Environment group condemns EU 'greenwashing' of CAP reform

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EU member states must 'steer choices' in right direction to ensure 'quality products' and a 'healthy environment', argues Faustine Defossez.

At the beginning of the common agricultural policy (CAP) reform process the European commission put the environment at the heart of the debate. Agriculture and the environment are inextricably interlinked, and without healthy soil, clean water and biodiversity, our capacity to produce food is threatened. It was, therefore, key to address the decline of the natural resources that farming depends on.

This decision to link payments and good agronomic practices was welcomed, especially when we think that under the current policy regime, we are asked to pay three times for the food - first to buy it, then for the subsidies, third for repairing damages done to nature.

But if the European commission’s proposal sewed some green shoots of hope, they were quickly cut
down when the European parliament and council entered into the co-decision process and the 'greenwashing' started.

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In the name of simplicity and flexibility, members of the European parliament and member state governments together managed to produce an ineffective policy that is green only on the surface. Trying to exempt as many farmers as possible from the most basic agronomic practices, they diluted the content of the greening measures and added dozens of grounds for exemption to already very weak rules.

As scientists recently confirmed [1], "The EU has lost an opportunity to design better guidelines to improve agricultural sustainability". According to them at least 88 per cent of EU farmers and about half of the farmed land will be exempted from the flagship measure of the reform.

The rules (set by the commission) for implementing the CAP have only compounded this. The delegated acts diminish what remained of the green content of the reform. For example, the commission decided to allow the use of pesticides and fertilisers on crops used in ‘ecological focus areas’ (EFAs). A contradiction if ever there was one. On top of that the commission decided to further weaken these rules by releasing a declaration amending the delegated acts which they had already sent to the parliament and council - wiping out what was left of the EFAs.

It is clear and confirmed by scientists that green hope in the EU texts has vanished. However, member states still have lots of flexibility in the choices they make vis-à-vis greening, and depending on the choices made, there is still a possibility that this flexibility can revive some environmentally practices.

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Member states carry a heavy responsibility in this as they will be the ones responsible for the crucial choices. Yet again we are worried to see that some of them are already using this flexibility to make things even worse. Countries like France will give a ‘green’ payment to maize monoculture by using an ‘equivalent’ trick to crop diversification. They should remember that the primary objective of this reform was the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action and adapt their plan before sending their final version to the commission on 1 August 2014.

Member states must make their decisions about the greening in pillar one, but also in rural development and cross compliance. We hope that they will steer their choices in the right direction and consider the environment and people first, ensuring that in exchange for the €58bn spent annually they get quality products and a healthy environment.

About the author

Faustine Defossez is senior policy officer on agriculture and bioenergy at the European Environmental Bureau (EEB)
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