

Commission proposal to abolish environmental requirements for agricultural subsidies puts farmers behind and makes problems worse

On Friday 15th of March, the European Commission is expected to propose to the member states the weakening of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The environmental requirements for farmers to receive subsidies would be drastically reduced. This goes directly against scientific recommendations and societal demands. Instead of offering farmers long-term economic sustainability, the Commission makes farming even more environmentally unsustainable.

“The proposals offer no urgently needed solution to environmental problems. The Commission is fooling farmers and citizens and makes problems even worse in the long run” says Martin Dermine, PAN Europe executive director. “Pretending to reduce administrative burden might sound nice, but the EU can’t spend one-third of its taxpayers’ money on practices which harm citizens’ health and the environment. These actions will increase the burden on farmers and society in the long run.”

The Commission proposes to weaken or make voluntary four of the eight so-called ‘Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions’ (GAEC). These conditions are prerequisites in order to receive agricultural subsidies. The measures undergoing changes include GAEC 5 (minimise tillage to prevent soil erosion), GAEC 6 (ensure minimal soil cover), GAEC 7 (crop rotation) and GAEC 8 (non-productive areas to enhance biodiversity). In addition, the Commission is also amending the CAP Strategic Plans procedures. These changes will mean that Member states are no longer required to align plans with the latest environmental policies, amend the plans within a set timeframe, or clarify in case no amendments are made. On Tuesday the Commission has also already published an amendment allowing more flexibility when applying GAEC 1 (related to permanent grassland) (2).

The actions are part of many proposals suggested in a non-paper of the Commission on 22 February, which was not made available to the public (1). The Commission takes all these actions without any assessment of their environmental and climate impact, and without taking into account the views of scientists and citizens. Many organisations have been asking to not dismantle the green architecture of the CAP (3).

“The actions of the Commission, driven by election fever, are unacceptable, and go directly against the public interest and expert assessments over the past decades, which stress the green architecture of the CAP is already far too weak”, adds Kristine De Schamphelaere, policy office at PAN Europe “The narrative that deleting environmental requirements will help farmers is misplaced; it will decrease farmers’ resilience to challenges related to climate, erosion, soil health and pests.”

Scientists have warned that, given the different environmental crises we are in, it is extremely urgent to move towards climate-resilient, nature-inclusive and sustainable agricultural practices (4). Not doing so will have catastrophic consequences and make the problems worse. To reach environmental goals, help farmers and give them a clear long-term perspective, a strong environmental conditionality to receive subsidies is needed. Voluntary measures eligible for additional funding should then go well beyond an ambitious baseline. Weakening basic environmental requirements or moving them to voluntary eco-schemes will result in even lower implementation of urgently needed measures by Member States.

In 2023, the OECD highlighted in 2 reports (5) that agricultural subsidies should be performance-based, and a larger share of the funds should be dedicated to remuneration of public goods such as environmental and climate protection. Just recently, the European Environment Agency (EEA) published the EU climate risk assessment (6). The report underlines the high climate risks threatening Europe’s ecosystems, environment and food security. It pointed out that the common agricultural policy does not sufficiently address major climate risks and adaptation needs in their implementation. Also, citizens have been repeatedly expressing via numerous consultations and polls the need for high

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environmental standards for agriculture (7). In that backdrop, the further abolishment of the, already significantly too weak, green architecture of the CAP is incomprehensible.

Farmers across Europe are showing that increasing crop diversification and rotation, soil health, ecological infrastructure and biodiversity can significantly lower pesticide dependency, enhance water infiltration, decrease drought stress and erosion. Sustainable practices ensure stable yields in the long run. Public funds should be steered to these practices with clear added societal value and should be linked to ambitious result indicators, targets and timelines.

The Council and the Parliament must take their responsibility and reject the Commission's proposals. The ENVI Committee should be involved in the process. Agriculture is one of the main drivers of the biodiversity collapse, climate crisis and environmental pollution. Not linking ambitious environmental requirements and targets to agricultural subsidies, as well as to voluntary measures eligible for additional funding, questions the legitimacy of the Common Agricultural Policy.

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Notes

- (1) [Commission non-paper, Agriculture and Fisheries Council, 26 February 2024, Green CAP on the Chopping Block – Commission to Cut CAP's Environmental Ambitions with no Impact Assessment](#)
- (2) [Amendment of Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2022/126 with adjustments for GAEC standard 1](#)
- (3) [Joint letter to the EU Commission to reconsider the loosening of the CAP's green architecture](#)
- (4) [Pe'er et al. Action needed for the EU Common Agricultural Policy to address sustainability challenges, Pe'er et al. How can the European Common Agricultural Policy help halt biodiversity loss? Recommendations by over 300 experts](#)
- (5) [Policies for the Future of Farming and Food in the European Union, Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2023 - Adapting Agriculture to Climate Change](#)
- (6) [European Climate Risk Assessment \(EUCRA\)](#)
- (7) [EU public consultation on the Common Agricultural Policy, 2017, The final report of the Conference for the Future of Europe; 2022, Eurobarometer survey on Food safety in the EU, 2022, IPSOS Poll 2023](#)

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