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Green farming for Europe: Is the European Parliament losing the plot?

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Media briefing on the EU Common Agriculture Policy, January 2013

Introduction

For the first time the European Parliament has joint decision-making powers in the reform of the EU's Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). Working on draft proposals from the European Commission, the Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (ComAgri) has agreed its position. This proposal will be assessed and put to a vote of the whole parliament in March, together with proposed amendments from other committees. After that the parliament will enter negotiations to reach an agreement with the EU member states.

This briefing judges whether the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (ComAgri) proposals will really 'green' the CAP and make European farming fit for the coming decade.

Voluntary instead of mandatory greening

At the heart of the original proposals from the European Commission was an obligation on farmers to take some basic environmental measures, next to existing environmental requirements (cross-compliance), in order to receive EU subsidies – the so-called 'greening' of the direct payments.

ComAgri proposes, instead, that the greening should be voluntary and that farmers should decide whether to fulfil the requirements and take the greening payments. This would mean that 70% of the direct subsidies would not be linked to improving the environment. Furthermore, the cross-compliance criteria have also been seriously weakened already in the proposals of the Commission.

Weaker 'greening'

The three greening measures proposed by the Commission were crop diversification, grassland protection and the introduction of ecological focus areas (EFA) on farmland. These measures were already weak in the Commission proposals and have been further watered down by ComAgri.

More monocultures, less crop rotation

The increase in monoculture farming, where the same crops are grown on the same fields in consecutive years, is threatening biodiversity and damaging soils. Monoculture farming is also highly dependent on chemical inputs.

The Commission had already submitted a very weak proposal; instead of encouraging farmers to rotate their crops it proposed to support farmers if they simply had a minimum of three crops on their fields – regardless of whether they rotated them. ComAgri has made this

weak proposal decidedly weaker; it proposes to only apply it to farms above 10 hectares, and that farms with 10 to 30 hectares need to have only two different crops, one of which could cover 80% of the farmland. Furthermore, there is no requirement on farmers to plant legume crops as part of this 'crop diversification'. These weak crop diversification measures are likely to lead to the use of more artificial fertilisers which not only pollute waterways but also increase greenhouse gas emissions.

The EU should follow the example of Switzerland where crop rotation has been compulsory since the 1990's. This has thereby reduced agriculture's impact on the climate and environment whilst improving the soil and local biodiversity.

Fewer wildlife areas

The Commission had proposed that farmers set up 'ecological focus areas' – areas designed to bring benefits for biodiversity – covering 7% of their land. ComAgri has proposed to reduce this to only 3%. Furthermore, it proposes to only apply this to farms above 10 hectares and to give the option to fulfil these requirements at a regional instead of farm level, allowing for further ecological depletion of intensively farmed areas. Although farmers would not be allowed to use artificial fertilisers and pesticides on the 'ecological focus areas', they could still use the areas for the planting of nitrogen-fixing crops or biofuels. This means, for example, a farmer with 100 hectares of land could have a soya or pea monoculture covering three hectares. Nitrogen-fixing leguminous crops have great environmental advantages, but they belong in a crop rotation – where they can improve the soil quality for future crops – and not on an 'ecological focus area' which is supposed to increase biodiversity.

Certification as a smokescreen

Under the proposals, farmers that have areas certified by national environmental certification schemes do not need to demonstrate that they have implemented the three greening measures in order to receive the funding for greening - they are assumed to be 'green by definition'. But, it is not clear on what basis their environmental performance should be measured. This means inequality between member states and farmers in terms of costs and monitoring.

Such an approach will also raise the issue of credibility. A national certification scheme, for instance, is not comparable with mandatory greening measures that have to apply at farm level over a whole farm.

Environment schemes instead of whole-farm measures

ComAgri proposes to exclude farms from some greening requirements if they are taking part in agri-environment or climate measures in the CAP's rural development programmes (known as second pillar). The greening should be at farm level, whereas agri-environmental measures can be implemented on a smaller level. For example, a farmer could implement the agri-environment measure of preserving the biodiversity value of a patch of grassland while at the same time growing maize in a monoculture on the rest of the farm. If the greening is implemented in this way, the question is: how does it increase the environmental performance of the whole farm?

Watering-down the environmental baseline

Farmers receive public subsidies based on the fulfilment of various basic environmental measures called 'Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions' (GAEC) as part of cross-compliance. This allows countries to, for example, use a crop rotation measure to restrict the spread of monocultures of certain crops (e.g. cereals in Italy, sunflowers in Romania, maize and tobacco in Hungary).

The Commission had proposed to reduce the number of cross-compliance requirements for farmers, with the explanation that some of them will be implemented through the 'greening'. The crop rotation measure currently in cross-compliance should be replaced after 2013 with a weaker crop diversification measure in the greening. However, with ComAgri now proposing the greening to be voluntary for farmers, whilst also not improving the weakened cross-compliance criteria and increasing the exemptions, the net result will be fewer measures to improve the environmental performance of farming. It is now unlikely that governments would be able to stop the spread of monocultures.

Less money for environmental measures in national programmes

In the current CAP, 25% of the rural development programme (second pillar) funds are earmarked for agri-environmental measures. This enables farmers to use their land in a way that preserves biodiversity and eco-systems. In the current proposals, the 25% will now need to be also shared with (still undefined) 'climate measures' as well as organic farming. In addition, the draft EU budget foresees less money overall for the second pillar and suggests financing from it a risk management tool for farmers in crisis situations (instead of regulating markets), which means a clear reduction for agri-environmental measures and support to biodiversity-friendly farming. Also, the percentage of EU co-funding is now at only 50%, and the funding rates for some labour-intensive agri-environmental measures also remain low, so it may not be profitable for farmers to implement them. This will all lead to a decrease of agri-environmental measures and a further decline of Europe's natural habitats and species.

Conclusions

The position of the European Parliament's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee is a disaster for the environment and, if implemented, would lead to farming which causes more environmental damage than now.

It will be essential for the plenary of the parliament to reject the committee's proposal and support a stronger package of environmental measures. A stronger package must include, as a minimum, mandatory greening with strong measures including crop rotation with leguminous crops, ecological focus areas covering 10% of the land on all farms, and an immediate end to the ploughing-up of natural grasslands and pastures.

The proposals as they stand will lead to a further industrialisation of the countryside, destroying what is left of our biodiversity and damaging the eco-systems and natural resources we depend on. The current proposals will be bad for the majority of farmers and bad for the public. It cannot be justified to spending billions of euro of taxpayers' money on a Common Agricultural Policy with low environmental standards and low levels of public benefits that only supports large-scale monoculture farming.



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