

Agriculture and Biodiversity in the EU

Title



Farmland makes up 47% of the European territory. Thus, a large wildlife has evolved around farming for centuries. The diverse range of habitats and species in traditional agricultural landscapes have provided invaluable aesthetic values and public benefits like countryside character, and ecosystem services covering soil, water and air quality.

However, for several years, scientists have pointed out a decline of farmland biodiversity. The farmland bird index, one of the best indicators of the health of Europe's farmland ecosystems and wildlife, showed that common farmland birds like corn bunting, goldfinch, lapwing and skylark, have declined by almost 50% in the past 30 years (Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme, 2013). Other indicators denounce similar declines. As an example, [the European Environmental Agency showed an almost 50% decline of 17 EU grassland butterfly populations](#) between 1990 and 2011.

In the past 50 years, the shift to an intensive farming, partly driven by a Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) focused on commercial production, and as a consequence, [the abandonment of extensively-managed croplands and pastures \(high nature value farming\)](#) have had a significant [loss of habitats](#) for farmland mammals and plants across Europe. Therefore, the farmland wildlife, already threatened by [climate change](#), is losing more and more species, which is putting the entire farmland ecosystem under a threat.

Agriculture influences the whole ecosystem

Agriculture does not only have an effect on birds and biodiversity, it also influences the wider ecosystem. Farming is responsible for over 50% of nitrogen in water and is a significant source of phosphates. Excess levels of these fertilisers in water bodies lead to eutrophication which can lead to the loss of many species. Agriculture accounts for around 24% of total water use in Europe. This can reach up to 80% in some parts of Southern Europe. In general, water scarcity concerns at least 14 Member States and around 100 million inhabitants in the EU. For soil the figures are at least as dramatic: 115 million hectares of Europe's total land area is affected by water erosion and 42 million hectares by wind erosion and this while soil holds one fourth of all biodiversity on earth. This shows that we need to keep the whole agriculture ecosystem healthy. To read more on the facts check out our factsheets.

But what about food security?

Climate change, biodiversity loss, hunger and poverty, rural development and regulation of world trade are all challenges that face global agriculture and areas in which the choices made by the European Union will play a vital role. While further research is still needed to better understand the complex mechanisms linking agricultural production, food consumption, environmental degradation and social problems, much scientific evidence is already available and can help inform EU decision makers. The only realistic way to ensure long term food security and to avoid a real crisis is to ensure that agricultural resource base such as soil, water and biodiversity is effectively protected, both in developed and developing countries. In EU, an easy win-win option is to support Europe's [High Nature Value farming](#) systems so they could go on being a source of high quality and sustainable food, while preventing such traditional farms from being abandoned would in the mean-time benefit farmland biodiversity. If you want to know more, read our full position [here](#).

[Landscapes Blog](#) interview *On Birds, agriculture, and European policy* with Trees Robijn, Senior EU Agriculture & Bioenergy Policy Officer for BirdLife Europe

Agriculture section

- [Advocating for sustainable agriculture](#)
- [Agriculture and Biodiversity in the EU](#)
- [The Common Agriculture Policy](#)
- [Rural Development](#)
- [High Nature Value Farming](#)
- [Agriculture](#)

Projects

- [PEGASUS: Transforming Approaches To Rural Land Management](#)



Stichting BirdLife Europe gratefully acknowledges financial support from the European Commission. All content and opinions expressed on these pages are solely those of Stichting BirdLife Europe.