

What does the European agriculture sector need from policy makers?

As part of Horizon 2020 BESTMAP project, we interviewed 12 Brussels-based representatives of agricultural producers, inputs industry, environmental NGOs and expert think tanks, on the drivers of change and the trade-offs in European Agriculture policy.

Their feedback showed support for four key objectives for the future policy development of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP):

- **A fairer distribution of value in the food chain**
- Moving away from direct payments and income support to public funds for public goods
- Less policy uncertainty and **better understanding and consideration of trade-offs**, especially with regard to land use
- Policy that considers the food system as a whole

Transitioning the CAP from a policy for income support to a policy for public goods

- A majority of interviewees suggested an overhaul of the current CAP should focus primarily on shifting away from direct payments and income support, to a policy that looks at the food system holistically, and/or compensates only public goods.
- Focused investment in agricultural innovation.

Distribution of value

- Interviewees argued for a fairer distribution of value in the food chain; stronger social policies to deal with necessary increase in food prices.

Competing objectives

- Currently the permanent grassland definition encourages farmers to plough up fields before their pasture reaches five years. The definition should extend to 10 or even 20 years to promote long fallow periods in otherwise arable fields.
- Interviewees had differing views on whether de-intensification/lower inputs (as the Farm to Fork policy stipulates) will reduce outputs or make European farmers disadvantaged compared to imported produce. This could also change over time, i.e. long term lack of investment in improving soils may lead to an even greater reduction in outputs, if not addressed early enough.
- There is still uncertainty on whether the growth in demand for organic food will match the targets set out in the Farm to Fork and therefore whether the target of 25% organic by 2030 is financially achievable. Consumers need better understanding of policy trade-offs, e.g. meeting HRI objectives versus organic farming and the use of crop protection products such as copper sulphate.

- A focus on climate and environmental objectives may shift land towards carbon sequestration e.g. forestry and less intensive production. This may decrease output but risks higher global food prices and food insecurity or carbon leakage, unless a simultaneous reduction in the consumption of livestock and a reduction in food waste takes place.
- Interviewees expressed the need for more integrated thinking about bioenergy and biodiversity competing for land. Growing biofuels to meet climate targets has low biodiversity value, compared to, for example, using the freed-up land for wetlands and forests.
- Systems thinking is necessary to identify how targets for reducing beef livestock production (to lower methane emissions), will influence dairy production (via restocking herds) and the availability of organic manure for use in organic farming.
- Most interviewees claimed that the current CAP architecture would limit the transition of EU agriculture towards a more sustainable model.
- The new delivery mode of the post-2020 CAP, with its focus on eco-schemes and national strategic plans, may increase awareness among citizens, would-be farmers and force national and regional politicians to act. This may bring real change to sustainability, but only if trade-offs between farmer income and environmental objectives are explicitly accounted for.

Looking to the future

- The Covid-19 pandemic put greater emphasis on food security and shorter supply chains, but interviewees argued that it is essential that recovery does not slow momentum towards environmental goals.
- Interviewees identified a number of important medium to long-term trends that should be taken into account in planning future policy, including:
 - Digitisation and precision agriculture
 - Promoting generational renewal
 - Escalation of the impact of environmental degradation on yields
 - Changes in farm sizes and numbers
 - Increasing forest cover whilst maintaining outputs
 - Rising costs of inputs such as oil and fertilizer
 - Credit for infrastructural investment
 - Long-term policy certainty
 - Equalising and strengthening policy enforcement across Europe

Who we are

The interviews were conducted by the Rural Investment Support for Europe Foundation (RISE), part of the consortium of Horizon 2020 project BESTMAP (Behavioural, Ecological and Socio-Economic Tools for Modelling Agriculture Policy). RISE conducted 12 interviews with Brussels-based representatives of producers (farmer groups and sector producers), input industry (fertilisers, pesticides, machinery etc.), environmental NGOs working on European agricultural policy and expert analysts (think tanks).

For further information or to hear about our work please contact Jodi Gunning, BESTMAP Project Manager at J.Gunning@leeds.ac.uk or visit us online at www.bestmap.eu