

Environment and the common agricultural policy

SUMMARY

The EU's common agricultural policy (CAP) has, over several decades and through successive reforms, devoted increased attention to the environment. This has led to the current CAP having a 'green architecture', which includes both mandatory elements – to which farmers must adhere in exchange for a full amount of direct payments – and voluntary elements – bringing extra payments for farmers engaging in farming practices that go beyond the basic requirements.

Mandatory requirements, also referred to as 'conditionality', include statutory management requirements laid out in different pieces of environmental legislation, but integrated into the CAP. They also include standards for good agricultural and environmental condition of land (GAECs) that, for instance, require crop rotation or diversification, establishment of buffer strips along rivers and lakes, or minimum soil cover in winter. The GAECs have been at the centre of farmer protests in several Member States in 2024 and were recently amended, reducing their ambition.

The voluntary elements include eco-schemes: a major novelty of the current CAP. They offer farmers a top-up on direct payments if they engage in additional environmentally sound practices. Which practices exactly, depends on individual Member States, as they have a significant flexibility in their design. As a result, more than 150 eco-schemes exist across the EU, the most popular addressing soil conservation and biodiversity. The second voluntary element comprises rural development agri-environmental schemes, the oldest environmental measures in the CAP. Also designed by the Member States, they compensate farmers for cost and income foregone as a result of engaging in environmentally friendly practices, continued agricultural activity in areas where farming is difficult, and restrictions in Natura 2000 areas. Voluntary elements also include green investments.

Several studies warn that Member States have not been ambitious in implementing the CAP's environmental measures. It is claimed that states have used the flexibility granted them to define the exact requirements and voluntary measures in ways that have not led to significant change on the ground. Finding ways to motivate farmers to engage in practices that truly benefit the environment, while ensuring their economic sustainability, remains a major challenge for negotiations on the post-2027 CAP, particularly in the context of widespread farmer discontent.



IN THIS BRIEFING

- Introduction
- Conditionality
- Eco-schemes
- Rural development interventions
- Does the CAP green architecture work?
- Stakeholder views



Introduction

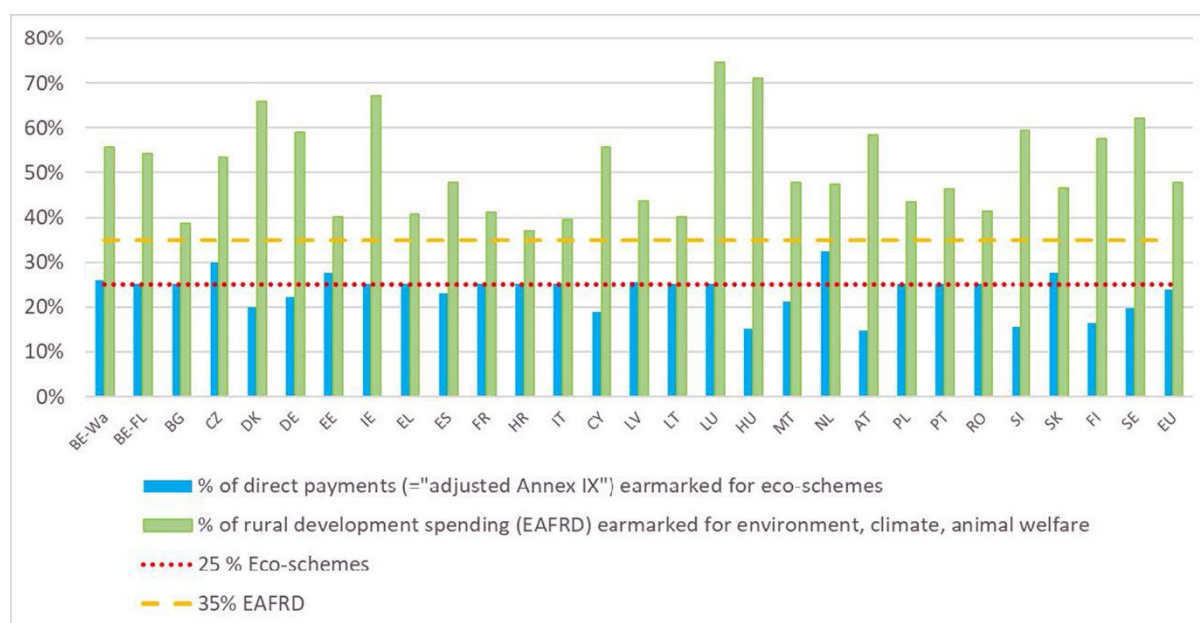
For decades, the EU has been devoting increased attention to the environment in its CAP. While the CAP objectives enshrined in the [Treaties](#) since the 1950s do not include the environment (and instead concern agricultural market stability, productivity, security of the food supply, and a fair living standard for farmers), since 1992, environmental protection has been a [mandatory element](#) in all policies. The 1992 CAP reform saw the [introduction](#) of the first mandatory environmental measures, with green requirements gradually strengthened in subsequent reforms. The current CAP – in application since 2023 and ending in 2027 – has [10 key objectives](#), three of which are environmental: tackling climate change, protecting natural resources, and enhancing biodiversity.

To achieve these objectives, the CAP includes a 'green architecture' that specifically focuses on climate and the environment, with three main elements:

- **conditionality**, mandatory for all farmers, comprised of statutory management requirements (SMRs) and standards for good agricultural and environmental condition of land (GAECs);
- **eco-schemes**, designed by Member States and voluntary for farmers;
- **agri-environment-climate commitments** (AECCs) and other rural development interventions, designed and co-financed by the Member States and also voluntary for farmers.¹

Member States have a certain margin in defining conditionality and significant flexibility in designing the eco-schemes and rural development interventions. The exact rules in each Member State are set out in the national **CAP strategic plans** (CSPs), submitted by Member States and approved by the European Commission.² Member States are required to set aside 25 % of their direct payment allocations to the eco-schemes and 35 % of the rural development allocations to interventions in favour of the environment and climate (this is called '**ring-fencing**'). According to the Commission's analysis of the approved CSPs, in the 2023–2027 period, Member States plan to dedicate 24 % (or €44.5 billion) of the direct payments to eco-schemes and 48 % (€31.6 billion) of rural development payments to the environment and climate.³ Overall, almost a third of the total public CAP funding in the 2023–2027 period, or close to €98 billion out of €307 billion,⁴ is [expected](#) to be dedicated to environmental practices that go beyond conditionality.

Figure 1 – Budget for eco-schemes and rural development in favour of the environment



Source: European Commission, [Approved 28 CAP Strategic Plans \(2023–2027\)](#), p. 59, accessed 21.6.2024.

Conditionality

To receive the full amount of direct payments and some types of rural development funds, farmers must adhere to environmental and social conditionality.⁵ The environmental conditionality includes two types of requirements, specified in the [CAP Strategic Plans Regulation](#).

- **Statutory management requirements (SMRs)** are obligations that apply to all farmers, regardless of whether they receive CAP income support or not. SMRs originate from other EU rules, such as the [General Food Law](#) and the [Sustainable Use of Pesticides](#) and [Nitrates](#) Directives, but are integrated into CAP legislation. This is, among other things, to raise awareness of these obligations among farmers, who must currently adhere to 11 SMRs.
- **Standards for good agricultural and environmental condition of land (GAECs)** are specific to the CAP. While the CAP Strategic Plans Regulation lays down the main principles for the GAECs, the minimum requirements are decided by Member States. The current CAP contains nine GAECs.

Conditionality has been part of the CAP since 2005, under the name of 'cross-compliance', which also consisted of SMRs and GAECs (albeit not the same ones). The 2014–2020 CAP added three mandatory 'greening' obligations for direct payment recipients.⁶ The current CAP originally strengthened some of the requirements, before scaling back others following the widespread farmers protests and the [targeted CAP revision](#) of May 2024. Farmers must currently adhere to the following GAECs.

- **GAEC 1: Maintenance of permanent grassland.** The ratio of permanent grassland to agricultural area cannot decrease by more than 5 % compared with 2018. A similar requirement existed in the previous CAP as part of the greening obligations, but the reference year was 2012, and organic farmers were exempted. A 2024 Commission [delegated regulation](#) made it easier for Member States to adhere to this GAEC.
- **GAEC 2: Protection of wetland and peatland.** As [wetlands](#) and [peatlands](#) store large amounts of carbon, this new requirement seeks to restrict agricultural practices, such as drainage, ploughing or peat extraction, that could release carbon or damage these habitats. Some Member States have postponed the application to 2025.
- **GAEC 3: Ban on burning arable stubble,** except for plant health reasons. This type of requirement existed in the previous CAP as GAEC 6.
- **GAEC 4: Establishment of buffer strips.** Farmers are required to use no fertilisers or pesticides for at least 3 metres along water courses. This is an enhanced requirement compared with the previous CAP. Nine Member States require buffer strips that are even wider.
- **GAEC 5: Tillage management in areas at risk of erosion.** This requirement existed in the previous CAP. Most Member States apply it to arable land on slopes, and have introduced bans on ploughing, a required direction of ploughing or mandatory plant cover. The [2024 CAP amendments](#) allow Member States to exempt certain crops, soil types or farming systems.
- **GAEC 6: Minimum soil cover.** This requirement seeks to avoid bare soil in the most sensitive periods (mainly in winter), and is enhanced compared with the previous CAP. Some Member States have opted for lower requirements owing to shorter vegetation period, while others require a minimum soil cover also on fallow land. The 2024 amendments also allow exemptions for certain crops, soil types or farming systems.
- **GAEC 7: Crop rotation or diversification.** A crop rotation requirement applies on all arable land, except to crops growing under water. However, the 2024 amendments allow Member States to replace this with crop diversification, which existed as a 'greening' obligation in the previous CAP. To comply, farmers must simultaneously cultivate at least two or three different crops on their farm, depending on its size. The

2024 amendments also allow Member States to exempt certain crops, soil types or farming systems.

- **GAEC 8: Retention of landscape features.** This GAEC includes a requirement to maintain landscape features (e.g. hedges and ponds), and a ban on cutting hedges and trees during the bird breeding and rearing season, to improve on-farm biodiversity. Member States can also decide to include measures to avoid invasive plant species. This requirement existed in the previous CAP as GAEC 7. Before the adoption of the 2024 CAP amendments, GAEC 8 also required that at least 4 % of arable land at farm level be devoted to non-productive areas or features, including land lying fallow. This has now turned into an eco-scheme that all Member States are required to offer to farmers.
- **GAEC 9:** Ban on converting or ploughing permanent grassland designated as environmentally sensitive permanent grasslands in Natura 2000 sites. Following the 2024 amendments, Member States can introduce exemptions in order to allow ploughing, to restore permanent grassland if it is damaged as a result of predators or invasive species.

Member States can introduce temporary exemptions for a GAEC if weather conditions prevent farmers from complying with it. However, Member States are allowed to introduce additional GAECs on their territory, as well, and, according to a Commission [study](#), six have done so: Spain, Latvia, the Netherlands and Austria have an additional GAEC regarding nutrient management and/or protection of water courses, Belgium-Flanders has a GAEC that bans converting or ploughing permanent grasslands designated as environmentally sensitive *outside* Natura 2000 sites, while Finland requires that any area grubbed up or taken up as new agricultural land from other uses must be permanently under grassland.

In line with the [CAP Horizontal Regulation](#), Member States are required to set up a **system to verify the compliance** of CAP beneficiaries **with conditionality**, including on-the-spot and administrative checks, and can make use of remote sensing or the area monitoring system. On-the-spot checks must cover at least 1 % of farms benefiting from CAP support. Member States must establish the control sample for the on-the-spot checks to be carried out each year on the basis of a risk analysis. The 2024 amendments exempted all farms up to 10 hectares from controls.

Member States are also required to lay down administrative penalties for farmers who do not comply with the SMRs and GAECs. The reduction should generally be 3 % of direct payments, but it can also be different: zero, if non-compliance has no or insignificant consequences for the achievement of the SMR or the GAEC objective; more than 3 % if non-compliance has grave consequences or constitutes a direct risk to public or animal health; 10 % if non-compliance persists or reoccurs once within 3 consecutive calendar years, and 15 % if the same non-compliance reoccurs 'without justified reason' (i.e. constitutes intentional non-compliance). Small farms up to 10 hectares have also been exempted from the penalties under the 2024 amendments.

Eco-schemes

Schemes for the climate, the environment and animal welfare ('eco-schemes') are a major novelty of the current CAP. They are direct payments for environmentally friendly practices that go *beyond* the conditionality and for which farmers can voluntarily apply on an annual basis. While the main principles of the conditionality requirements are roughly the same across the EU, eco-schemes are highly diverse, as they are designed by individual Member States to reflect the particular characteristics and priorities of their agriculture. As a result, Member States run almost 160 eco-schemes that reward farmers, for instance, to take up organic farming, integrated pest control, crop rotation with leguminous crops or reduction of fertiliser use, and rewetting of wetlands and peatlands. The only eco-scheme common across the EU is that rewarding farmers for setting aside land for non-productive features, including land lying fallow, which all Member States must run following the 2024 CAP revision.

According to the Commission's study on the 28 approved CAP strategic plans, the most popular eco-schemes are those addressing soil conservation practices, which are available to farmers in all Member States with the exception of Portugal. These account for 30 % of all eco-schemes at EU level. They are followed by eco-schemes addressing biodiversity, accounting for 20 % of all eco-schemes, followed by grasslands management (15 %), integrated pest management ([IPM](#)) and pesticide management (6 %), organic farming (6 %), nutrient management (5 %) and animal welfare (5 %).

Figure 2 – Thematic coverage of eco-schemes in the CAP strategic plans

	AT	BE	BE	BE	BG	CY	CZ	DE	DK	EE	EL	ES	FI	FR	HR	HU	IE	IT	LT	LU	LV	MT	NL	PL	PT	RO	SE	SI	SK
Integrated production/ high environmental value																													
IPM/pesticide management																													
Fertilisation																													
Soil conservation practices																													
Organic farming																													
Landscape and biodiversity																													
Wetlands and peatlands																													
Grassland and grazing																													
Animals and animal welfare																													
Precision agriculture																													
Water management																													

Data source: European Commission, [Approved 28 CAP Strategic Plans \(2023-2027\)](#), p. 64, graphic: Samy Chahri.

Most Member States have several eco-schemes allowing farmers to select one or more that are relevant to their farm. Some Member States (Czechia, Ireland, France, Hungary, the Netherlands and Slovakia) have only one eco-scheme, with sub-options that farmers can choose and apply, either on the whole farm or on part of it.

A [study](#) commissioned by the European Parliament shows that, despite their high number, 50 % of eco-schemes target less than 4 % of EU agricultural land. The eco-schemes that cover the largest area focus on pasture extensification, crop rotation going beyond conditionality,⁷ soil protection and management, and organic farming.

Rural development interventions

Rural development interventions that compensate farmers for the loss of income because of the pursuit of environmental goals are the oldest environmental measures in the CAP, [dating back to 1987](#). Member States can run several types of such interventions, funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and co-financed by the national budgets:

- agri-environment-climate commitments (AECCs)
- natural or other area-specific constraints
- area-specific disadvantages resulting from certain mandatory requirements
- green investments
- cooperation, knowledge exchange and dissemination of information.

Unlike the eco-schemes, which are annual, rural development interventions generally include commitments for 5 to 7 years, although Member States can, in some circumstances, determine longer or shorter periods. They are available to both farmers and beneficiaries who are not farmers.

Agri-environment-climate commitments (AECCs)

All Member States are required to offer farmers environmental, climate-related and other management commitment (AECC) schemes, which are voluntary for farmers. They must go beyond the relevant SMRs and GAEC standards, and national and EU law and must contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation and to the protection and improvement of the environment. This can include measures to support agro-ecology, conservation agriculture and integrated production; forest, environmental and climate services and forest conservation; animal welfare; and conservation, sustainable use and development of genetic resources, in particular through traditional breeding methods. The payments aim to compensate farmers or other beneficiaries for the additional costs incurred and income foregone on account the commitments made. If AECC schemes concern conversion to, or maintaining, organic farming, payments must be per hectare, while for other commitments, Member States can apply other units.

According to the Commission's study of the 28 approved CSPs, Member States run a total of 200 such schemes with diverse numbers and approaches – from two in the Netherlands to more than 40 in Italy. Overall, AECCs are the most popular type of rural development measures – according to the European Parliament's study, Member States plan to allocate 31% of rural development funds to them (from less than 20 % in Greece, France, Malta and Portugal, to more than 45 % in Ireland, Hungary and Austria).

The EU has the goal, set in the [biodiversity](#) and [farm to fork](#) strategies, of having at least 25 % of total agricultural area under **organic farming** by 2030. This would require the area under organic farming to more than double compared with 9.9% in 2021. CAP funds can be used to support both the conversion of farms to organic farming and the maintenance of organic production. Some Member States offer farmers eco-schemes for converting their farms to organic agriculture and AECC schemes for maintaining organic production, others do so the other way around, while still others support both conversion and maintenance with either eco-schemes or AECCs. However, the European Environment Agency (EEA) estimates that [current efforts](#) are unlikely to reach the 25 % target.

Areas with natural or other area-specific constraints (ANCs)

Most Member States provide farmers with a possibility to get [compensation](#) for areas with natural or other area-specific constraints (ANCs), which can also benefit the environment.⁸ Member States designate the ANCs in line with the 2013 [Rural Development Regulation](#) – these are mainly mountain areas, where agriculture is difficult because of short growing season or slopes that are too steep for the use of regular machinery. Other areas facing significant natural or specific constraints, such as low temperature, dryness, or soils that are difficult to farm, can also be designated as ANCs. About

30 % of agricultural land receives this type of support. It helps farmers to continue farming and in this way avoid land abandonment, which could lead to loss of habitats and biodiversity. The support is paid annually per hectare and compensates for income foregone and additional cost.

Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directive payments

Rural development funding can be used as support for 'area-specific disadvantages resulting from certain mandatory requirements' relating to the EU [Birds](#) and [Habitats](#) Directives and the [Water Framework Directive](#). Payments can be granted to farmers, forest holders and their associations, and other land managers, in particular for agricultural and forest areas in Natura 2000 protected areas⁹. The annual payments per hectare are intended to compensate for all or part of the additional cost and income foregone. According to the Commission's study, the 19 CAP strategic plans that include this type of payments will mostly compensate farmers for restricting fertilisers, pesticides, mowing and grazing.

Green investments

Member States can also support environmentally-friendly investment. The support typically covers 80 % of the eligible cost, but can go up to 85 % for small farms, and up to 100 % for afforestation. According to the Commission's study, the most popular is funding for investment contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation (which in the 2023–2027 period is expected to benefit more than 176 000 EU farms, or 1.8 %); investment related to the care of natural resources such as water, soil and air (almost 145 000 EU farms, or 1.5%); and investment related to biodiversity (almost 52 657 farms, or 0.5 %). Measures can include investment in precision farming technologies or production of renewable energy, restoring dry stone walls, and restoring wetlands and peatlands. With certain restrictions, Member States can also approve investment in irrigation. Forests can also benefit from green investments, and Member States plan to invest in afforestation, forest restoring after natural disasters, agroforestry and sustainable forest management.

Does the CAP green architecture work?

Several studies, by the [European Parliament](#), the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change ([ESABCC](#)), the European Environment Agency ([EEA](#)) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD](#)), concluded that, even before the lowering of the conditionality requirements in May 2024, environmental measures planned by the Member States were not ambitious enough. Instead, the current CAP's main feature remained economic support, which mainly goes to conventional farming. The ESABCC found that the flexibility regarding the definition of the GAECs, together with the ability to decide on the eco-schemes' design, allowed Member States to pay farmers for practices with limited added environmental value. A study by the Institute for European Environmental Policy ([IEEP](#)) went further and said that eco-schemes were designed to 'allow most farmers to receive a payment without having to change their farming practices'.

A 2022 European Court of Auditors (ECA) [report](#) showed that this was already the case in the previous CAP, as the greening requirements largely matched pre-existing farm practices.¹⁰ The report criticised the low environmental ambition of the previous CAP's implementation. While the European Commission estimated that in the 2014–2020 period, €100 billion, or 26 % of CAP funds, were spent on climate action (representing 50 % of total EU climate action spending), the ECA found that this had little impact on agricultural emissions. This was due to the fact that most supported measures had a low potential to mitigate climate change, while measures with high potential were rarely financed. The report also criticised that the CAP does not seek to limit livestock numbers or provide incentives to reduce them, but includes market measures to promote animal products. Coupled payments for livestock farming in the current CAP are also strongly criticised by all studies mentioned above.

Helping farmers to engage in practices that truly benefit the environment, while ensuring farms' economic sustainability, is expected to be a major challenge in the negotiations on the post-2027 CAP. This has become even more daunting in light of the farmer protests in the beginning of 2024, which denounced environmental rules in agriculture, among other issues, and resulted in watering down CAP conditionality. Among the ideas put forward before the protests was reducing the CAP budget for direct payments by focusing income support mainly on low-income farms and farmer poverty, and dedicating a larger share of the CAP budget to payments for environmental results (OECD) or even creating a new, separate fund that would pay farmers for environmental practices ([IEEP](#)). The EEA [suggested](#) setting up a just transition fund for the food system, modelled after the Just Transition Fund for the energy transition, that would soften the socioeconomic impact of the transition to more sustainable agriculture. In its May 2024 [report](#), the EEA said the CAP reform should properly recognise and compensate the role of farmers as stewards of nature and a healthy and secure food system. More ideas are expected to come out from the [Strategic Dialogue](#) on the future of EU agriculture.

Coupled income support

Coupled income support is a type of direct payment that supports specific farming sectors. While formally not part of environmental CAP measures, the Member States' choice of sectors to support can have indirect positive or negative impact on the environment. In many Member States, coupled income support is available for the production of protein crops, which, in addition to potentially being able to contribute to more environmentally friendly diets, also fix nitrogen in the soil. Member States also use this type of support for fruit and vegetable production. This is equally essential for the change towards a more plant-based diet that could help reduce the environmental footprint of European food and agriculture.

However, most Member States also grant coupled income support for livestock production – which has been criticised because of its significant negative climate impact. A 2021 European Court of Auditors [report](#) (and several other studies) identifies coupled income support as a factor that 'may be artificially maintaining high livestock numbers in the EU'. The Commission, however, notes that this type of support can be beneficial for biodiversity if it supports extensive instead of intensive livestock farming.

Stakeholder views

Various stakeholders have already started to position themselves regarding the CAP's future. In their manifesto, EU farmer and cooperative associations [Copa and Cogeca](#) list reconciling climate change mitigation, nature conservation and agri-food production as the first of seven priorities for the new Commission. Their manifesto suggests that the way to achieve this is to ensure a fair remuneration for farmers by revising the Unfair Trading Practices Directive (UTPD); introduce derogations to competition law and sectoral sustainability standards that would guarantee a fair reward for sustainability for farmers; and promote and incentivise short value chains and farmers' market networks. Copa and Cogeca call for an Agri Restoration Act that would, among other things, 'protect the agricultural sector as the EU protects nature'.

The European Council of Young Farmers ([CEJA](#)) lists climate change and access to water, together with ensuring the sustainability of soils and nutrients and effective risk management in dealing with unpredictable weather, as one of its 10 demands for the European Parliament's next term. According to, CEJA young farmers are enthusiastic about sustainability, but this must go hand in hand with economic viability. CEJA had previously said young farmers were [committed](#) to sustainability, but 'feel like they have been hit with targets without any practical means to reach them. They feel they must compromise their economic viability and social well-being to reach higher goals, fearing they will never be fairly acknowledged'.

[IFOAM Organics Europe](#), representing EU organic farmers, in its vision for the EU agriculture, criticises the scaling back of the CAP environmental requirements. It calls for the future CAP to set more ambitious environmental, biodiversity, and climate goals, and to move away from untargeted payments not linked to environmental outcomes. Moreover, it calls for linking CAP payments directly

to the level of environmental performance of farms, in terms of soil, climate, water and biodiversity, with organic farming considered most environmentally friendly of all. IFOAM had previously [advocated](#) for incentives and support for farmers who want to re-design their farms and deliver more for the environment.

[Via Campesina](#), which represents family and small-scale farmers, says viable prices and smaller farms are needed to enable a transition to agroecology. To achieve this, Via Campesina calls for a revision of the UTPD and CAP subsidies in order to regulate the market and manage supply, but also for the direct payments to be reoriented to prioritise farms' agroecological and sustainable transition.

[Non-governmental organisations](#) BirdLife Europe, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), in their vision for agriculture in the EU, call for rewarding land managers for good stewardship of land and natural resources, and for the delivery of ecosystem services. They call for ending the untargeted area-based income support and subsidies linked to production, and at the same time, for establishing a just transition mechanism that would support vulnerable farms most affected by this.

MAIN REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ These elements are discussed in more detail below. [Other elements](#) of the 'green architecture' are producer groups, operational programmes, and farm advisers.
- ² The CSPs were assessed as to their consistency with and contribution to EU environmental and climate legislation and commitments, in particular with the farm to fork and new biodiversity strategies. These include: reducing use of chemical pesticides and more hazardous pesticides by 50 % by 2030; reducing nutrient losses by 50 %; reducing fertiliser use by at least 20 %; reducing antimicrobials for farmed animals by 50 %; having 25 % of the agricultural land under organic farming; protecting at least 30 % of the EU's land under the Natura 2000 network; and placing at least 10 % of agricultural area under high-diversity landscape features. Not all of this is expected to be achieved by the CAP.
- ³ The lower amount from the direct payments was allowed because it was offset by the higher amount set aside from the rural development funds.
- ⁴ Out of this total, €264 comes from the CAP budget, and the rest from national co-financing.
- ⁵ Social conditionality is mandatory from 2025.
- ⁶ For a comparison on cross-compliance requirements in the CAP since 2005, see the OECD study, [Policies for the Future of Farming and Food in the European Union](#), p. 184.
- ⁷ The study was done before the 2024 CAP amendments made crop rotation optional.
- ⁸ This is not always the case, so for Member States, only 50 % of this type of interventions is counted towards the requirement that they spend 35 % of the rural development funds on the environment.
- ⁹ This concerns around 11 % of the EU total forest and agricultural areas situated in Natura 2000 sites.
- ¹⁰ See also an [analysis](#) done for the European Commission showing, for instance, that the crop diversification obligation introduced in the 2014–2020 CAP led to the expansion of this practice to just 0.8 % of arable land, as crop diversification was already in place on 70 % of arable land, and 19 % of land was exempted. Still, the study concluded that mandatory crop diversification slowed the trend towards monocultures, and in particular slowed the decline in protein crops and fallow land.

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