

The CAP & Grasslands

Grasslands

Grasslands provide highly valued habitats and offer an enormous range of benefits. They support a huge range of biodiversity above and below surface level, act as barriers to forest fires, protect water resources and store carbon.

The environmental value of grasslands depends on where they are and how they are managed. Re-seeded, fertilised grasslands tend to be more productive but also pose more environmental problems, whereas semi-natural habitat, subject only to low levels of grazing and/or mowing, have higher environmental values.

Grazing animals can also contribute towards decreasing EU dependency on feed imports and reducing livestock's ecological footprint as grassland is a basis for sustainable milk and meat production (including being more beneficial for animal welfare).

The most biodiverse grasslands are threatened by a variety of changes in land use including conversion to arable farming, comprising energy crops; intensification of management; overgrazing; land abandonment; urban development, or afforestation.

Currently land managers are poorly rewarded through the CAP for continuing the extensive management of semi-natural grasslands.



Facts & figures

- Grasslands store around 34% of the global stock of carbon in terrestrial ecosystems while forests store approximately 39% and agro-ecosystems approximately 17%¹.
- Semi-natural grasslands are unique in harbouring numerous habitat types from Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive, ranging from hay meadows to wood pastures and heaths. Of the 200 habitats listed as Natura 2000 sites, over 40 are grassland types.
- A recent assessment shows that only 7% of Natura 2000 grasslands sites are in favourable condition².
- At least 1,320 endemic plants inhabit grasslands in Europe³.
- The European grassland butterfly indicator shows a 70% decline since 1990⁴.
- CORINE 2000 estimates that the extent of grassland (including moors, heaths, etc.) in the EU27 is approximately 100 M ha.
- FAO data suggest a 12.8% decrease in the area of grassland in Europe between 1990 and 2003⁵.

Recommendation

The CAP needs profound change to support the farming Europe needs in the 21st century. Public money must support public goods. Taxpayers must see the real value of the billions they invest in the CAP. Those who sustainably manage High Nature Value grasslands must receive a premium while those who harm the environment should receive no public money.

If politicians are serious about protecting grasslands and ecosystems, they must support a fundamental CAP reform now.



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pic1: © Andy Hay (rsrb-images.com) pic2: © Johan Tillet



Bioenergy production drives grassland destruction

Increased demand for energy crops is leading to the destruction of important grassland habitats in Germany⁶. Between 2003 and 2009, 226,000 ha of grassland were lost⁷.

It is estimated that at least a quarter of this is due to conversion to maize. Ironically, the destruction of grasslands not only destroys important sites for biodiversity, but the overall carbon balance becomes negative, particularly for wet grasslands.

In one incident in the upland area of the Eifel,

30 ha of lowland hay meadow and calcareous fen were partially destroyed in a Natura 2000 area. Because of this breach in cross-compliance, the farmer received a one-off 5% reduction to payments but was not required to restore the site.

CAP reform should ensure land managers are required to restore protected habitats if they destroy them. Moreover, incentives to produce energy crops where these lead to increases in emissions must be removed, both from the EU's and Member States' energy policy.



Excluding grasslands from CAP support increases threat of neglect

In Estonia, there is 1,124 M ha of agricultural land but around 25% is not registered to receive money under the Single Area Payments Scheme (SAPS). Traditional farming methods often involve animal grazing grasslands with high proportions of trees and bushes. These extensively grazed, wooded pastures are not compliant with SAPS rules.

In Bulgaria, approximately 1.6 M ha of farmland has been identified as being of High Nature Value, but just over 1 M ha is eligible for SAPS support.

The excluded land is typically semi-natural grassland in great danger of abandonment. The economic incentives for continuing traditional management are low. Given that these areas are productive in terms of public goods (i.e. biodiversity), funding must be available to allow and encourage their continuous management.

This should maintain income streams in areas otherwise at risk of depopulation and at risk of losing wildlife. Thus, eligibility criteria for support through the new CAP must include extensive farming systems.

A French example: a model for grassland support?

France has demonstrated how a relatively simple scheme could be used to better target direct payments. The agro-environmental grassland payments for farmers, PHAE 2 is a broad agri-environmental scheme that rewards farms maintaining a large proportion of grassland under low-intensity management.

The requirements of the scheme are:

- Between 50-75% of the UAA must be grassland;
- Stocking density 0.35-1.4 LU/ha;
- 20% of the surface maintained as biodiversity features;
- Fertiliser use has upper limit of 125 N/90

- P/160 K g/ha-1;
- Herbicide use not permitted.

The main problem is that these requirements reward maintenance of intensive, temporary grassland, not just semi-natural pasture. The amount of livestock in one area may be above the optimum level for biodiversity, and fertiliser use can remain high.

However, with some tweaks to the rules - e.g. the introduction of scaled payments depending on intensity of use - such a system funded through Pillar 1 of the CAP could incentivise the maintenance and better management of grasslands across the EU.

