



EDITORIAL

Voluntary modulation: small lifeboat for sinking rural development

Observing European leaders struggle to reach such a bad compromise on the financial perspective 2007-2013 has been frustrating and saddening. Despite the rhetoric about Europe's need to preserve its declining biodiversity, we are left with a future of severe cuts to the rural development funds and agri environment schemes. These are the only measures that could have helped the recovery of European countryside, its wildlife, social fabric and economy.

The figures of this debacle of historical proportion are frightening. On average, the EU 15 has lost 43 % of the current rural development funds. If this figure is hard to swallow for those who care about the environment, more detailed figures are even worse. German cuts are as severe as 47%.

If agriculture ministers had their own vision about the future of rural areas, and stressed the importance of funding true sustainable rural development, finance ministers have stamped on it and on the aspirations of the many citizens that want a better EU.

My country, Austria, now has the Presidency of the EU for the first 6 months of 2006. Its record loyalty to spending two thirds of its total agricultural budget on rural development measures should inspire and influence other Member States. But will it? Will the excuse of a reduced budget be used to avoid expanding much needed rural spending?

Agriculture ministers might be still recovering from the shock and blaming others for this appalling deal, but this is the time for them to show that they are not all talk, no action.

After all, the option of shifting money from pillar I to pillar II is still there. They can stick a plaster on the wounds of agri environment through voluntary modulation.

They can give CAP some credibility as a policy and better reflect society's worries, after the financial perspective has dismissed them. They can give a new lease of life to endangered wildlife and be consistent with the promise to halt biodiversity loss by 2010 agreed at the Gothenburg summit in 2001. And more. But will they?

There will be little excuse for agriculture ministers not to do so. The claim that recent reforms have radically changed the CAP and that decoupling will sort out the environment doesn't stand on its feet. Until the notorious 80% of direct payments going to 20% of farmers is changed, until public money is spent to deliver public benefits in rural areas and most importantly, until we see a recovery of our wildlife species across the countryside, the CAP will be the target of public attention and criticism. I hope my country will be able to bring a tangible contribution to this debate in Europe and bring Agricultural Ministers to start the new year on the right path.



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FARMING FOR LIFE *NEWSLETTER*

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Indicators for the rural development policy: measure reality in order to change it

BirdLife has been arguing for a long time that the CAP should be radically reformed to use public money to deliver public goods, with biodiversity conservation as one of its key objectives.

An important step in improving policies and making them accountable for their efficacy is to monitor the delivery of benefits. The outcomes of policy action can be captured by adopting meaningful and robust indicators. Biodiversity conservation is a case in point. Unless we gather reliable information about its trends, it will be impossible to set realistic targets for EU farmland biodiversity and feedback into programs to ensure those targets are met. It would also be difficult to show taxpayers that their money has been put to good use.

The EU urgently needs both baseline state indicators, to define the state of play across Member States, and outcome and impact indicators to monitor the success of specific measures.

In the case of biodiversity, an indicator is readily available. This is the Farmland bird indicator- a statistically well designed index that captures the trends in populations of a pool of widespread farmland birds. This indicator is based on data regularly collected in most EU countries by thousands of skilled volunteers, under high level scientific supervision.

The adoption of a farmland bird indicator and other relevant baseline indicators, and the commitment by Member States to monitor the results of their Rural development measures will be a crucial step to-

ward saving Europe's declining wildlife and a valuable proof to EU taxpayers that their money is effectively spent to save our natural heritage. Including such a provision for the monitoring into the new rural development implementing regulation would be the way to go.

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The deal on the financial perspective 2007-2013: bad news for farmland wildlife

The agreement reached by Europe's leaders on the financial perspective on 17th December spells disaster for wildlife. While funding for Pillar I of the CAP (direct payments and market expenditure) has largely been preserved compared to the Commission's proposals, money for rural development (Pillar II) has been slashed by around one fifth. BirdLife is dismayed to note that the budget supporting agri-environment and other environmentally friendly farming measures under Pillar II, has been hit particularly hard, reducing current spending by over 40 per cent in some Member States. This deal throws the EU's commitment to halt biodiversity decline by 2010 into disarray and reverses much of the progress made in the

recent CAP reforms.

Although the agreement allows Member States to transfer up to 20 per cent of direct subsidies allocated to them under Pillar I to Pillar II (so-called modulation), Member States have so far shown little appetite for this option. Conservationists are therefore calling national governments to make a clear commitment to transferring Pillar I funds to rural development, as allowed by the agreement. They are also asking the Commission to deliver a fundamental overhaul of the CAP in favour of wildlife and the environment in 2008/2009 when the entire EU budget is reviewed.

However, before the deal can enter into force, it must be adopted by the European

Parliament. BirdLife is urging MEPs to use their bargaining power to increase the budget for rural development by remaining firm to their position that the Commission's proposed budget for rural development – EUR 88.75 billion – is the minimum necessary to ensure the delivery of the EU's sustainable development objectives in rural areas.

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Sugar reform at last, but environment is ignored

In July we asked our supporters to take action over the European Union's scandalous system of sugar subsidies and trade barriers that have prevented many small farmers from working their way out of poverty and raising environmental standards. More than 12000 people from WWF, Oxfam and BirdLife International wrote to Margaret Beckett, Chair of the European Council of Agriculture Ministers during the UK Presidency, and called on the EU to make reforms that are sweeter for people and nature everywhere.

Reform was agreed at the end of 2005 following a series of concessions to resisting Member States. While we have welcomed the reform as a step in the right direction, the final compromise is a long way from a system that supports the movement towards a more sustainable beet production system in the EU and fair and equitable treatment of developing country producers. With €1.5Bn of an already constrained European budget being assigned to a sugar single farm payment, no further modulation to boost rural de-

velopment funds, and only €40Mn designated to developing country trading partners affected by the reform, how could it be argued otherwise?

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Case study: Habitat restoration in Emilia Romagna delivering benefits for biodiversity and people



In Italy, the great majority of agri-environment schemes are not aimed at the conservation of birds or other biodiversity. The few ones that are, mainly promote wildlife friendly farming practices. However, the cessation of farming activities on some fields and the restoration of habitats has proved to be the most effective conservation instrument in the country's most intensively farmed landscapes, such as the Po Plain in north Italy. In this

area a large concentration of monocultures has in time replaced what was once a diverse, habitat rich, mixed farming system.

The recreation of natural habitats in this intensive arable area, and their specific management for birds and other wildlife through agri environment schemes, has yielded spectacular results. A most impressive example is that of Regione Emilia-Romagna, south of the Po river. This scheme started in 1992 under the old EU Reg. 2078 and today boosts around 5,000 hectares of habitats recreated and managed for conservation purposes. More than 320 farms participate to this scheme. This costs 600 Euro/ha, lasts 20 years and promotes the restoration of semi-natural habitats that were common in the area until the Second World War: permanent wetlands, temporary wetlands (met meadows) and permanent grasslands interspersed with bushes. These habitats are now very rare and in need of Community's support.

Some of the restored areas can now be used for leisure activities, thanks to the establishment of cycle paths, hides and observation towers. These are enabling local farmers to diversify their business

and provide tourist and recreation services in rural areas, with obvious benefit to the public and to wildlife.

Monitoring the results of agri-environment schemes is increasingly important, as it helps to assess the returns of the agri-environment "investment" on rural areas and to tax payers. The Emilia-Romagna scheme has an effective and comprehensive monitoring plan that has revealed extraordinary results: 44 bird species are now nesting in restored wetlands, 15 of which are of Community Importance (annex I of Birds Directive); up to 100% of the Emilia-Romagna populations of 14 species breed on restored areas. Examples of these are Lapwings (35% of national population.), Collared Pratincole (30% of nat. pop.), Whiskered Tern (60-80% of reg. and nat. pop.) and Ferruginous duck (30% of reg. pop.). Restored wetlands are also extensively used by migratory waterfowl (herons, coot, waders, ducks, geese, etc.) while restored permanent grasslands have boosted populations of declining farmland species such as Corn bunting, Red backed shrike, Turtle dove and Skylark.

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WTO agriculture negotiations

2005 ended dramatically, with the Financial Perspectives being agreed in Brussels, while trade ministers were in Hong Kong, at the 6th Ministerial of the WTO, furthering negotiations committed to under the Doha Mandate. Key to the negotiations was agriculture. In the past, WTO agreements have been a driver for further CAP reform, but progress in Hong Kong was slow, although a very welcome commitment was made to phase out export subsi-

dies and equivalent support by 2013. Much has been left to discuss and agree on over the coming year, including a review of the green box. BirdLife, along with many other civil society organisations, will be calling for this to be a thorough review that leads to the tightening of green box subsidy criteria, so that it only permits agricultural support that is aimed at delivering direct environmental and social objectives.

In the long term, our attention must turn

to how agricultural trade can become a positive force in sustainable development. Perhaps most importantly, we need to develop an equitable system that allows sustainably produced products to be favoured and encouraged through the international trading system, otherwise a race to the bottom in social and environmental standards seems inevitable.

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Diary dates

January 23-24	Agriculture and Fisheries Council: <i>Exchange of views on Biomass Action Plan</i>
February 20-21	Agriculture and Fisheries Council: <i>Adoption of Sugar Reform; Adoption of Rural Development Strategic Guideline; Exchange of views on EU Strategy for Biofuels</i>
March 20-21	Agriculture and Fisheries Council: <i>Policy debate on review of the Sustainable Development Strategy</i>
March 23-24	European Council
April 25	Agriculture and Fisheries Council
May 22-23	Agriculture and Fisheries Council: <i>Council conclusions on EU strategy for biofuels, poss. Presentation of the Commission's Report on Agri-Enviro Indicators</i>
May 28-30	Informal Meeting of Agriculture Ministers
June 15-16	European Council
June 19-20	Agriculture and Fisheries Council



THE BIRDLIFE EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP



The BirdLife European Partnership consists of 42 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 Wageningen (The Netherlands) and Brussels (Belgium) working together with the BirdLife Global Secretariat in Cambridge (UK). While many of these are working on agricultural issues connected to bird conservation, only Partners in EU and Accession countries are active in the BirdLife 'Farming for Life' Campaign.

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