

To: Mr. Wolfgang Burtscher
Director-General DG AGRI
European Commission

CC: Ms. Florika Fink-Hooijer
Director-General DG ENVI
European Commission

OPEN LETTER

Brussels, 24 October 2024

Dear Mr Burtscher,

We are writing to express our concerns regarding both the process and the content of amending the CAP Strategic Plans, following the 2024 revision of the CAP regulations. The reform, which was intended to reduce the administrative burden on EU farmers, ultimately became a tool for weakening environmental standards. We expect the Commission to address these issues promptly.

As you might know, BirdLife, along with many other stakeholders, strongly condemned the process and content of the 2024 CAP reform, which was carried out without proper consultation or impact assessment. Nonetheless, with the new rules in place, our colleagues working on the national level engaged in the process of CAP strategic plan amendments striving to achieve the best possible outcome for biodiversity and other environmental objectives. This concerns in particular the changes related to the removal of the first GAEC8 requirement and a new obligation on Member states to offer farmers an eco-scheme for maintenance of non-productive areas and establishment of landscape features. Regrettably, the new eco-schemes introduced in Czechia, Italy, and Poland come with limited budgets and inadequate design. These appear more as a formality aimed at complying with legislation rather than a genuine attempt to provide farmers with an effective tool to promote biodiversity on their farms. At the same time, the proposed amendments to existing eco-schemes supporting maintenance of non-productive areas and landscape features in countries such as Czechia, Italy, Lithuania, Slovakia, Belgium (Wallonia), and Spain are likely to weaken the original environmental ambitions of the scheme, either by lowering the required share of non-productive areas

and landscape features or other changes to the eligibility rules. While we do not have a complete overview of all EU countries, the evidence so far strongly suggests that it is highly unlikely that the voluntary approach, with existing flexibilities granted to Member States, will come close to creating the additional million hectares for nature that GAEC 8 was supposed to. This is likely to have negative consequences for both biodiversity and farmers.

There is ample evidence showing that restoring ecosystems can benefit farmers by improving agricultural productivity and resilience, which is crucial in the context of the climate crisis as it helps safeguard food security and protect livelihoods against the increasing impacts of extreme weather. It is in farmers' best interest to take action for nature, and they should be provided with effective tools under the CAP to facilitate this. They should not be held hostage to a lack of leadership from their minister, short-term political interests, or the agendas of lobby groups that represent only a few.

Equally, we would like to draw your attention to the fact that the process of amendments to CAP strategic plans in some countries has significant shortcomings with regards to involving partners and is not in line with the Partnership Principle. This is problematic because it limits the transparency and inclusiveness of the CAP amendments process, restricts the opportunity for key stakeholders to provide valuable input, and undermines the collaborative approach required to address the diverse challenges related to agriculture. In particular, this concerns Italy, Spain, Belgium (Wallonia) and Poland, where the Monitoring Committees were either not consulted on the proposed changes to the CAP Strategic Plans, or the consultation was merely a formality, with no real opportunity to influence the outcome. These issues have already been communicated to the national authorities as well as the relevant Heads of Units at DG AGRI. However, the responses received were lukewarm, offering little indication of any genuine commitment to improving the situation. While we understand that, due to shared competence, the Commission has limited powers in certain areas, it must still ensure that the rules are upheld in all cases.

In order to address the above-mentioned issues, the Commission should leverage its authority and responsibility to:

- **Adequate and inclusive stakeholder process at the national level:** Ensure that managing authorities conduct an adequate consultation process on the proposed

amendments to CSPs, involving the Monitoring Committee and other relevant stakeholders. They should also be required to report on this process to the Commission.

- **Transparency regarding Commission's observations on proposed amendments to CSPs:** Make observations on the proposed amendments to CSPs in accordance with Article 119.3 of the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation and publish them on the Commission's website.
- **No backsliding on environmental commitments and standards:** Do not approve any amendments that weaken environmental ambitions, particularly those related to the new rules for GAEC 8, as well as those concerning existing interventions and standards; this should be based on evidence not just claims.
- **Robust and targeted advisory support:** Ensure that managing authorities have effective communication and advisory capacities in place to guide and support farmers in implementing the new or amended eco-schemes.
- **Transparency and timely disclosure of data:** Without delay, make publicly available information on the areas supported for the maintenance of non-productive areas and the establishment of landscape features in 2024.

The Commission has stated that the amendments to the CAP regulations will not compromise its environmental and climate ambitions, however the indications outlined in this letter suggest otherwise. It is up to the Commission to use all the powers and tools at its disposal to rectify these issues without delay. Otherwise, the already fragile legitimacy of the CAP will be further undermined and more importantly, the CAP budget will fail to deliver on EU objectives or tackle the significant challenges our society faces. Instead, it will continue to exacerbate the biodiversity and climate crises.

We would appreciate the opportunity to meet and discuss these concerns in more detail.

Sincerely yours



Ariel Brunner
Regional Director BirdLife Europe and Central Asia

Annex:

Links to media releases by BirdLife Partners/NGO coalitions related to the issues outlined in the letter (The links lead to the texts in the original language with titles google translated)

Czech NGOs: [The government continues to gamble with agricultural subsidies](#) (22.10.2024)

Natagora (BirdLife Wallonia): [Agricultural policy - Wallonia revises its environmental ambition downwards](#) (18.10.2024)

Natuurpunt (BirdLife Flanders): [Agriculture Agency fails to protect carbon hotspots in agricultural areas](#) (09.10.2024)

Lithuanian NGOs: [The aim is to abolish important conservation requirements in agriculture](#) (1.10.2024)

Italian NGOs: [Changes to the CAP strategic plan: participation and nature the big absentees](#) (30.07.2024)

Spanish NGOs: [Five entities of the Coalition participate in the PEPAC Monitoring Committee](#) (22.06.2024)

The letters to Heads of Geographical units can be provided upon request.