One of the overarching aims of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform was to make it deliver more for the environment. This factsheet therefore analyses the quality of public spending. It looks at what hides behind the official numbers and what French Rural Development spending means for the environment, specifically for biodiversity in the Rhône-Alpes region.

STATE OF PLAY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT:

The Rhône-Alpes region is very diverse geographically, which means it supports a large variety of natural ecosystems and encourages very rich biodiversity. The agricultural surface is about 40% of the territory of Rhône-Alpes. Of the total Rhône-Alpes territory, 56.5% of it is mountainous (with three different mountain types) and 71% of it can be classed as Areas with Natural Constraints. The loss of agriculture in these areas could have negative effects on the environment and on rural development. Therefore, it is important to maintain livestock-based activities, especially in mountain areas.

Natura 2000 sites cover 11% of the Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) of the Rhône-Alpes region. The network includes 166 sites with incredible biodiversity. Other nature protection categories exist: 26 natural, biological and forest reserves, six regional nature parks, and about 37,000ha are under biotope protection. Meadows and permanent grassland constitute more than half (52%) of the UAA in the Rhône-Alpes region. 6.5% of this area is natural meadows (2010).

Between 2006 and 2010 a significant loss (10%) of permanent grassland has been observed.

FARMLAND BIRD INDEX:

Farmland Birds have decreased by 32% in the French countryside since 1989.

Priority 4: RURAL DEVELOPMENT BUDGET FOR ‘ECOSYSTEMS’: theory and practice

The implementation of EU Rural Development (RD) programmes should fulfil a number of set objectives and priorities. While 65% of the RD money in the Rhône-Alpes region has been allocated to measures that should directly benefit biodiversity, water and soil, the reality is that not all measures for which this money has been earmarked have high environmental value. These measures may, at best, benefit nature indirectly, such as payments for farming in Areas with Natural Constraints (ANC), but they are

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2 Priority 4, as foreseen by the Rural Development Regulation, Art. 5
not tied to concrete environmental targets or conditions. Indeed, in the Rhône-Alpes region the largest share, and close to three quarters of the money under this priority (74%), will go to ANC farmers. Although the payment rates differ between intensive and more extensive farming practices (extensive farmers will receive higher support), the bottom line is that intensive production systems in ANC regions will benefit from this additional income support with no strings attached.

Only 8% of this budget has been earmarked for agri-environment measures.

In addition, some RDP measures risk harming the environment and biodiversity in particular, such as support to forestry with non-indigenous species, support to irrigation and water storage platforms instead of incentivising water use efficiency and savings. Measures aimed at reducing and limiting harmful herbicides are insufficient due to low thresholds.

**AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SPENDING: past vs. future**

In Rhône-Alpes a mere 85 million Euros (5.3% of RD money) will be spent on Agri-Environment measures (AEC) – although this is a large increase compared to the previous spending period, it still clearly falls short to cater for needs of priority farmland species and habitats.

The increase of the AEC budget might be due to a new approach, targeting and tailoring AEC measures to the regional and local levels. One risk with this approach is that territories that are too small to have their own AEC programme may be left out and will not benefit from AEC support. The budget increase for AEC measures is also related to the introduction of new ‘system AEC measures’: broad AEC measures applicable to all farms and with high payment rates. However, due to eligibility criteria the take-up could be limited.

The little money available for AEC measures could be well invested: 64% of the AEC budget will be spent on schemes targeted directly at specific species, habitats or biodiversity problems, i.e. those which are ‘dark green’ and are really tackling the issues at stake.
What do we mean by ‘dark green’ agri-environment measures:

The European Court of Auditors, in its special report from 2011* looking at effectiveness of agri-environment support, recommended that agri-environment schemes should be more precisely targeted and that there should be a higher rate of EU contribution for sub-measures with a higher environmental potential. In our analysis we have looked at what proportion of agri-environment budget has been allocated to targeted, as we call them ‘dark green’, schemes for biodiversity. As EAFRD and Rural Development plans do not recognise such a category, we have worked with regional and national experts to assess measures, using the following principles: The scheme has been considered ‘dark green’ if it is targeted at specific species (group of species), habitats or a specific biodiversity problem (pollinator strips).

* ECA Special report no 7/2011: Is agri-environment support well designed and managed?

FARM BIODIVERSITY CONTRACTS INSUFFICIENT TO REACH EU BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY OBJECTIVES

The EU’s Biodiversity Strategy clearly states that by 2020 the area of farmland covered by biodiversity-related measures must be maximised in order to achieve a measurable improvement of species dependent on, or affected by, agriculture.

The Rhône-Alpes region claims that 16.9% of its farmland will be covered under contracts for biodiversity protection, but measures under the new RDP which could be genuinely beneficial for biodiversity are only applicable to 13% of farmland. These measures include, for example, schemes supporting late mowing practices targeted at ground nesting birds and certain plant species, or supporting the maintenance of the floristic richness of natural meadows which protects specific and regionally adapted floristic species.

AEC measures, including ‘dark green’ schemes, offer varying payment rates and level of requirements. The balance between the payment rate and the requirements is sometimes inadequate and the budget available is not realistic for some of the requirements. This situation will affect attractiveness and take-up of some of the schemes, including ‘dark green’ schemes. There is therefore a serious risk that the less-stringent schemes will be the most applied for and that the funds available for ‘dark green’ schemes will not be sufficiently used up. Moreover, in order to be successful, these ‘dark green’ schemes need effective accompanying services (advisory services, cooperation, expertise etc.). Recent evidence shows that the Rhône-Alpes region is instead planning on reducing support to environmental associations that could deliver these types of services. This will eventually allow critics to demonstrate that such targeted schemes are not attractive or effective.
UNCERTAINTY ON NATURA 2000
Rural Development Programmes should include an approach to tackling the specific needs of Natura 2000 areas\(^3\). Although 11% of the UAA is designated as Natura 2000, not even 1% of the budget under Priority 4 has been earmarked for Natura 2000 Payments.

Other measures that can benefit Natura 2000 are; support to the development and revision of Natura 2000 management plans, and support to coordinating and accompanying activities also in Natura 2000. All AEC schemes are prioritised for Natura 2000 sites.

Overall, it is difficult to identify to what extent Natura 2000 will benefit from RDP measures and spending in the French Rhône-Alpes region.

EUROPE NEEDS:

1. To ensure that a well-designed greening and reinforced cross compliance represent a firm baseline for Pillar 2 environmental measures. This could help free up money for more efficient and targeted measures that benefit the environment and biodiversity.

   *These baselines should be properly set and checked so as to create an equal level playing field for all farmers in Europe – special attention is needed on issues such as integrated pest management, water and soil. The Commission should urgently start to work on including the Water Framework Directive and Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive directly into cross compliance so that the uncertainty around what is the baseline and what is not, is removed.*

2. To ensure that the CAP is designed in a way which helps reach the EU Biodiversity Strategy goals by 2020. So far evidence shows that the agriculture target is the most problematic.

   *In Pillar 2 this can only be done through proper funding of the Natura 2000 Network and the Priority ‘Habitats and species’ as defined in the Birds and Habitats Directives.*

3. To have a genuine system for tracking environmental spending. Only measures with clear environmental objectives and delivery can be included. Areas of Natural Constraints (ANCs) must not be counted as environmentally-beneficial measures as there are no environmental obligations or management requirements attached to the payments.

   *At best, ANC has an indirect positive effect for biodiversity and the environment. However, in the worst case they are just income support which is pushing damaging intensification. The purpose of the ANC payments – to fight against abandonment or compensate farmers to work in more difficult areas – remains difficult to justify when compared to the direct income support of the first pillar. At best it is proof of the duality of the CAP where Pillar 1 is a driver for large and intensified farms and Pillar 2 a way to counter this drive. This duality should be ended and a targeted instrument should be devised which supports extensive farming systems that provide high environmental value but are not economically viable.*

4. To ensure proper monitoring of the Rural Development schemes’ delivery.

   *It is not possible to know if investments in rural development are really delivering benefits for biodiversity without this evaluation.*

Conclusion: Europe needs to take a proper look at the whole of its agricultural policy and how it is working together or against environmental commitments and priorities. Even if Rural Development can be a large

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\(^3\) Rural Development Regulation, Art. 8
part of the answer and has the potential to play a positive role in many parts of Europe, the figures unfortunately show adjustments are necessary for this policy to truly deliver towards its objectives. It is now clear that this reformed CAP still has a long way to go before it can be called green.

THE FRENCH RHÔNE-ALPES REGION NEEDS:

1. To review measures that can affect water use in view of achieving an efficient and sustainable management of water resources.
2. To review measures related to the use of polluting substances by including stricter prescriptions to avoid damage to the environment.
3. To review the eligibility criteria of ANC payments and propose stricter environmental criteria.

SOURCES:


The data in this factsheet is based on the first version of the Rural Development Programme in the Rhône-Alpes region.

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