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BirdLife's bi-annual Agriculture Newsletter

July

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Editorial: A new vision for the future

Dear reader,

European agriculture is at a crossroads. 2010 will mark the EU's failure to live up to its goal of halting biodiversity decline, and species and habitats dependant on farming are in particularly poor condition. With our window of opportunity to contain runaway climate change closing fast, and ever clearer global strain on natural resources, it is clear that we cannot postpone action any longer.

2010 will also see the European Commission submit its proposals for the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) - a policy that could do much to deliver sustainable food production and land management across Europe, but that is still systematically failing to do so. The current system is built mainly on historic and obsolete mechanisms. Support is still directed towards those who produced more under the "old" CAP, rather than those who deliver the most environmental benefits and contribute to maintaining a sustainable resource base which is necessary for ensuring long-term food security. At the same time, CAP expenditure, which accounts for 40% of the current budget, faces increasing pressure and scrutiny as decisions are taken on the future of the EU Budget.

BirdLife International and other NGOs, already engaged for many years in reconciling farming and environmental conservation, have come together with detailed proposals for a transformation of the CAP. This new CAP would help farmers rise to the challenge of sustainable farming and reward those who deliver the environmental benefits that society values and needs.

We hope to engage in a frank and open debate on the future of European farming, land management and the role of the CAP. We have therefore launched an unprecedented consultation effort, inviting all stakeholders to comment on our proposals, and endorse them if they agree with us. We do not expect everybody to agree with our proposals, but we do hope to prompt a constructive debate on CAP's objectives and the means of achieving them. To promote such a debate, we will publish the results of our consultation exercise online, criticism included. If the future of Europe's rural areas, food production, landscapes and biodiversity are important to you, download our proposals and have your say at <http://www.cap2020.ieep.eu/vision/>

Besides presenting our proposals for the future CAP, in this issue we will also be looking at the implementation problems of the current policy, the complex interaction between climate and agriculture policies and the legacy of the outgoing Commissioner.

Ariel Brunner
Senior EU Agriculture Policy Officer
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Time for a new CAP

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has come a long way from the dark days of Butter Mountains & Wine Lakes and of

forcing farmers to degrade their environment, but it remains a backward looking policy, which is out of tune with today's challenges. To face up to biodiversity and climate crises, and ensure our long-term food security, a radical change is needed. And if taxpayers are to accept investing their money into a European Common Agricultural Policy, we need a system that can ensure these funds are wisely used.

This is the spirit of a new detailed proposal for the future of the CAP jointly published by BirdLife International, EEB, the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, IFOAM and WWF.

In our proposal, we suggest a range of tools which could transform the CAP into an effective and efficient policy fit to tackle new and emerging challenges. We propose a new architecture, drawing on lessons learned from the current system. We envisage a CAP where Member States tailor common tools to local needs within a common framework, ensuring full accountability and better targeting and effectiveness. We propose a combination of public goods payments supporting good practice, including a basic flat rate payment based on robust commitments, to deliver above and beyond the mandatory baseline, and higher payments for systems delivering higher benefits. Targeted agri-environment payments would address more specific issues and protect valuable habitats and species. We also envisage a range of public investments in sustainable farming and local communities to help build a knowledge-based, resource efficient and viable farming sector. Most importantly, we are proposing a way to overcome the inadequacies of current CAP through combining the best elements of both current "pillars" within one rational system.

Download the joint proposal at http://www.birdlife.org/eu/pdfs/CAP_proposal_09.pdf

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Guest contribution from the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism



Our joint vision for a new CAP is not a radical proposal. Compared to the existing CAP, what we propose is more rational and better linked to wider EU policy goals. The idea is to use CAP funds to support positive action, rather than to pay various forms of compensation to farmers.

Halting biodiversity decline is a key EU policy commitment affecting rural areas. We all agree that this commitment can only be met if farming is steered in a new direction. The European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP)'s particular concern is the future of High Nature Value (HNV) farming. This is farmland with a large proportion of semi-natural vegetation, and managed at a sufficiently low intensity to support wildlife communities not found on intensively farmed land.

We estimate that HNV farming may cover as much as half of European farmland at present, concentrated mainly in the more marginal areas that have been less intensified. If this farming goes, much of our biodiversity goes with it.

And it is already going. As intensive farming continues to rationalise and increase its productivity, and as incomes rise in the wider economy, it becomes harder to earn a living from HNV farming. The returns on labour are so small that, across large areas of the EU's most marginal and fragile rural landscapes, HNV farming faces stark choices between abandonment and intensification. As farmers give up, landscapes rich in biodiversity and culture, and resistant to forest fires, are being lost to scrub, afforestation, or new intensive crops.

Agri-environment schemes do not solve this fundamental problem. They put too much emphasis on compensating the costs of specific practices. They tend to be highly bureaucratic, and implementation is very uneven across the EU. They are needed, but we should not pretend they address the underlying economic problem.

Targeted farm income support is needed if HNV farming is to continue. In fact, income support absorbs most of the current CAP budget, but is not targeted in any rational way. The absurd "historic" payments steer income support firmly towards the most productive and intensively farmed land.

Our joint CAP vision proposes a system of income payments specifically for HNV farming. The payments are for farms that meet basic eligibility criteria, such as a minimum proportion of semi-natural farmland, and thresholds for livestock density and other inputs. These payments should be made readily accessible for the large number of farms that meet the criteria, without excessive bureaucracy. The scheme should aim to bring in farmers, not to exclude them with red-tape.

But income payments alone are not going to maintain HNV farming in the longer term, especially in the most marginal areas. Local initiatives are essential for giving HNV farming a dynamic future. Rural development programmes should give priority to helping farmers' groups to tackle local issues, ranging from processing and marketing to habitat conservation. For this, they need not only funding, but also input from expert advisors and animators. Such people are key to making things happen on the ground, but this human resource is strikingly absent from many marginal farming areas.

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Through the green smokescreen - How is CAP cross compliance delivering for biodiversity?



The new BirdLife report shows that cross compliance, the system of rules attached to the receipt of the €31 billion-worth single payment scheme, is still far from concretely supporting biodiversity protection. BirdLife's analysis unveils a lack of clear policy objectives, targets and mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the results, therefore concluding that this policy is not in line with the principles of efficiency and effectiveness that must apply to EU budget spending.

BirdLife's report proves that cross compliance and the single payment scheme fail to reflect the 'polluter-pays' principle. The report highlights how environmental rules are often partially implemented, inconsistent and weakly enforced. On the other hand, rules on registration and identification of livestock are being enforced out of context and place a disproportionate burden on extensive livestock systems. These systems,

which are crucial for biodiversity, often receive lower subsidies than intensive farms. A similarly inappropriate approach has been taken for standards on preventing scrub encroachment on agricultural land, damaging habitats that are protected under the Habitats Directive.

The report lays down technical guidelines on how to improve cross compliance standard in the current financial perspective. However, BirdLife calls for a profound reform of the CAP after 2013, realigning the whole policy to the principles of rural development policy, which currently represent the best model to reward biodiversity conservation and the delivery of other public goods.

Download the full report at

http://www.birdlife.org/eu/pdfs/Through_the_green_smokescreen_November_2009.pdf

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CAP 'Health Check' implementation: rural development programmes



The European Commission has so far approved 42 out of 88 revised rural development programmes, enabling Member States to make use of extra funding provided by the CAP "Health Check" and the European Economic Recovery Plan. In the Health Check exercise, biodiversity was identified as one of the "new challenges" to be addressed by the additional funding available for rural development.

Data on the recently approved programmes show that approximately 27% of additional funding has been earmarked for biodiversity. This apparently positive result actually masks a more complex situation, with the amounts ringfenced for biodiversity ranging from 0% in many cases (e.g. Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Sardinia, Trento, Cantabria, Madrid, Murcia, Navarra) to over 80% in the case of Catalunya and Northern Ireland. The technical quality of measures that are classified as pro-biodiversity is another element of uncertainty, as supported operations may range from wasteful integrated pest management to well-designed habitat restoration.

Moreover, the fact that extra funding has been "on paper" allocated to biodiversity does not imply that additional resources will be available in reality, as a financial rearrangement of programmes (with shifts of funds between measures) might result in net reductions of available biodiversity funding. This seems to be an issue for the programmes of Austria and Ireland.

Another issue for concern is that a significant amount of extra funding (18% in the approved revised programmes) has been earmarked for the dairy sector. The large majority of EU milk production occurs in intensive farms, which rely on soya that is produced destroying important natural habitats in South America such as the Brazilian Cerrado and Argentine pampas. Dairy factory farms are also responsible for high water consumption and pollution, as well as methane emissions.

Any additional support to intensive livestock systems is likely to make fruitless all efforts to tackle biodiversity, climate change and water management. Commission's scrutiny will be of primary importance to avoid supporting unsustainable factory farms and to ensure biodiversity decline is addressed.

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CAP 'Health Check' implementation: Article 68 of Regulation EC 73/2009



As discussed in our previous issue, this flexible tool has a great potential to support

High Nature Value farming systems and biodiversity-friendly practices, by making use of funds currently being wasted through the single payment scheme.

However, in the very few Member States that have chosen to adopt this instrument, most of funding will be diverted to unsustainable factory farming, especially dairy sector, without any environmental safeguard.

In France 12% of art. 68 funds will be used to support organic farming, while the environmental benefits of all other measures (coupled payments for different livestock sectors, crop insurance schemes, durum wheat and protein crop premia) are extremely doubtful.

In Spain, 8% of art.68 funds have been earmarked for extensive livestock systems (sheep, goat and cattle) and 23% of funds for extensive arable systems. All other funds will provide untargeted support for some livestock sectors, as well as for unsustainable irrigated crops.

Italy will support extensive sheep and goat systems (although there is no clearly ring fenced amount). Along with untargeted support to livestock sectors and payments for an extremely weak crop rotation scheme. Incredibly, supporting high tobacco quality (€21.5 million) seems to be a priority in this country.

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End of the Year: time for the Commissioner's appraisal



The European Commission has now accepted that the EU objective to halt biodiversity decline by 2010 will be missed, and that agriculture dependent species and habitats consistently fare worse than others- an indictment of the failure of EU policies to tackle the crisis in our countryside. Reaching this sad milestone, it is worth taking a look back at the performance of the outgoing European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural development.

After a promising start, Commissioner Fischer-Boel adopted a disappointing business as-usual approach to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Despite powerful rhetoric on the need to address "New Challenges" (climate change, biodiversity, water, renewable energy), she has failed to seriously address the environmental crises. The opportunity of the 'CAP Health Check' was wasted, leaving subsidies virtually unchanged with environmentally harmful farms often reaping the highest payments, extensive farming left out in the cold and environmental measures only slightly less underfunded.

Succumbing to farm lobby pressure, Commissioner Fischer-Boel rushed to scrap the set-aside obligation without a proper assessment of the environmental impacts and without proposing credible mitigation measures. She has also been instrumental in the adoption of a misguided target for increased use of biofuels in the EU despite clear evidence of their often perverse effects on the climate, biodiversity and human welfare.

On a brighter note, she has overseen important improvements to Rural Development Policy (including efforts to improve strategic planning and impact monitoring) and she has taken a strong and positive position on the subsidies transparency initiative, with the result that the CAP's many inequalities and inefficiencies are now laid bare.

While much of the blame should rest with Member States, Commissioner Fischer-Boel has missed the opportunity to continue the reforms begun by her predecessors. The European countryside remains stuck on a path of waste, natural resource depletion and ecosystem degradation and the CAP is in poor shape and vulnerable to the gathering budgetary storm.

The next Commissioner must do better.

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How can agriculture adapt to climate change?



Climate change is already being felt in European agriculture and increasingly large impacts are expected, posing a major challenge for farming systems across the EU. Adaptation will not only be crucial for the continued viability and profitability of agricultural production, but will have effects that transcend geographical and sectoral borders. Many of these effects will be mediated by and impact upon ecosystems.

Therefore, as European agriculture adapts to climate change, it must adopt an ecosystem approach which takes the health and resilience of ecosystems into account. It must, in the first place, be ensured that damage to ecosystems is avoided or minimised, in order to avoid perverse outcomes (or 'mal-adaptation'). For example, increased use of pesticides as a response to a climate-induced spread of pests and diseases will impact on water quality and biodiversity in agricultural systems, reducing – rather than increasing – resilience to climate change, and also impose negative externalities on other sectors.

Biodiversity and ecosystems can also be harnessed more proactively in adaptation. Conserving 'agro-biodiversity' – a diversity of crops, wild plants, animals and micro-organisms – increases resistance to weather extremes, pest infections and invasive species; it also underpins the development of new crops. Healthy soils present a solution to both droughts and floods, as they mitigate the extremes by absorbing and storing water. An ecosystem approach to adaptation – an important consideration in the upcoming CAP reform – will not only ensure sustainability and provide cost-efficient adaptation solutions; it will also contribute to a host of other EU priorities such as biodiversity conservation and freshwater management.

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