



Knowledge grows

Strengthening support for farmers under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)



Introduction

Over the last few years, it has become clear that an open and constructive dialogue is essential for ensuring the EU farming sector’s transition is economically viable, socially inclusive, and sustainable. While the effectiveness of the Strategic Dialogue as a tool for building consensus remains to be seen, one thing is certain: collaboration among all stakeholders across the agri-food value chain is crucial.

This same spirit of collaboration must also guide the implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) national Strategic Plans, which play a pivotal role in driving sustainable change. These plans should prioritize collaborative approaches, knowledge exchange, and targeted schemes that empower farmers to scale up efforts to reduce agriculture’s environmental footprint. Additionally, incentives for adopting sustainable practices should be results-oriented, while minimizing administrative burdens for farmers.

Shaping the EU’s Vision for Agriculture and Food

The European Commission’s Vision for Agriculture and Food is set to be delivered in the first 100 days of President Ursula von der Leyen’s mandate. Here are our recommendations for what is needed to ensure that the Commission’s Vision will meet the goals of the CAP and support farmers in their key role in ensuring food security in Europe and beyond.

MINERAL FERTILIZERS: A KEY PILLAR OF EUROPE’S FOOD SECURITY

Fertilization is a key agricultural practice that ensures crops’ nutritional needs are effectively met. Arable soils do not usually contain sufficient amounts of plant nutrients for high and sustained crop yields, especially as nutrients are removed when crops are harvested. If these nutrients are not replaced, yields will diminish, crops will develop deficiency symptoms and soils will be depleted. This is why mineral fertilizers play an essential and irreplaceable role by bridging the gap between the nutrients provided by other sources (soil, air or on-farm manure), and the nutritional requirements of crops. Mineral fertilizers are crucial for sustaining soil fertility and productivity, thereby playing a key role in supporting the economic viability of crop production in Europe. To ensure the long-term sustainability of this key pillar of Europe’s food security, a comprehensive strategic framework is needed to support the sustainable production and use of fertilizers, including application technologies, as well as the development and use of nutrient recovery technologies.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic priorities for the future Common Agricultural Policy

1. Prioritize efforts to reduce the carbon footprint across the food value chain.

Lower carbon footprint fertilizers, produced using low-carbon or renewable ammonia, are essential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions throughout the food value chain. Lower carbon footprint fertilizers produced from renewable sources, for example, have an up to 90% lower carbon footprint compared to similar fertilizers produced from fossil-based natural gas. However, current market demand for these fertilizers remains insufficient. To unlock their potential and bring them to market, favorable market conditions

that drive demand and encourage their use are needed. Eco-schemes in the CAP Strategic Plans should be developed to promote the use of lower carbon fertilizers, supporting the decarbonization of agriculture and food.

2. Upscale best nutrient management practices.

So-called horizontal measures for reducing agricultural inputs, such as fertilizers, represent the risk to be counterproductive. Instead, we recommend that the CAP supports farmers in upscaling the best nutrient management practices beyond the current baseline by focusing interventions on the need to improve nitrogen use efficiency, thereby also reducing nutrient losses. This can be achieved by optimizing fertilization. Farmers should be supported in improving nutrient management through, for example, the use of balanced crop nutrition plans that improve productivity, sustainability as well as soil health.



Another effective approach could be the creation of an eco-scheme to support the implementation of Soil Management Plans (SMPs). Such SMPs could include a clear nutrient management plan and address aspects such as erosion, compaction, soil health, water status, nutrient losses and ammonia volatilization.

3. Advance precision farming practices and the digital transformation.

Supporting the scaling up of precision farming and digital tools is crucial for driving progress and innovation. Eco-schemes related to this have so far not been included broadly in the CAP National Strategic Plans, which is a missed opportunity. We urge both the EU Commission and Member States to place greater emphasis on this in the future. The use of precision farming tools enhances the efficient management of natural resources, such as improving water and nitrogen use efficiency.

4. Promote solutions to improve Nitrogen Use Efficiency.

We support launching an EU-wide benchmarking system in the agri-food sector, which has been called for by the members of the Strategic Dialogue on the future of EU agriculture. A common understanding is essential to foster sustainable agricultural practices and drive improvements in environmental and economic performance through balanced plant nutrition and precision farming. We encourage building on the findings of the European Nitrogen Expert Panel¹, a network of European scientists, decision-makers, and representatives from the agricultural sector and food value chain, and to include an indicator to measure and optimize the ratio between crop yield and nitrogen supply (the so-called Nitrogen Use Efficiency (NUE) indicator).

Approaches to implementing the Common Agricultural Policy

1. Monitor outcomes and link them to overall sustainability goals.

It is currently difficult to link CAP eco-schemes to specific tangible achievements, which can be further consolidated at an EU level. Today, farmers receive subsidies for various eco-schemes, but there is still limited clarity on the outcomes and how they contribute to the EU's long-term climate and sustainability goals. Even though the New Delivery Model (NDM), supported by the Data Monitoring and Evaluation (DME) and Performance Monitor and Evaluation (PMEF) initiatives, represents a shift towards a strong focus on performance and results, this needs to be simplified and proven in practice to avoid complexity and bureaucracy.

2. Enable adequate coverage of European agricultural land through eco-schemes.

A study commissioned by the European Parliament shows that 50% of eco-schemes target less than 4% of agricultural land². In addition, a large portion of this agricultural land is not covered by digital tools or does not adhere to key aspects of the national CAP Strategic Plans. Eco-schemes should be designed so that they are accessible to a larger number of farmers and cover a broader area of land by being less complex, thereby minimizing farmers' administrative burden. Including incentives can also encourage farmers to adopt more sustainable practices.

3. Allocate required financial resources for the transition towards sustainable practices.

The post-2027 CAP should adopt a holistic approach, simplifying administrative burdens through digitalization, boosting investment in sustainability measures, and supporting farmers in their transition to resilient and economically viable farming practices. Public funds should be used to cover the costs of the green transition by rewarding farmers who opt for more climate and environmentally friendly farming models. From this perspective, we welcome the idea of creating a Temporary Just Transition Fund outside the CAP to complement support for the sector's swift sustainability transition.

¹<https://www.eunep.com/>

²[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762360/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)762360_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762360/EPRS_BRI(2024)762360_EN.pdf)