

European Court of Auditors puts high quality agri environment in the spotlight, as Commission mulls backtracking on drive for a greener CAP

Title

As the European Commission is about to propose its reform of the Common Agriculture policy, an official report has highlighted the importance of agri environment schemes across Europe. The European Court of Auditors' two year long study into the effectiveness of agri environment schemes released on Monday 19 September. While containing some hard-hitting recommendations for improvement, it hails the crucial role agri environment plays in supporting farmers to introduce more sustainable and wildlife friendly practices.

The study chimes with another report compiled by the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) which provides examples of successful agri environment schemes across Europe. The Seeds of Success report highlights case studies in Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Romania and the UK. Ariel Brunner, Head of EU Policy at BirdLife Europe, said: 'We welcome the Court of Auditors' in-depth study which is further evidence of the importance of agri environment schemes.' 'Funding conservation in our farmed countryside is vital if we are to reverse declines in biodiversity and many farmers have stepped up to do their bit for wildlife. Sadly, from what we have seen of proposals to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, EU decision makers risk undoing the progress agri-environment has made over the past twenty years.' 'The Court of Auditors report makes some good recommendations and these schemes must be improved so that they work harder for the environment ? but we must also ensure the basic level of funding is in place across all European member states ? without enough money even the best schemes in the world will fail to deliver what is needed.'

Recent leaked CAP reform documents reveal that there are plans to remove the rule setting out the minimum amount countries must spend on agri environment schemes and paves the

way for money currently dedicated to environmental schemes to be spent in other areas, including untargeted and old fashioned income support. The Commission has announced plans for 'greening' the direct payment (Pillar 1) element of the CAP. This will mean farmers will have to adhere to some basic good practice rules to be eligible for a direct payment cheque. While BirdLife Europe believes that if such standards are properly designed they can improve environmental quality across the farmed landscape, in no case should such 'greening' come at the expense of a boosting of agri environment (Pillar II) funding which, as outlined by the Court of Auditors, holds the potential for truly effective spending. 'In light of the Court's report, it would be inconceivable if the Commission was to come out with a reform that weakens agri environment spending while just greenwashing pillar I spending' concluded Ariel Brunner.
