



Society for Conservation Biology

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New EU reform fails on European biodiversity

Experts show in the scientific journal Science that the European Union's recent agricultural reform is far too weak to have any positive impact on the continent's shrinking farmland biodiversity, and call on member states to take action.

- About half of all farmland and at least 88% of EU farmers are exempt from Ecological Focus Areas, the main “greening measure” that could help wildlife on farmland.
- Meeting EU's own biodiversity targets for 2020 now relies on initiatives from member states.
- Experts from leading organisations offer six ‘immediate actions’ needed to be taken by member states, and six actions for the EU to avoid reforms that allow on-going agricultural intensification under a ‘green’ label.

The EU spends 40% of its budget on agriculture, (approx. 360 billion € in the period 2013-2020) this influences the management of half of EU territory and has strong effects on biodiversity. Latest reforms of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) have been declared significantly “greener” by the Members of the European Parliament, following promises to make the environment and climate change ‘core issues’ for the new CAP.

However, leading conservation experts writing in the journal *Science* warn that after three years of CAP negotiations the environmental reforms are so diluted they will be of no benefit to European wildlife, and biodiversity will continue to decline across the continent.

Under the new CAP almost a third of direct payments to farmers are now subject to conditions relating to ‘greening measures’: establishing Ecological Focus Areas, maintaining permanent grasslands, and setting minimum requirements on number of crops grown to stop areas slipping into homogenous ‘monocultures’. However, following thorough analysis, experts have found that the large number of clauses introduced to the greening measures exempt over 88% of farmers in the EU, and over 48% of its agricultural areas from having to incorporate Ecological Focus Areas. 81% of arable farmers are now exempt from the crop diversity measure, and the measure meant to protect natural grassland allows a further loss of 5% of their extent by 2020. At the same time, budgets to support voluntary ‘greening measures’ have been reduced.

“The thresholds set are not only low but also lack any quality criteria for what counts as green,” says Dr Guy Pe’er, lead author of the paper, from the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research and a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Conservation Biology – Europe Section (SCB-ES). “This allows on-going intensification under a green label”. Authors conclude that the CAP reforms fail to fulfil Target 3A of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, which explicitly requires the EU to “maximise areas [...] covered by biodiversity-related measures under the CAP”.

“Individual member states need to use the flexibility offered by the reforms to design national plans for sustaining ecosystems. Unless member states take serious steps beyond those required for the CAP, the EU’s own biodiversity targets for 2020 are very unlikely to be met” says Pe’er.

The Common Agricultural Policy provides subsidies that increase the scale of farming throughout the EU. This has led to increased grassland conversion and peatland drainage. The situation is particularly severe in new member states, where the use of agri-chemicals such as fertilizers has grown rapidly.

This continues to take a heavy toll on wildlife, with dramatic declines in everything from the farmland bird index to ‘permanent’ grassland that, in newer member states, has shrunk over 11% in just the last decade.

“Many regions of the new member states, and countries of southern Europe, are still supporting very high biodiversity”, says András Báldi from the MTA Centre for Ecological Research, Hungary and president of SCB-ES. “But there were new member states that opposed agri-environment schemes, and some already decided to transfer budgets away from Rural Development into Direct Payment for farmers, with essentially no environmental requirements installed. Without obligation from Brussels, we may see no greening taking place”.

“Because of its enormous budget and its direct influence on half of the EU terrestrial area, the CAP offers a great opportunity for win-win policies that promote healthy ecosystems together with food-security and rural development”, says Piero Visconti, a Computational Ecologist at Microsoft Research and a member of the Board of Director of the SCB-ES. “By using scenario analyses, optimization algorithms, and experimental data, it is possible to achieve better outcomes for all societal levels involved, as well as supporting biodiversity and ecosystem services.”

Visconti adds: “it will be very important to rely on scientific-evidence and design outcome-based payment methods. We hope that the EU Department of Agriculture will consider using these tools for a more rigorous assessment of the environmental and economic costs and benefits of the CAP reform at the first opportunity. The knowledge and tools to achieve better biodiversity outcomes from the CAP are available, and the experts are welcoming a constructive dialogue.”

“Appropriate and full scale compensation for farmers managing High Nature Value farmland is key condition for effective protection of farmland biodiversity. We need appropriate funding for programs targeting species-rich grassland in particular,” says former SCB-ES president Martin Dieterich, from the Agricultural University of Hohenheim. “We also need

practical oriented research and university education targeting ecological expertise in the farming sector.”

The experts offer six ‘immediate actions’ that EU Member states should take. These include increasing the economic support and the uptake of voluntary measures that have documented benefits to biodiversity, comprehensive mapping and protection of existing grasslands and their quality, increasing the availability of ecological expertise to farmers, and monitoring the biodiversity outcomes of the CAP. They also list recommendations for the EU to consider towards the next, still-much-needed revision of the CAP.

“We hope these recommendations will encourage individual states and the EU as a whole to move towards sustainable agriculture, securing vital ecosystems for current and future generations”, says Pe’er.

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G. Pe’er, L. V. Dicks, P. Visconti, R. Arlettaz, A. Báldi, T. G. Benton, S. Collins, M. Dieterich, R. D. Gregory, F. Hartig, K. Henle, P. R. Hobson, D. Kleijn, R. K. Neumann, T. Robijns, J. Schmidt, A. Shwartz, W. J. Sutherland, A. Turbe, F. Wulf and A. V. Scott (2014): EU agricultural reform fails on biodiversity. *SCIENCE*, 6 June 2014, Vol. 344, Issue 6188. DOI: 10.1126/science.1253425.

Open access version of the paper available here <http://www.ufz.de/index.php?en=1625>

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Further information:

The EU Biodiversity 2020 Strategy:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/biodiversity/comm2006/2020.htm>

The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) is an international organization of scientists and conservation professionals with thousands of members from more than 60 countries. Members include academics with expertise across the natural and social sciences, field biologists, educators, resource managers, administrators, economists, lawyers, and many others. SCB is dedicated to advancing the science and practice of conserving the Earth's biological diversity. Europe Section (SCB-ES) represents conservation professionals from all 28 EU member states. www.conbio.org

Multimedia:

Homogenous monocultures in Germany versus heterogeneous farming areas in Transylvania, Romania. Photograph 1: Guy Pe'er, UFZ – Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research / Society for Conservation Biology. Photograph 2: Tibor Hartel, Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania / Society for Conservation Biology.

High resolution version, and other photographs, freely downloadable at <http://www.ufz.de/index.php?en=1625>

