

Money from Brussels for more birds and flowers

For the first time, EU countries can now decide for themselves which environment- and nature-related goals they want to use European agricultural subsidies to achieve. WUR researchers Robert Baayen and Anne van Doorn are providing the basis for the Dutch climate and nature plan for agricultural land.



Text Albert Sikkema

Baayen and Van Doorn recently published a memorandum called 'Intervention rationale for the green-blue architecture of the CAP' for the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The ministry can use this memo in drawing up a national strategic plan for the new Common Agricultural Policy, paying more attention to climate and nature.

How much money does Dutch agriculture get from Brussels?

Baayen: 'About 900 million euros per year, about 700 million of which is income support for farmers. The Dutch government can spend the other 200 million on rural development. Of the 700 million, 30 per cent is allocated on condition that farmers meet certain green criteria. That will stop and instead, farmers can subscribe to an 'eco-scheme'. About 25 per cent of the support funds will be reserved for that scheme instead of standard income support.'

Which of the green targets do you want to spend that money on?

Van Doorn: 'The EU talks about three targets: climate, environment, and biodiversity & landscape. We have analysed the Dutch situation and we think that the Netherlands would be best off prioritizing biodiversity & landscape. There is already a lot of action on climate goals in the Netherlands, and we think the environmental issues should primarily be tackled with legislation and not with subsidies.'

What nature goals do you have in mind?

Baayen: 'We are thinking of subsidies for maintaining hedgerows or wooded banks, ponds, nature-friendly field

margins and waterway banks. These landscape elements are refuges for birds, wild plants and insects, so this way you promote biodiversity, which is deteriorating fast in the Netherlands.'

Van Doorn: 'Hedgerows benefit biodiversity directly, but we should also think about improving soil health and reducing drought and overfertilization. Wetter agricultural and nature areas with less nitrogen and phosphate pollution strengthen biodiversity.'

You want to support measures that improve climate, nature and the environment at the same time?

Van Doorn: 'That's right. We want to sup-

'We want to strengthen biodiversity and circular agriculture throughout the Netherlands'

port flower-rich field margins, because they are good both for biodiversity and for the soil quality in the form of CO₂ sequestration. Hedgerows capture CO₂ as well, so they are good for the climate too. On the other hand, you should be careful about locating solar farms on agricultural land. They are good for the climate, but they are a disaster for biodiversity. And we're also against large-scale subsidies for crops planted after the main crop to capture excess fertilizer from the soil. That practice somewhat fits the environmental goals, but it doesn't produce any biodiversity.'

But surely there is already funding for agricultural nature management?

Van Doorn: 'Farmers can already apply

for funding for nature management collectively. This system will remain, and it is useful, but it concentrates on a limited number of species — mainly field and meadow birds — in a limited agricultural area. If the surrounding land doesn't offer a good habitat for these species, you don't solve the problem. We want to strengthen biodiversity and circular agriculture throughout the Netherlands. For that purpose, an eco-scheme is ideal, because every farmer can take part in it.'

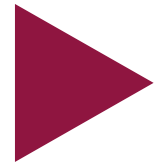
And what do you want to do with the peatland areas?

Baayen: 'With the current low groundwater levels, these areas emit too much CO₂. but if you raise the level, agriculture becomes unprofitable and needs financial support. In the new CAP, you

can fully compensate the farmers for the negative impact of this. That's a golden opportunity for the climate. But the point is: that support comes out of the 700 million for general support, and you're allowed to use some of it for subsidies for this specific purpose. Which is only allowed after 2022, incidentally.'

How do you want to compensate the farmers?

Baayen: 'We want an eco-scheme that is open to all farmers. Ecological subsidies have always come with a dogma: you were only allowed to compensate farmers for additional costs or lost income. The EU is



Greetings from Brussels



For the first time, EU countries can decide for themselves which environmental and nature targets they use European agricultural subsidies to aim at. Photo Shutterstock



Robert Baayen



Anne van Doorn

‘The landscape will become part of the farmer’s business model for the first time’

‘We argue for a points system in which farmers can collect points to qualify for a subsidy’

letting go of that dogma for landscape elements such as wooded banks and ponds that are not profitable for the farmer. We suggest that farmers get generous compensation for those elements. That will make the landscape part of the farmer’s business model for the first time.’

How do you plan to make sure there are more insects and birds?

Van Doorn: ‘The simplest answer is: more flowers. The Dutch landscape is getting more and more monotonous, with English ryegrass, maize and potatoes. It could be more diverse, and flowery field margins and herb-rich meadows would help.’

Baayen: ‘The question is how do you do it. Are farmers going to farm extensively on their whole farm or free up some of their farmland for nature and intensify the rest with precision agriculture? Both approaches are possible.’

Van Doorn: ‘The point is, though, that we won’t solve this just with nature management in nature areas. Something’s got to be done on agricultural land as well. We now have a farming system that targets maximum production, and everything is geared to that. We are hoping for circular livestock farms with mixtures of grass and clover, which might produce less but would create a healthier agro-ecosystem, and for arable farms that get a good income from crop diversification and strip farming.’

Do you reckon to solve the nitrogen problem this way too?

Baayen: ‘You can also use the eco-scheme to reduce farmers’ nitrogen emissions, thus contributing to the restoration of nature. Take farmers near Natura 2000 areas, for example. We propose creating a link between the eco-scheme and the nitrogen accounting system that the Remkes Committee proposed. That would mean measuring nitrogen emissions on farms and rewarding reductions in nitrogen, while letting farmers decide for themselves which measures they want to adopt.’

Do the subsidies mean extra rules?

Baayen: ‘What we want is precisely a simple system that requires very little administration. That’s why we argue for a points system. Farmers can collect points with a hedgerow, a flower-rich field margin or a reduction in nitrogen emissions and for interventions that benefit field birds. Those points accumulate and when they have enough, they qualify for a subsidy. The great advantage of this is that the government uses a clear accounting system while the farmers get the space to make their own decisions. Other countries are already using this kind of points system for nature and there were pilots in the Netherlands with groups of farmers, with very promising results.’

Who is going to keep tabs on all this?

Van Doorn: ‘We need several robust indicators with which we can measure effectively, and which reflect the status of the nature accurately. We’re thinking in terms of an index of farmland birds such as lapwings and skylarks. But those indicators don’t cover everything. I think it would also be good to have indicators for insects and landscape elements, as well as for the environment and the climate. We want to know whether the CAP funds are being used effectively.’

You want a regional approach. Why?

Baayen: ‘What is needed varies per region. On higher sandy soils you get drought, in the clay regions much less so, and on peaty soils there’s a climate-related problem. Also, nature policy has been decentralized to the provinces so that’s where the expertise is, with the farmers, water boards and nature organizations clustered around them. That’s where the knowledge of the area is, and that’s where you can organize greening in a targeted manner.’ ■