



EDITORIAL

The time has come. DG Agriculture has just unveiled its proposals for the hotly anticipated CAP Health Check. On first analysis, as suspected by BirdLife International, the proposals indeed lack vision and appetite for putting European farming firmly on the path toward a new CAP post-2013.

The proposals fall uncomfortably short of addressing the 'new challenges' facing Europe: biodiversity loss, climate change and water shortages, instead responding to the usual vested interests to resist any move that would threaten the nature of EU subsidies. This ill-founded stance is unlikely to gain any supporters as the EU Budget Review kicks-off. The stark reality? No winners, only losers as the CAP budget is slashed.

While the Commission's original green paper made ambitious promises to bring the CAP into line with citizens' expectations and address these new challenges, the actual proposal essentially represents a 'business-as-usual' approach. It is difficult to understand the game being played here. Given the Commission's minimal ambition, our only hope to stave off EU finance ministries will rest with farm ministers. They hold the key to establishing a steady foothold to move beyond the 2003 reforms and create a new sustainable land management and rural development policy for Europe. Unfortunately, the noises emanating from Member States would suggest an even lower level of ambition and greater defence of the current flawed system of subsidies.

A key issue for the Health Check is ensuring environmental quality across the farmed landscape, quality that is ever more threatened by intensification driven by high commodity prices and biofuels production. Plans to abolish set-aside, a scheme that has brought widespread accidental benefits to wildlife and water quality, go completely against this need, with the promised alternative of a targeted environmental tool barely featuring in the proposals.

Under the current CAP, all farmers receiving subsidies must respect environmental legislation and some basic good practice rules that go some way to helping wildlife. To date, few countries enforce these requirements correctly and so the Commission needs to bring concrete improvements to the table – especially in light of growing concerns over the unsustainable use of water and accelerating climate change. Some important improvements, that could help protect wildlife habitats, such as a better protection of landscape elements and water courses are being proposed, but high nature value permanent pastures remain at the mercy of the plough. The biggest problem, however, is that most Member States seem to prefer 'administrative simplicity' to proper enforcement of environmental rules.

BirdLife welcomes, on the other hand, the idea of shifting more funds from untargeted subsidies toward environmentally beneficial schemes, such as agri-environment. However, the level proposed is not nearly enough to address the EU's pressing environmental problems and societal expectations - such money will still be dwarfed by highly wasteful and unsustainable direct payments.

This is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss – and one that cannot wait until 2014. Farmland biodiversity is facing a serious crisis, while climate change is adding further pressure on the environment. Now is the time to show courage and address these challenges whilst we still have the support of taxpayers. We hope the Presidency and other EU governments heed these concerns and press forward with real reform.

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FARMING FOR LIFE *NEWSLETTER*

The CAP Health check proposals lack vision and appetite for putting European farming firmly on the path toward a new CAP post-2013



Replacing set aside- vital measures used as smoke screen

The environmental benefits accidentally delivered by the now suspended set aside scheme are now well documented. It is also widely recognised that alternative tools must be put in place if the upcoming definitive abolition of set aside is not to further damage the EU's beleaguered farmland biodiversity.

BirdLife International has been proposing a mandatory 10% environmental priority areas obligation as the only realistic tool that can ensure a minimum of environmental quality throughout the farmed landscape, while leaving farmers maximum flexibility in factoring the needs of biodiversity into their farming practices. This proposal has now received a strong scientific backing by a study published by NABU, BirdLife's German partner <http://www.nabu.de/imperia/md/content/nabude/landwirtschaft/agrarreform/9.pdf>.

The study analyses trends in populations of farmland birds and other species and identifies the level of habitat availability needed within farmed landscape in order to allow for biodiversity recovery.

While the Commission has, in principle, acknowledged the need to capture the benefits of set aside, the leaked Health Check proposal seems not to contain any such measure.



Andy Hav

It does propose however a couple of improvements to the cross compliance mechanism: a better definition of protected landscape elements and a (quite generic) requirement to manage buffer strips along water courses. The proposals would indeed plug severe gaps in the current cross compliance system (yet still leave major loopholes on the protection

of permanent grasslands) and it is welcomed by BirdLife that has been arguing their need for several years.

The Commission seems however to be suggesting these measures as an alternative to set aside. This is mostly misleading. Proper protection of landscape elements is a vital measure to prevent further degradation of the environment but in no way it can help restore biodiversity or substitute the habitats provided by set aside. Buffer strips could on the other hand provide some of the benefits of set aside, but only if their overall surface is sufficient and if they are specifically managed for biodiversity. Narrow and scarce buffer strips that are systematically mowed might still provide some benefits to water quality but are almost useless for biodiversity. EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development Fischer-Boel likes to say that we should use the right tool for the right task. In this case however we are asked to believe that the undoubtedly precious hammer can double count as a screw-driver.

Review of Less Favoured Areas support

More than half of farmland in the EU is classified as Less Favoured Area (LFA). In many Member States and regions, the rural development budget allocated to LFA is larger than that allocated for agri-environment, so it is clear that getting LFA support right can have a big impact on supporting the types of farming that deliver for wildlife and the wider environment.

The need to review LFA support was recognised before the new rural development regulations were finalised, but the Council of the EU could not find agreement on LFA classification, so the existing LFA framework remains in place until 2010. The European Commission has now launched the review process and aims to produce proposals for future designation and payment system for LFAs by November 2008.

The review aims to increase the transparency and objectivity of the delimitation of 'Intermediate' LFAs, whose designation has, in the past, been inconsistent across Member States, and the subject of criticism from the European Court of Auditors.

The impacts of using new climatic and soil criteria to delimit these LFAs are now being assessed, and the results mapped for each Member State. In addition, the Com-



Curlew by Kajetan Kravos

mission will now be consulting on fixed eligibility criteria, and also the scope for targeting LFA support at areas of High Nature Value (HNV) farmland.

BirdLife would like to see a very comprehensive LFA review, which looks carefully at how the scheme can support

sustainable farming systems and maintain sustainable land management, in line with the environmental objectives of Axis 2. Conditions of environmental eligibility are needed, for example detailing livestock management practices. The need for LFA payments to secure the continuance of HNV farming systems should be the key objective of this instrument so the review needs to come up with a coherent system of support, rather than limit itself to a simple mapping exercise.



The EU in a state of denial over biofuels

The European Environment Agency is the latest of an ever lengthening string of respectable scientific institutions calling for an urgent halt to the rush for biofuels. Yet despite the overwhelming case for caution, EU decision-makers seem unable to face up to reality and prefer to maintain their commitment to what is now clearly a failed policy. BirdLife International has recently published a collection of real life case studies illustrating how the Commission proposed "sustainability standard" for biofuels is little more than a fig leaf, unable to prevent even the worst cases of environmental destruction. You can find the report at http://www.birdlife.org/eu/eu_biofuels_report_2008.html



Dieter Hoffman

its flawed commitment to an irrational 10% biofuel target, rather than finding a way to ensure genuinely sustainable bio-energy production.

As things stand, we are facing a sorry tale of text-book bad policy making: an emotional rush to fix policy targets on the basis of shaky science and little reflection, followed by a stubborn refusal to acknowledge scientific evidence and clumsy attempts to retro-fit sustainability add-ons on an inherently flawed policy.

Time for both Parliament and Member States' governments to show maturity and courage, by scrapping the biofuels target and going back to the drawing board on biofuels and other transport policies to ensure that the untapped potential of bioenergy is exploited truly sustainably and that emissions from transport are properly addressed. Ensuring that real

Member States have recognised the Commission proposal as inadequate and have set up a Council working group to try and come up with a better system. However, as their discussions have progressed, it has become ever clearer that the Council is also more interested in green-washing

At the time of writing, most of the issues remain un-addressed: from impacts on valuable wildlife habitats and vulnerable people to indirect land use change. Even on the simple and central role of ensuring that biofuels actually deliver, significant emissions reductions, the jury is still out.

progress is made on managing demand for transport and improving the efficiency of the vehicles we drive are among the real solutions that now need to take priority.

Case study: Conservation of corncrake in Slovenia through Rural development funds

Traditional Slovenian agriculture landscapes, especially extensive wet meadows mosaic areas, are home to the Corncrake *Crex crex*, a globally threatened species. Over the last decade DOPPS/BirdLife Slovenia monitoring data revealed a significant decline in the population of Corncrake. The main cause is believed to be changes to the traditional farming practices and abandonment of hay meadows.

In order to help to reverse this trend, DOPPS/BirdLife Slovenia implemented a LIFE Nature III project in the period 2004-2007. One of the key elements of the project was development and testing of an agri-environment scheme benefiting the Corncrake. This scheme has now been included in the new Slovenian Rural De-

velopment Programme for the period 2007-2013.

Activities also included informing and educating relevant stakeholders, with focus on farmers managing wet meadows in key corncrake sites, in order to increase their willingness to adopt bird-friendly farming practices and ensure sufficient uptake of the scheme. The project also included an extensive monitoring element which contributed to improvement of methodology and further implementation of the Farmland Bird Index (FBI) as a biodiversity indicator within the Rural development policy. Finally, the project has successfully engaged with local stakeholders and explored the possible synergies between agriculture and nature

conservation demands in Natura 2000 sites.

DOPPS – BirdLife Slovenia



Corncrake by M.Demko

Date for your diary

28 May

Ljubljana, Slovenia

Making the CAP work for the Environment

An international conference organised by DOPPS/BirdLife Slovenia and BirdLife International with the support of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) aimed at stimulating a debate on the future of the EU Common Agriculture Policy

For more information: http://www.birdlife.org/eu/eu_events.html



THE BIRDLIFE EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP



The BirdLife European Partnership consists of 43 conservation organisations with 1800 staff, 1.7 million members and more than 6,000 reserves (covering over 300,000 hectares). A European Programme to conserve birds is implemented by Partners with coordination provided by the European Division staff in Brussels (Belgium) working together with the BirdLife Global Secretariat in Cambridge (UK). While many of these are working on agriculture issues connected to bird conservation, only Partners in EU are active in the BirdLife 'Farming for Life' Campaign.

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