

REFORM OF THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

A few shades



greener



Is the greening of the European agricultural policy really going to do much for the natural environment? Scientists and nature organizations are critical, but farmers think we should count our blessings.

TEXT NIENKE BEINTEMA ILLUSTRATION M.A KOEKKOEK

The starting shot has been fired and the greening of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is about to get going. The policy obliges farmers to take a series of steps towards making European farming more nature- and environment-friendly. These measures are of three kinds: crop rotation, the conservation of permanent grassland, and the allocation of 5 percent of their land surface to ecological purposes in 'ecological focus areas'. What do the experts think: is the greening likely to be fruitful?

David Kleijn is an animal ecologist at Alterra Wageningen UR. At the beginning of June he and some of his colleagues published an article in the journal *Science* entitled: *EU agricultural reform fails on biodiversity*. 'It is a crying shame,' he says, 'but this greening will deliver woefully few ecological benefits in Europe. I see a lot of missed opportunities. First of all: the measures only apply to farms larger than 15 hectares. That means that an awful lot of farmers are let off the hook.' He also thinks 5 percent for the ecological focus areas (EFAs) is too stingy: 'Scientific research has shown that 10 percent really is the minimum to go for if you want to see any

ecological effect. But during the negotiations that kept on being nibbled away at.'

ADVANCED MATHS

Anne van Doorn of the Alterra department of Spatial Knowledge Systems is equally sceptical about the new policy. She is first author of two Alterra reports on the ecological side of the greening. 'Thanks to the political tug-of-war, the policy has become very complicated,' she says. 'For example, the definition of what is allowed to count as EFA. Whether it's managed field edges, ditches or landscape elements: with all the weighting factors, a farmer needs advanced maths to be able to calculate whether they count as EFA.' She also thinks the measures have been made less effective by being watered down so much. In certain regions with large-scale agriculture, such as Flevoland or Zeeland, she reckons you might start to see a bit of a difference: a little more variation in the landscape. Now these regions are typified by endless fields of monocultures; under the new policy there will be more variety through the crop rotation, and in the best case scenarios also through the creation of new >

INCOME SUPPORT IN EXCHANGE FOR GREENING

The new European Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), which will be in force from 2015 to 2020, includes measures intended to make European agriculture more nature- and environment-friendly. Thirty percent of the income support for farmers has been made contingent on these measures, which are of three kinds: crop rotation, the conservation of permanent grassland, and the establishment of 'ecological focus areas' (EFAs), in which farmers set aside 5 percent of their land surface 'for ecological purposes'.

At the end of June Dutch secretary of state for Economic Affairs Sharon Dijksma outlined to the lower house of parliament how she aims to implement this new European policy in the Netherlands. This was followed by a parliamentary debate on 1 July in which it was established how the Netherlands will set to work on this issue in the coming years. The Dutch plans still need to be ratified by the EU, and this decision will only be taken in the autumn. Then the measures can be put in place.



landscape elements. Van Doorn: 'But it is difficult to estimate what impact that will actually have on individual species.'

The big Dutch nature organizations (*Vogelbescherming*, *Natuurmonumenten*, *Milieudefensie*, *Natuur en Milieu*, the 12 Landscape conservation organizations and *Landschapsbeheer Nederland*) put joint proposals on greening to the secretary of state back in 2012. They argued for raising the groundwater table under grasslands, reinforcing the structure of 'region-specific landscape elements' such as terraced slopes in Limburg or wooded embankments in the peat soil area, as well as for creating and widening field edges and nature-friendly banks.

Cees Witkamp of *Vogelbescherming Nederland* (a society for the protection of birds) thinks there is little or nothing to show for these ideas in the final policy. 'One of our systematic objections is that there may be rulings about preserving permanent grassland and special landscape elements, for example,' he says, 'but there is nothing about their management. For field birds, management makes all the difference to whether young birds grow to maturity. We would have liked to see precious grassland getting special protected status. Now that only happens within Natura 200 areas. So we are not very optimistic. If you look at how much

taxpayers' money is being spent on that greening, we could have expected more of it.'

NO TARGETS

The nature organizations also deplore the pack of criteria in the new policy for testing the 'green impact' of the measures. There are no concrete biodiversity targets, for instance. Ben Hermans of nature and environment foundation *Stichting Natuur en Milieu*: 'Take the conservation of permanent grassland. That is not so difficult for the Dutch dairy sector with its intensive grasslands sown with English ryegrass. Only the size of the area has to be monitored and not the quality of that grassland for field birds, for example.' Dairy farmers, he concludes, are getting out of the greening en masse. 'The new policy won't lead to flowery meadows or higher groundwater levels for field birds. That is disappointing. This way you are just accepting the decline of biodiversity.'

Anne van Doorn of *Alterra* agrees. 'For endangered field bird species such as skylarks, it is not just field edges that are important, but what happens across the whole field. What is planted plays a role, as well as the use of pesticides. Vulnerable species, which have very specific needs, will not benefit from the greening. The policy is too one-dimensional for that.'

The greening policy means farmers can also dig ditches and count them as EFA. 'But if they are really to contribute anything to biodiversity,' says Merijn Biemans of nature conservation organization *Natuurmonumenten*, 'then they need to level off the banks to reduce the impact of fertilizer and pesticides on the aquatic life in the ditches. Reeds make a good buffer too. Sadly, these sorts of quality criteria have not been laid down now.' According to Biemans, the proposed greening measures are not going to benefit Dutch biodiversity at all: 'The greening of the CAP is quite simply a failure.'

GREEN CATCH CROPS

Another cause for concern, say the critics, is the major role assigned by the new policy to 'catch crops'. These are crops which are of no intrinsic value to the farmer, but are used for purposes such as counteracting the runoff of fertilizer into ground and surface water. Examples are winter rye or ryegrass, which are sown after the main crop is harvested. Green sources of



fertilizer such as nitrogen-binding legumes also count as catch crops, as do crops which lure harmful insects or worms, thus protecting the main crop. In the new policy many of these kinds of catch crop – including protein crops such as lupin and alfalfa – count as ‘green’. A farmer only has to sow these crops for his land to count as EFA.

‘The greening will deliver woefully few ecological benefits’

‘Some legumes are certainly helpful for biodiversity, but that is by no means true of all catch crops,’ responds David Kleijn of Alterra. ‘Such measures could deliver biodiversity gains,’ agrees Cees Witkamp of Vogelbescherming, ‘but only if they are carried out in a particular way. No arrangements have been made for that, so I don’t expect much to come of it. It would be good if the ministry of Economic Affairs got some research done on the most promising way to carry out these kinds of measures, and then communicate clearly about it with farmers.’

Jos Roemaat, chair of the Network of Agrarian Nature and Landscape Management, is less pessimistic about the effect of catch crops. ‘At many places we can already see that they definitely lead to more biodiversity, providing shelter for wild animals for instance.’ The regional agricultural and horticultural organizations belong to his network, as do the three umbrella organizations for agricultural nature associations.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Roemaat emphasizes that a total of 14,000 Dutch farmers are involved in agrarian nature management, managing 300,000 hectares of land between them. In other words, he says ‘green thinking’ is all in a day’s work for very many Dutch farmers. So he thinks it is a pity the Dutch nature organizations react so negatively. ‘There are already many positive developments going on,’ he says. ‘The agrarian nature managers meet almost all the new European criteria for greening. The point is

now that all Dutch arable farmers must start greening.’ And he is positive about this. He does think greening will only be effective if farmers are involved in thinking through the policy. ‘It is logical that entrepreneurs are not wild about measures that cost money,’ he says. ‘Farmers and policymakers need to look together for measures that are good for nature, but which also make money. In that case farmers are definitely prepared to go into action.’ He thinks the best approach is to shift responsibilities to the district level, to collectives of farmers who themselves work out which measures are most effective.

‘Of course the new greening policy that is in place now won’t achieve enough in itself,’ says Roemaat. ‘I understand that nature organizations are disappointed. But we must be realistic. It is quite something that a move has been made in this direction. I think we should count our blessings.’

Dirk de Heer, arable farmer in De Purmer, supports this view. ‘I thoroughly enjoy the flowery ditch banks around my fields. It is lovely that nature can run its course in places the farmer pulls out of. I am convinced you don’t need strict rules in order to get greening off the ground in the right way. So much is going on already, just give it free rein.’

GREENER MINDSET

Only time will tell who is right. The Ministry of Economic Affairs has asked Alterra to monitor the ecological effects of the greening over the coming years, an assignment which got support from the lower house of parliament during the debate on the subject. Exactly what form that monitoring will take is not yet clear; the ministry will consult Alterra about that this autumn. ‘In any case, we hope to be able to say something more concrete about the effectiveness of the greening measures by halfway through this CAP period, in 2016-2017,’ says Anne van Doorn of Alterra, who will be involved in the monitoring. ‘In recent years we have seen the adopted policy being watered down. But very slowly now, a greener mindset is spreading, among farmers as well as policymakers. And that is a big gain. I do see light on the horizon.’

www.wageningenur.nl/cap