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 Italian Rural Development spending in the Piedmont region means for the environment, specifically for biodiversity.

STATE OF PLAY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT:

Some of the major challenges for the Piedmont region identified by the RDP are: support to restoration, maintenance and improvement of natural and farmed biodiversity and landscape, limitation of the contamination of non-renewable resources (water, soil, air) from agriculture and the protection and development of agricultural and forest activities in mountainous areas.

However other environmental issues also urgently need to be tackled, such as, planning of a strategy for the maintenance of mountain pastures and hay meadows in a good ecological status, also outside Natura 2000, the prevention of predation by large carnivores and the restoration of flood plain forests for naturalistic purposes.

According to the Prioritised Action Framework for Natura 2000 in the region, Alpine open habitats are in good conservation status, although there is the risk of impoverishment due to overgrazing and of succession because of abandonment of grazing or mowing. The main protected farmland habitats in the lowlands are nutrient-poor grassland and rice fields, which figure as a replacement habitat for lowland birds. The main threats for these habitats are the enlargement of monoculture and the elimination of ecological connectivity elements, the dry management of rice cultivation and pollution.

FARMLAND BIRD INDEX:

Farmland Birds have increased by 4% in the countryside in Piedmont between 2000 and 2013. At national level, the Farmland Bird Index for mountain grassland birds (FBIpm), mainly influenced by alpine birds, decreased by 37% between 2000 and 2014.

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

The implementation of EU RD programmes should fulfil a number of set objectives and priorities. While 33% of the RD money in the Piedmont region has been allocated to measures that should directly benefit biodiversity, water and soil, in addition, the reality is that not all measures for which this money has been earmarked have high environmental value. These

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1 Priority 4, as foreseen by the Rural Development Regulation, Art. 5
measures may, at best, benefit nature indirectly, such as payments for farming in Areas with Natural Constraints (ANC), but they are not tied to concrete environmental targets and benefits.

Although 63% of the budget under this priority goes to agri-environment measures, many AEC schemes are broad and shallow in their design and objectives. For example, 63% of the AEC budget has been earmarked for integrated agriculture and 10% for conservation agriculture.

Only 7% of the budget for priority 4 will be spent on supporting organic agriculture.

Some other RDP measures (not all included in priority 4 budget) also risk harming the environment and biodiversity. Examples include investments for digging of reservoirs in river beds through permanent dikes for irrigation, support to building roads on farmland and in forests, support to conservation agriculture (with increased use of herbicides, such as glyphosate), and forest investments for intensive poplar plantations (associated with the use of pesticides) prioritised in Natura 2000 sites and river areas.

AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SPENDING: past vs. future

In the Piedmont region 20% of RD money will be spent on Agri-Environment measures (AEC) – this is a 21.4% cut compared to the previous spending period despite the fact that Member States were required to maintain AEC funding levels².

Only 7% of the AEC budget will be spent on schemes targeted directly at specific species, habitats or biodiversity problems, i.e. that are ‘dark green’ and are really tackling the issues at stake³, such as ‘Biodiversity friendly rice pad management’ and ‘Protection of livestock from predation by wolves and wild dogs’.

In absolute terms the budget available for ‘dark green’ schemes has also been cut in comparison to the previous period.

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² Rural Development Regulation, Recital 22.
³ No evaluation of the evolution of spending on dark green schemes can be made in comparison to the previous programming period as there is no information on budgets for specific schemes during 2007-2013.
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 achieve a measurable improvement of species dependent on or affected by agriculture.

According to the Piedmont region only 2.3% of its farmland will be covered under voluntary contracts for biodiversity protection. Our assessment is slightly more optimistic with 3.6% of farmland covered by RDP schemes which could genuinely be beneficial for biodiversity, i.e. ‘dark green’ schemes. However, this figure is still insufficient to fulfil the objectives of the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

INCOMPLETE ACTION ON NATURA 2000

Rural Development Programmes should include an approach to tackling the specific needs of Natura 2000 areas.4

Due to the lack of management plans and conservation measures, Natura 2000 payments in Piedmont have only been foreseen for forests, not on farmland. Natura 2000 sites not designated and managed as protected areas are not eligible for non productive investments measures such as ‘restoration and improvement of biodiversity’.

Both ‘dark green’ schemes mentioned above are relevant to Natura 2000: the conservation of biodiversity in rice pads, many of which are located in Natura 2000 sites, and avoidance of predation by large carnivores, which can deter the illegal shooting of protected wolves and help managing open habitats by grazing. Other RD measures may play a positive role in enhancing biodiversity in Natura 2000 areas, including support to drafting of Natura 2000 management plans and prioritisation of Natura 2000 sites for some AEC and non productive investment measures. Priority is also given to projects and measures that

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4 Rural Development Regulation, Art. 8
are coherent with the objectives of the Prioritised Action Framework for Natura 2000 of the Piedmont region.

Overall, however our assessment is that the RDP cannot sufficiently target or support the needs of species and habitats of the Natura 2000 network in the Piedmont region mainly because of the lack of management plans and conservation measure for farmland sites.

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 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 ITALIAN PIEDMONT REGION NEEDS:

1. Payments for farmers in Natura 2000, including objectives and prescriptions.
2. Simple but well researched prescriptions in the application of specific schemes in order to improve their effectiveness.
3. A scheme targeted at meadow birds and biodiversity.
4. A scheme for the restoration of wood in flood plains and along rivers in the lowlands.

SOURCES


The data in this factsheet is based on the first version of the Rural Development Programme in Piedmont

CONTACT

BirdLife Europe
Trees Robijns
Phone: +32 (0) 2 238 50 91
Email: Trees.Robijns@birdlife.org

European Environmental Bureau
Faustine Bas-Defossez
Phone: +32 (0) 2 790 88 14
Email: Faustine.Bas-Defossez@eeb.org

LIPU
Patrizia Rossi
Phone: +39 (0) 521 273043
Email: Patrizia.Rossi@lipu.it