



European Committee
of the Regions

NAT-VII/010

142nd plenary session, 3, 4 and 5 February 2021

OPINION

Agro-ecology

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- proposes that the future CAP should further promote agro-ecological practices such as crop diversification, long crop rotations, hedges, cultivating leguminous plants, constant soil cover, mixed crop-livestock farming, etc.;
- calls for the implementation of the proposals set out in its previous opinions on the future CAP and pastoralism;
- recommends that the Member States introduce a system of bonuses and penalties as part of the eco-schemes of the new common agricultural policy;
- calls for an end to cage rearing, suggests creating a European "animal welfare" label, and recommends clear, mandatory labelling of the husbandry method;
- calls on the European Commission to propose a new European directive on agricultural soils to halt the decrease in their organic matter content and stop erosion;
- calls for new European legislation on seeds to enable the use and marketing of farmer-saved seeds;
- proposes that the EU implement the recommendations made by the European Parliament in its 2017 own-initiative report on farmland concentration in the EU and Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure adopted by the FAO in 2012;
- recommends measures such as: reducing VAT on organic, local and seasonal products, "local" meal vouchers for such products, and a significant percentage of organic, local and seasonal products in mass catering;
- calls on the EU to coordinate and facilitate a network of municipalities committed to taking measures to promote resilient, sustainable agricultural and food systems.

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Reference document

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – Agro-ecology

I. GENERAL COMMENTS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Background

1. observes that the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the importance and the vulnerability of our food systems in Europe, and highlights the need for resilient, sovereign food systems in which the economic viability of rural territories is essential;
2. stresses that, in the face of the dangers of global warming, destruction of biodiversity and soil degradation, the pandemic is making it even more urgent for the European Union to take new agronomic, social and territorial approaches that protect natural resources, preserve health, encourage farm renewal and build territorial cohesion;
3. points out that the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in agriculture is the only viable option today;
4. points out that permanent grassland makes up a third of the EU's agricultural area and plays a major role, storing a lot of organic matter in the soil and fostering biodiversity;
5. notes that it is necessary to move from an extractive agricultural mindset to a circular one – particularly for the carbon, phosphorus and nitrogen cycle – and to move towards lean, efficient resource management;
6. points out that homogeneity and uniformity of seeds goes against biodiversity;
7. points out that public health, global warming and animal welfare require us to change our farming practices for forms of production which play a positive environmental role, namely by maintaining pastures and maintaining woodland, which do not put the health of farmers and the general population at risk, and which respect animals. It is possible to reduce meat consumption while developing sustainable farming;
8. considers that livestock farmers' quality of life and animal welfare go hand in hand and deserve an alternative approach to livestock farming, in which farmers no longer sell at a loss and where they respect their animals;
9. points out that many specialised farms with heavy purchases of inputs (oil, fertilisers, pesticides, antibiotics, etc.) are more economically vulnerable due to their higher production costs, dependence on upstream firms and greater exposure to economic risks;
10. welcomes the Farm to Fork (F2F) and Biodiversity strategies put forward by the European Commission, which call for a significant transformation in agricultural policy;

11. notes that the difficulty of accessing land use, through rental or ownership, makes it difficult for new farmers to get established.

The agro-ecological approach

12. points out that the proposal to significantly reduce the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and to increase ecological focus areas by 2030 implies a systemic transformation of agricultural production methods;
13. highlights that agro-ecology, which makes the most of ecosystems as a production factor while maintaining their capacity for renewal, meets this challenge;
14. notes that the FAO summarises agro-ecology as 10 interdependent elements: diversity, co-creation and sharing of knowledge, synergies, efficiency, recycling, resilience, human and social values, culture and food traditions, responsible governance, and circular and solidarity economy;
15. stresses the need to see waste as resources, for example, reclaimed water, with its essential nutrient inputs, for irrigating areas where there is a shortage, or cereal straw residue that is processed to become a productive asset for livestock farming, green building or mulch;
16. stresses that agro-ecology reduces the carbon footprint of agriculture, fosters the recovery of biodiversity, ensures or restores the fertility of soil, prevents air and water pollution, increases the economic resilience of farms, and guarantees healthy and accessible food;
17. stresses that agro-ecology is not a return to the past, that it is more complex than agricultural practices based on chemicals or oil, and that it is a smart form of agriculture that combines environmental, economic and social performance, as well as agronomic and social practices resulting from innovative experiments, expertise and public research;
18. stresses that agro-ecology develops agriculture with and within nature;
19. notes that agro-ecology develops living soils which promote healthy plants and store a lot of carbon and water and are more resistant to drought and high temperatures;
20. underlines that agro-ecology takes account of local agro-climatic and historical conditions to choose products, varieties, breeds and timetables to make farms as resilient as possible to hazards;
21. notes that agro-ecology develops farms that are on a human scale and as free range as possible, and which aim for self-sufficiency in feeding their animals;

22. notes that agro-ecology involves more:
 - a. small and medium-sized farms that will help stop the decline in agricultural jobs and start to help young farmers get established again,
 - b. mutual aid networks between farms,
 - c. links with the rest of the population through short supply chains and more local processing of products;
23. considers that digitalisation can make certain production and marketing practices easier; notes, however, that widespread development of automated and smart agricultural machinery raises the question of data sovereignty, which the farmers may not be able to maintain control over; takes the view that farmers should not outsource the specific knowledge relating to their farms and should retain the right to repair their machinery;

Policies supporting the agro-ecological transition

24. notes that agro-ecology does not just take account of food production, but covers the entire food system, including fair working conditions;
25. observes that the CAP reform currently under negotiation, while its main substance does not meet current challenges, nonetheless offers Member States and their regions certain tools to support agro-ecology;
26. welcomes the European Commission's memo to the European Council of October 2020 identifying four possible types of eco-scheme, including agroforestry and agro-ecology;
27. notes that agro-ecology, being based on an ecosystem of small and medium-sized farms, cannot be developed if CAP direct payments are still allocated per hectare and not per agricultural worker;
28. notes that other European policies (agricultural markets, external trade, climate, seeds, water, soil, research, etc.) should be brought into line with the agro-ecological approach;
29. considers agro-ecology to be a tool for the management of sustainable rural tourism;
30. notes that public research must step up its support for agro-ecology;
31. believes that, by promoting a network of small and medium-sized farms that are updated and adapted to face the challenges of the 21st century, and by bringing urban and rural closer together through short supply chains and organic and local mass catering, agro-ecology will be a powerful engine for revitalising the regions and strengthening cohesion between rural, peri-urban and urban areas;
32. believes that it is essential to strengthen the position of farmers in the food value chain, particularly through consortia of producers and of local small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises which can achieve economies of scale so that they can receive fairer remuneration for their work, while also helping to make the local economy more dynamic;

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CAP reform

33. proposes that the future CAP should further promote agro-ecological practices such as:
 - a) crop diversification, which makes farms less vulnerable to natural or sectoral hazards,
 - b) long crop rotations and plant associations that share the agronomic benefits,
 - c) trees, hedges, ponds and stony habitats around/in plots,
 - d) cultivating leguminous plants which naturally incorporate nitrogen into the soil,
 - e) mixing species and varieties in the same plot,
 - f) good and constant soil cover which prevents erosion,
 - g) farmers reclaiming local farmer-saved seeds and local animal breeds that are better adapted to the soil, climate, etc.,
 - h) mixed crop-livestock farming,
 - i) replacing the chemical approach to crops with the integrated management approach;
34. calls, in light of the proposals it made in its opinion on the CAP, for the eco-schemes in the next CAP to incorporate the quantified objectives of the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy: reducing nutrient losses by at least 50%, fertiliser use by at least 20%, the use and risk of chemical pesticides by 50% and antimicrobials by 50%, and achieving 10% ecological focus areas and 25% of land under organic farming;
35. requests that the European Parliament and the Council implement the objectives of the Green Deal within the trilogue on the future common agricultural policy; suggests that at least 30% of the budget for the first pillar should be set at European level for the eco-schemes of each national strategic plan (NSP);
36. notes that not all farms have the same conditions in terms of environmental sustainability. Stricter environmental measures should be coupled, through the national eco-scheme, with adequate funding and training that would be determined by farms' environmental specificities;
37. recommends, as it said in its opinions on the CAP and pastoralism, broadening conditionality, for all farms, to include respect for the rights of agricultural workers (introducing the concept of social conditionality) and a livestock density limit on farms, and strengthening conditionality regarding animal welfare legislation;
38. proposes a gradual shift from a basic payment per hectare to a basic payment linked to the number of people working on the farm and for direct payments to be funnelled as a matter of priority to small and medium-sized farms and agro-ecological practices;
39. proposes that direct payments per farm should be significantly capped;
40. recommends that, in order to promote the agro-ecological transition, the Member States introduce a system of bonuses and penalties as part of the eco-schemes of the new common

agricultural policy: for example, a bonus for increasing crop diversification, financed by a penalty on chemical fertilisers and pesticides and antibiotics, or a bonus for grazing livestock, financed by a greenhouse gas penalty proportional to the number of ruminants reared;

41. recommends that the system of bonuses/penalties described in point 40 be implemented by the Member States taking in account their environmental priorities
42. recommends that measures under the second pillar of the CAP should prioritise:
 - a. agro-ecological production methods, including agro-forestry, and collective approaches to them (cooperation),
 - b. systemic agri-environment-climate measures (AECMs),
 - c. short supply chains,
 - d. organic and local catering,
 - e. training and advice on agro-ecology, agroforestry and agro/silvopastoralism;
43. calls for Article 65 (second pillar) of the Regulation on national strategic plans (NSPs) to be amended to shift from a per-area mindset to an agro-ecological contract;
44. reiterates the proposal it made in its opinion on the PAC that investment support should be conditional on an environmental audit and that its budgetary envelope should be limited to a maximum of 10% of second-pillar funds;
45. suggests that the European Commission draw up guidelines to provide methodological support to managing authorities and regional stakeholders to promote the adoption of the agro-ecological project in the mobilisation of the various voluntary measures of the CAP.

Farming practices

46. proposes that ruminant farming should move towards permanent grazing, except when wintering;
47. calls for industrialised off-land farming of monogastric animals (pigs, poultry), which produces many negative externalities in terms of public health and the environment, to evolve fully or partially into free-range farming with a limit on the number of animals per building and per hectare of feeding surface area;
48. calls for an end to cage rearing, as called for in a recent citizens' initiative and as it urged in its opinion on the CAP;
49. suggests, in the interests of animal welfare, developing on-farm slaughter and small local abattoirs;
50. calls for an extension beyond 31 December 2020 of the derogation allowing producers of poultry and rabbits to slaughter and process their animals on the farm for local sale under Regulation (EC) No 853/2004;

51. suggests strengthening the Germany Presidency's proposal to create a European "animal welfare" label;
52. also recommends clear, mandatory labelling of the husbandry method, covering the animal's lifecycle, including its transport, such that producers can obtain recognition of improvements in their practices and consumers can choose products in line with their wishes, along the lines of European egg labelling;

Other policies

53. recommends that the new law on sustainable food systems announced in the F2F strategy should establish a legal framework obliging the EU to begin a genuine agro-ecological transition that shifts demand for food by providing an environment conducive to dietary changes, curbs the increase in obesity, reduces meat consumption, shortens supply chains and drastically reduces food waste;
54. calls on the Commission to promote the development of short supply chains:
 - a. adapting hygiene rules and standards to on-farm processing of products and, more generally, applying food legislation in adapted form to small producers, as well as labelling requirements,
 - b. supporting local and collective projects concerning, in the first instance, equipment needed for local processing (small abattoir, mobile abattoir, vegetable area, public kitchen, local market infrastructure such as farm halls or farmers' shops, etc.), and in the second instance, the formation of small local production, processing and marketing cooperatives;
55. proposes that the EU implement the recommendations made by the European Parliament in its 2017 own-initiative report¹ on farmland concentration in the EU, including the creation of a European farmland observatory; proposes that the EU implement – in the form of an EU directive such as the Water Directive – the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure² adopted by the FAO in 2012, in order to improve the security of access to land and thus help young farmers get established.
56. calls on the European Commission to propose a new European directive on agricultural soils to halt the decrease in their organic matter content, stop erosion and prioritise soil life in agricultural practices;
57. recommends strengthening the water directives by excluding derogations (Nitrates Directive);
58. recommends that the introduction of the circular economy be stepped up in the treatment of livestock waste in order to harness this in agronomic (compost and organic fertilisers) terms;

¹ European Parliament (2017), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0197_EN.html

² <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i2801f.pdf>.

59. in line with its opinion on agricultural genetic resources, calls for new European legislation on seeds to enable the use and marketing of farmer-saved seeds, in particular by making the changes proposed in the new Organic Farming Regulation for inclusion in the organic seed database;
60. calls for EU legislation to exclude genetically modified or mutagenic seeds, in order to promote biodiversity;
61. calls for the societal added value and the positive externalities offered by agro-ecology to be reflected economically for producers, so that they are stakeholders in the transition;
62. in order to guarantee the right to agro-ecological food for the whole population, recommends measures such as:
 - a. reducing VAT on organic, local and seasonal products,
 - b. "local" meal vouchers for such products,
 - c. a significant percentage of organic, local and seasonal products in mass catering;
63. proposes that specifications for PDOs and PGIs should include agro-ecological practices;
64. calls for the EU to stop importing agricultural products that do not comply with European social and environmental production standards, including those set out in the Farm to Fork strategy, and that are in unfair competition with European production, and exporting surpluses at prices below European production costs, often to the detriment of producers in third countries;
65. recommends, as it did in its opinion on the CAP, introducing new multilateral and bilateral agricultural trade rules that are fairer and more solidarity-based, and incorporate the agro-ecological approach;
66. calls for more support to be given at European level to independent public research in agro-ecology/agroforestry and participatory research with farmer-researchers, including in the field of social science studying the dynamics of socio-technical transition; welcomes the Commission's initiative to promote and coordinate a network of agro-ecological experiments;

Local and regional level

67. recommends providing very active support for local and regional authorities in implementing an agro-ecological approach, in particular in terms of technical training for new entrants, help for young farmers to get established, independent advice for farmers, support for short supply chains and for small-scale processing of agricultural products, rules on agricultural land and urban planning, expansion of protected agricultural areas, creation of agro-ecological demonstration farms, and tools for monitoring the implementation of the agro-ecological transition;
68. proposes "long contracts for agro-ecological innovation" between groups of farmers and local or regional authorities, in the context of the tools offered by the European Innovation Partnership on agricultural productivity and sustainability;

69. calls on the EU to coordinate and facilitate a network of municipalities committed to taking measures to promote resilient, sustainable agricultural and food systems, as was done for the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.

Brussels, 5 February 2021

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Bližkovský

III. PROCEDURE

Title	Agro-ecology
Reference(s)	
Legal basis	Own-initiative opinion
Procedural basis	Article 307(4) TFEU
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	
Date of Bureau/President's decision	29/06/2020
Commission responsible	Commission for Natural Resources
Rapporteur	Guillaume Cros (FR/Greens)
Analysis	19/09/2020
Discussed in commission	23/11/2020
Date adopted by commission	23/11/2020
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	Unanimous
Date adopted in plenary	05/02/2021
Previous Committee opinions	
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	