writes Igor Teslenko.

Igor Teslenko is the President for Europe of Corteva Agriscience.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the importance of agriculture in the functioning of our societies into stark relief. Amid the upheaval of the foundations of our daily lives, the need for a plentiful supply of nutritious food has remained ever-present.

And farmers have delivered throughout the crisis. With agriculture declared an essential industry, the sector has been able to overcome challenges and secure an uninterrupted supply of food for consumers in Europe and beyond.

But if the rural exodus – the departure of people from the countryside to cities continues – they may struggle to do so in the future. As young people flock to cities, rural areas are seeing increasing levels of depopulation. The emergence of demographic deserts and the ageing population of those who remain in rural areas is resulting in diminishing public resources, a lack of education facilities and few work opportunities. And so the cycle continues. There is no time to waste in reversing this

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trend: we must all work together now to retain and attract young people to agriculture – this is crucial to the very survival of the sector.

We at Corteva Agriscience are committed to investing in future generations, and an important part of this is enabling rural areas to thrive. Through Spain’s Puebla project, we will sow the seeds of change and take a step closer to meeting our mission: To enrich the lives of those who produce and those who consume, ensuring progress for generations to come.

Through the sales of Pioneer® sunflower seeds, Puebla will support six projects focused on encouraging young people to take up and maintain careers in the countryside. An expert jury will choose the winning projects based on several key indicators, including innovation, the fight against depopulation, environmental impact, sustainability and digital transformation.

Not only does Puebla help regenerate rural areas, it also facilitates opportunities for young Spaniards, meaning they are not forced to abandon their roots due to a lack of career choices in the countryside. Innovative new projects implemented as part of Puebla will pave the way for new generations to meet their potential and play a full role in ensuring that the agriculture sector not only survives, but thrives.

These projects will contribute to the generational renewal of the agricultural sector and help ensure we remain on track to meet our 2030 Sustainability Vision, which includes a commitment to enabling youth.

Puebla is just one example of the practical steps Corteva is taking to engage young people in agriculture. As a company committed to future generations, we have launched several initiatives across Europe to better understand the issues facing young people and how we can encourage them to consider careers in agriculture.

In Central and Eastern Europe, for example, we are working with popular social media personalities to raise awareness among young people of potential agrarian careers. The initiative, now in its second year, follows a survey of more than 6,000 urban and rural residents from Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, which found that only 1% of 14- to 18-year-olds were considering a career in agriculture.

The study sponsored by Corteva and carried out by the analytical agency Proinsight Lab revealed that youth are strongly influenced by social media when making career decisions, with this rate particularly high in Ukraine, Romania and Russia. So, last year, we began working with popular social media influencers to demonstrate the benefits of working in the industry.

As my colleague Monica Sorribas, Corteva Agriscience Marketing Leader, Europe, writes on LinkedIn, we are also using our involvement in the eSports arena to spark enthusiasm for the next generation of farming, through our sponsorship of the Farming Simulator video game and associated tournament.

Much remains uncertain in the new era of COVID-19 but one thing is clear – consumers need a reliable and sustainable supply of food to sustain them in times of crisis and every other day. We at Corteva Agriscience will work tirelessly to innovate and regenerate rural areas, engaging young people as the agents of change and advance the sustainable agriculture that is so crucial for the survival of our sector and the preservation of our planet.

Corteva is working on the Puebla project alongside the Spanish Alliance for a Sustainable Agriculture (ALAS). ALAS is made up of national professional agricultural organizations ASAJA and UPA, as well as the Agro-Food Cooperatives of Spain, FEPEX and the Spanish Association for Live Soil Conservation Agriculture (AEAC.SV).

For more information or to sign up for the program, please visit the ProgramaPuebla.es website or watch this video on YouTube.