

Dutch CAP strategic plan

Transition to sustainability or (bad) business as usual?

What is at stake

The main problems the Netherlands faces related to agriculture is a destructive surplus of nitrogen (>four times the EU-27 average), bad quality of surface and groundwater bodies, a very strong decline of biodiversity for a long time (wet meadow and farmland birds in particular), and a strong decrease in the quality and quantity of landscape elements. There is also a problem of degrading peat bog soils due to drainage, causing high carbon emissions. These problems are the result of the country's high levels of intensive agricultural activities, coupled with neglecting these problems for decades, or at least not prioritising them the way they should have. Furthermore, the Netherlands has a long tradition of relying on voluntary measures, which has not brought sufficient results. Finally, the CAP is seen as a subsidy, not as an instrument to drive solutions, which doesn't help solve the problems the Netherlands faces. This is also reflected in the fact that there are no clear and enforceable targets included in the proposed CSP.

What is wrong with the Dutch CSP

- Failure to prioritise action on nitrogen surplus within CSP: CAP subsidies have contributed to creating the massive problem with nitrogen in the Netherlands, yet it is unclear how the new CSP will contribute to addressing it. It is not evident which real measures will be in place and what are the targets.
- Failure to step up efforts to protect and restore biodiversity: The decrease of biodiversity in the Netherlands is well known and alarming. The solution offered by the new CSP is a continuation of existing agri-environment-climate measures (AECM). The problem is that there was no evaluation of the current AECM programme, making it difficult to judge whether it works. Moreover, given the dire status of biodiversity, the continuation of current efforts is far from what is needed to stabilise and reverse the trend.
- Inadequate action to protect water quality from pesticide use: The CSP proposal offers some possibilities within the AECM programme and through an eco-scheme to improve the quality of the surface water, but as the targets are not known, it is not clear whether the actions will be sufficient. Effective measures that would incentivise minimising and eliminating pesticide use are missing.
- Inadequate measures to reach 10% target of natural elements: Many landscape features have disappeared in the past decades due to large scale farming, and lack of interest by governments to stop these, often illegal, clearings. In the new CSP, there are some possibilities to support non-productive features next to the ones protected under the GAEC, but they won't bring the necessary 10% of good quality landscape elements on all farms. Clear targets are also missing.
- Failure to protect important carbon sinks through conditionality: The Netherlands has a huge area of peat bog soils, but decades of drainage has resulted in the degradation of the soil and enormous output of carbon. The CSP could have stopped this process by raising water levels and introducing a ban on ploughing these areas. However, the CSP failed to introduce this option, relying once again on voluntary measures.

This is how the Dutch CSP can help the transition to sustainability

- Put in place a strong baseline through conditionality, in particular, GAEC 2 (protection of wetland and peatland), GAEC 4 (buffer strips along watercourses), and GAEC 8 (non-productive features) and step up its enforcement.
- Put in place effective and adequately funded voluntary measures to address the pressing problems of nitrogen surplus and related poor quality of water bodies and the negative impact on biodiversity (including Natura 2000 sites). This should go in parallel with effective national legislation operationalising the "polluter pays" principle.
- Put in place a robust and adequately funded agri-environment programme with strong elements focusing on tackling the decline of biodiversity. The programme should have clear targets and be accompanied by scientific monitoring with results made available to the public.
- Putting in place effective voluntary measures that would incentivise maintenance and creation of high-quality non-productive features and areas aiming to reach a minimum 10% target as agreed in the EU biodiversity strategy.
- Introducing an integral approach that would address a mix of problems instead of a piece-meal approach.