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OPINION PIECE by Henri Brichart

2030 target - Set-aside farmers

Two weeks ago, the Commission presented two ambitious strategies – one on the Biodiversity and the other on the Farm to Fork. These texts address many issues that are vital to farming in Europe and its future. We were expecting concrete solutions and precise answers. Instead, we were given theoretical, inconsistent targets as well as surrealistic measures.

Among those key targets, there is one that clearly stands out to me: to unequivocally set aside 10% of agriculture area is a principle that goes against everything that my fellow farmers and I stand for.

The idea that someone would tell me not to use part of my farming land, without any financial compensation, just seems out of this world to me. Imagine buying an apartment where 10% of its value is taken away from you by a third party... What would you think of that? Would you sign up for it? I wouldn't think so, and I am afraid that the thousands of young farmers that are lined up to take over from us to secure generational renewal won't buy it either... For settled livestock farmers like me, would it mean that I will have to give up this land and the feed for my animals, making me more dependent on external feed sources, including imported ones? Doesn't this conflict with other central objectives mentioned in these strategies?

More generally speaking, I do not understand the environmental interest behind such a proposal. We are already facing the abandonment of agricultural land on certain territories, where it is being replaced by uncultivated land, forest fires in the summer and landslides in the winter. When agriculture disappears from the land, the authorities are quick to complain and recognise the value of agricultural practices... But often, unfortunately, it is already too late!

If we are to cut the use of pesticides by 50% (meaning lower yields), increase the share of organic farming to 25% (also resulting in lower yields¹) and then also set aside 10% of the agricultural area, how are we planning to ensure food security for an increasing population? Following the Covid-19 outbreak, I thought that one of the lessons learnt would be that food security would never again be taken for granted. Someone needs to explain to me how these targets are addressing this issue, how we will maintain food prices at a reasonable level and why farmers seem to be the only ones worrying about this in Brussels! We would need to increase our agricultural production by 70%² to feed 9.8 billion people by 2050³. This does not even take into account that by 2030 we will lose 4 million hectares⁴ of agricultural land due to urbanization, and that 11%⁵ of land is also projected to be abandoned as farmers will stop their production. Considering all these elements, I don't see how it is possible for the EU to avoid increasing imports from third countries – countries that do not have the same food, health and

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2664.12035>

² http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/wsfs/docs/expert_paper/How_to_Feed_the_World_in_2050.pdf

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/world-population-prospects-2017.html>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/eu-agricultural-outlook-arable-land-area-continue-its-decline_en

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/jrc113718.pdf>

environmental standards as we do in the EU. Surely, if these standards and biodiversity protection are so important for the EU, we should want them to be upheld in the countries we import from as well. Let's also not forget that if we decrease the EU production by 1%, this would represent an increase of 1.5 million hectares of farmland from third countries, with the almost immediate effect of increased deforestation. It would indeed be a sad outcome for the Biodiversity Strategy if we were to simply outsource our agriculture to these countries thus in practice creating double standards between what is demanded from our farmers and what is allowed to our colleagues in third countries.

The target itself has to be questioned as well. On which basis is the 10% set out? How will this be monitored and how will national differences be addressed? The statistics show that the data are insufficient to make any kind of comparison. The impact assessment that preceded the Commission's proposal for a CAP post-2020 states that the current share of landscape features is around 4%.⁷ But this number comes from a 2013 evaluation and the data comparison from paying agencies from different Member States also shows some serious discrepancies. All of this goes back to the fact that Member States will indeed have to adapt this to the lower geographical scale at national level and the progress towards this target should be under constant review. At farm level, I simply don't see how this could be implemented in a simple manner.

We must consider that the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies do not present any kind of financial compensation for farmers who simply set aside part of their land. With so many farmers struggling to keep their heads above water, who could think that this new injunction will be accepted on the ground? Do we need to remind the Commission that any strategy can be implemented only if those who are supposed to contribute to it the most accept it and support it?

Farmers are the first to live on their farms and therefore in this environment, which they maintain and enhance. What can we actually do to help get farmers on board for this target and help them implement these high-diversity landscape features? There are a few simple measures that I would like to mention in this regard.

First of all, since market orientation and competitiveness remain major objectives of the European Union, these landscape features should be financially encouraged in all Member States. The idea that farmers would simply take out part of their land and leave it out of production does not work. The support can happen through the CAP with either Pillar I eco-schemes or Pillar II agri-environmental-climate schemes (AEEM) for more ambitious solutions. Yet this means that both Pillars would have to be sufficiently funded and have no cuts to the funding in the MFF 2021-2027, something I have not seen reflected in any proposal so far. It also highlights the fact that AEEM – the preferred approach due to the multi-annual commitments - need to be incentivized. The evaluation of the CAP and its impact on habitats, landscape and biodiversity⁸ clearly underlined the importance of AEEM and its success throughout the implementation of the CAP. Yet the current approach where farmers only receive costs incurred and income foregone is not enough. If we are to support high-diversity landscape features, we need to make sure that the best tool to deliver on this within the scope of the CAP is actually effective and supported by a well-funded budget.

Secondly, an enhanced list of landscape features that would be harmonized and eligible across all EU Member States is needed as well. It is hard to understand why one type of landscape feature should be eligible in one Member State and not in another, as this would create an uneven playing field. The list of features should set the baseline according to the already existing legislation to ensure a balanced approach on European level. Importantly, productive elements

⁶ Noleppa, von Witzke, Carlsburg, 2013

⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=SWD%3A2018%3A301%3AFIN>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/key-policies/common-agricultural-policy/cmef/sustainability/impact-cap-habitats-landscapes-biodiversity_en

need to be included as well, as they can in some cases provide more benefits than a simple set-aside. This inclusion of productive elements would be most important for fodder production – as I have seen during the last few years, the hot and dry summer limited the fodder production to a minimum and many livestock farmers like me were struggling to feed their animals. If they need to use the space designated for landscape features or set-aside in this time of need, we should not prevent them from doing so. Areas that are adjacent to agricultural parcels should be considered as well, as borderline areas between two adjacent land use types are in many cases hotspots for biodiversity and therefore should not be disregarded.

Thirdly, controls of these landscape features must become the easiest thing to do, so as not to increase the administrative burden for the farmers. In this regard, we should ensure that landscape features are part of eligible hectares, to make sure that farmers are still able to receive direct payments for these areas. Most importantly, it would erase the need for farmers to single out those areas in their single aid application, a burdensome practice with limited impact. It would also allow farmers to be more flexible in the implementation of these features and change their position should their farming practices require it.

Lastly and most importantly, asking for more landscape features should happen first and foremost on a voluntary basis. We tend to forget that farmers are usually the only ones actually living in the agricultural landscape and taking care of it. If we want to increase the rate of landscape features, we should focus on those farmers who would actually want to implement them rather than imposing an obligatory target. That is why landscape features should be promoted first and foremost through eco-schemes and AECM.

A few more things should also be kept in mind. We need to take good care of the landscape features already on the ground and develop stimulated targeted management. Again, the Pillar II schemes seem best equipped to do so. In view of the fact that a significant part of agricultural land will be abandoned in the near future, we should primarily focus on trying to bring this abandoned land back into focus and implement the new landscape features primarily there. A proper advisory system which can help farmers in planning and implementing them, promote potential short- and long-term benefits and propose available support for these landscape features is needed. From experience, we also know that collective approaches can exponentially increase value to landscapes. We should therefore support the farmers who want to collaborate together in groups. Sustainable management of these landscape features in the long run is also key.

To conclude, I would like to stress that landscape features are a valuable and long-established part of EU agricultural practices and landscapes. They serve as a habitat for farmland birds and insects, they prevent erosion and nutrient run-off, store carbon, mitigate climate change, provide shade for farm animals and many other valuable ecosystem services. They also carry the specific regional identity as the landscape they create is unique to each EU region and add its value to the diverse EU agriculture. Yet there can be conflicting objectives when it comes to preserving and protecting landscape features on the one hand and competitive modern agriculture on the other. We need to combine these two approaches with a dual performance concept – environmental and economic, because if farmers do not generate income, sustainability will not be achieved. It is better to have farmers like me, who wish to implement these practices on voluntary basis, able do so and be paid for these public goods, than to impose an unsubstantiated objective at European level. Together with Copa's farmers and Cogeca's cooperatives, I say: targets are not solutions!

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