

The CAP & Organic Agriculture

Organic Agriculture

Organic farming is able to produce wide-ranging benefits for the environment. Organic farming systems grow healthy plants without the use of synthetic fertiliser or agro-chemicals. By favouring mixed farming and enriched crop rotations, organic farming often displays greater habitat diversity than conventional systems and supports a greater range of wildlife. In general, soils are less compacted and more stable, thereby storing more carbon, less prone to erosion and more able to retain water.

Although organic farming is popular with many European consumers, its price can be a barrier. Whilst some of this is due to certification costs and higher labour demands, organic produce is also made more expensive as the negative outcomes of certain conventional practices - such as the cost of tackling nitrogen fertiliser pollution - are not reflected in the price of food.

Due to the market failure to reward the delivery of environmentally friendly public goods and to penalise many negative environmental effects from conventional farming, there is a clear case for intervention to support organic farming practices. There is also a need to encourage conventional farming to adopt more sustainable methods, which may include practices viewed as 'organic' such as wider crop rotation and the use of nitrogen fixing plants.



Facts & figures

- In 2009, organic farming accounted for 4.7% of agricultural land across the EU27. This area is steadily growing. The area under organic management differs considerably between Member States, from 18.5% in Austria to less than 2.46% in France¹.
- Nitrogen leaching from organic fields is up to 57% lower compared to conventional fields².
- Soil carbon sequestration rates on organically-managed arable land can range from 200kg to 2,000kg of carbon per hectare per year more than conventional farming³.
- Organic management benefits a wide range of species with farms often having more diversity and larger populations than conventional farms⁴.
- Organic farming practices in Umbria, Italy helped reduce soil erosion by an average of 6.8 t/ha/yr⁵.
- The organic industry is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the food industry in the EU⁶.

Recommendation

The CAP needs profound change to support the kinds of farming Europe needs in the 21st century. Public money must support public goods. Taxpayers must see real value for the billions they invest in the CAP. Those who farm sustainably must be effectively supported while those who consistently harm the environment should receive no public money.

If politicians are serious about supporting more sustainable forms of farming, like organic farming, they must support a fundamental CAP reform now.



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Organic sheep farming in Wales

Lake Vyrnwy is an organic farm, owned by a water company and managed by the RSPB⁷ (BirdLife in the UK). The farm's sheep graze on heather, natural herbs and grasses on the hills, and are managed sensitively to benefit farmland bird populations. Their natural diet is said to improve the flavour of their meat and customers can buy this directly from the farm.

High in the Welsh hills, Lake Vyrnwy is also the source of water for the people of Liverpool, a major city in England. The pollution control

measures that have been implemented, combined with organic farming methods, ensure a strict protection of the quality of water in the surrounding environment. Agri-environment schemes have played a significant role in facilitating this positive land management.

The RSPB and Severn Trent Water are demonstrating that it is possible to run an efficient farm while benefiting local wildlife and people, and protecting an important source of drinking water.



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More wildlife on organic farms

In general, biodiversity is up to 50% higher on organically managed farms than on conventional farms⁸. Often, this can be directly linked to the rules which govern organic farming, such as the non-use of synthetic fertilisers and minimal use of pesticides.

However, other characteristics, common but not exclusive to organic farming, also play a major role such as lower livestock stocking densities; maintenance of hedges; field margins and other uncropped areas; encouragement of natural predators for

controlling pests, and the use of mixed crop and livestock systems rather than monocultures. It is the absence of these beneficial factors, often driven by the CAP, on many intensive, non-organic farms that has accounted for much of the wildlife declines in the EU in recent decades.


Organic farms should be explicitly rewarded for the higher levels of environmental benefits they provide and conventional farming should be encouraged to adopt more sustainable methods, which are often associated with organic farming.



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Inconsistent support for organic farming across the EU



The European Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming⁹ recommends full use of the CAP's Rural Development programmes for the support of organic farming. However, the level of support for organic farming varies considerably. In Sweden, payments for arable land in 2009 counted up to €555 per hectare (for potatoes and vegetables; for grain the amount is €144/ha), while in England it is just €66/ha¹⁰.

In some Member States, intensively managed conventional agriculture receives more support than organic. In the Madrid autonomous region,

the substitution of irrigated arable crops with irrigated tree crops (often intensively managed olive groves) receive an annual Pillar 2 payment of almost €900/ha while irrigated organic arable crops receive less than €250/ha, despite the increased environmental benefits and complexity of commitments¹¹.

The EU has formally recognised the benefits of organic farming and the role CAP should play. However, there is a clear need for the policy to secure fair and consistent support measures across all Member States.

Prepared by:

