

CAP greening: what are the prospects?



The year 2015 marks the start of implementation of the latest incarnation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Finally agreed at the end of 2013, the new CAP was billed as being greener and fairer, with ‘sustainable management of natural resources and climate action’ one of its three core objectives.

The main environmental innovation was the introduction of three ‘green’ compulsory measures for farmers within Pillar 1, to which €12.5 billion per year have been attached. This is almost the same amount as the whole annual rural development budget.

With such a significant injection of money for ‘green’ farming practices, the question now on everyone’s lips is what impact these measures will have on the ground? This is particularly pertinent given the recent publication of the mid-term review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy, showing a lack of progress in improving the conservation status of species and habitats that depend on, or are affected by, agriculture.

IEEP has examined the choices made to implement greening in nine Member States and their potential for delivering improved environmental management on farmland in a report for the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), published on 11 November. The report demonstrates that most countries appear not to have used the flexibility permitted in the regulations to increase overall environmental ambition. Rather, they have maximised opportunities for farmers to meet their obligations without making significant changes.

For example, in the case of Ecological Focus Areas – the measure that many thought could achieve the greatest environmental benefits – options are permitted in most Member States to allow continued crop production, such as N-fixing crops and catch crops, with inputs of agrochemicals and fertilisers. The designation of environmentally sensitive permanent grassland under the measure for maintaining permanent grassland, particularly outside Natura 2000 areas, is likely to bring some additional environmental benefits. This is because of the ban on ploughing, although only four countries have chosen to protect

areas outside their Natura boundaries. Disappointingly, the introduction of greening in Pillar 1 seems not to have led to more ambitious agri-environment-climate schemes under Pillar 2. Rather, initial figures suggest that the budget for this measure has decreased significantly in a number of Member States.

The report concludes that the significant increase in the CAP budget allocated to improving the environmental sustainability of agriculture was a positive move. However, the final design of the greening measures and Member States’ implementation choices appear to much diminish the chances of significant additional environmental benefits. We need to see what options farmers choose on their farms before assessing the actual environmental added value. However, progress with implementation so far raises tough questions over what can be achieved for the environment with the Pillar 1 budget compared with an equivalent scale of expenditure tailored under rural development policy. There are likely to be implications for discussions on the future of the CAP post 2020.

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