

# Agriculture in the EU

[A living countryside?](#) | [The root cause](#) | [CAP](#) | [WWF's vision](#) | [Recommendations](#)

## **A LIVING COUNTRYSIDE?**

The countryside is one of our most valuable assets, not only for the food it produces and the livelihoods it provides for rural communities, but also for the wildlife it supports, and for recreation.

But all is not well. The problems highlighted below are the clearest possible indicators that the EU has to re-think our agricultural processes and practices:

### **Species and habitat decline**

Despite considerable action by conservation organisations, governments and many others over recent years, the EU's wildlife is still in decline:

- European butterflies are under serious threat. The marsh fritillary, for example, which is found on unimproved grassland, is declining throughout most of Europe and is now extinct in the Netherlands.
- Farmland habitats are declining too. For example, in France an extra 3.5 million hectares of land were ploughed up between 1975 to 1995.
- The massive expansion of irrigated agriculture, particularly in southern Europe, has led to severe loss and degradation of important wetland habitats, including the Las Tablas de Damiel National Park in Spain.

### **Pollution**

- The Earth's surface is around 0.6 degrees Celsius warmer than it was one hundred years ago, mainly due to increased emissions of "greenhouse gases" such as carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) through human activities.
- Pollution is a major problem for many rivers and coastal waters in the EU.
- Toxic chemicals, including pesticides, can build up in the food chain, threatening wildlife and people.

### **The rural economy**

- Employment in agriculture is falling in the EU. This is affecting all Member States but in particular the countries with the highest levels of jobs in farming (Italy, Spain, Portugal and France). Each of these four countries lost more than one third of its farming jobs between 1987 and 1997.
- The area under agriculture has fallen by five per cent over the past two decades, as certain areas in the EU have been abandoned, because they are hard to reach, unsuited to agriculture, or under pressure from urbanisation.

## **THE ROOT CAUSE – INTENSIFICATION**

Since the end of the Second World War, the development of agriculture in the EU has been driven by the pursuit of ever-higher levels of productivity and efficiency. This has led to the adoption of new farming methods, which have changed the face of the countryside to an unprecedented degree.

Intensification, as this shift in agricultural practice is known, is characterised by:

- an increase in water abstraction, particularly in southern European countries such as Italy, Portugal and Spain, to enhance productivity;
- an increase in the use of heavy machinery such as combined harvesters;
- a reduction in the number of people employed on the land;
- the removal of hedgerows, walls and wooded areas to provide a greater area for cultivation;
- high inputs of man-made fertilisers and pesticides to allow year-round cultivation;
- widespread drainage of wetland habitats to bring more land under cultivation;
- periods of extended cultivation through the introduction of winter-sown crops;
- rapid technological advances including new biotechnology and the introduction of new crop varieties.

It is largely as a result of these changes that the current crisis in the countryside has come about. To illustrate how this has happened, let's look at the problem areas identified earlier:

### **Species and habitat decline**

Whereas traditional, low-intensity, farming methods helped to create a rich tapestry of cultivated fields, fallows, hedgerows, wood pastures, permanent pastures and orchards, which supported a wealth of wildlife, intensification has given rise to a much more uniform landscape. Many of these important habitats have been lost or have suffered reduction, degradation or fragmentation, threatening the very wildlife that has become dependent on them.

### **Pollution**

Agricultural chemicals contribute to farm productivity, but also pose risks to human health and the environment.

Fertilisers, manure and soil can be washed off the land into rivers and the sea, upsetting the natural balance of these ecosystems and reducing the variety of life within them. Over half of Europe's rivers are heavily polluted. Pesticides not only kill 'pest' species, including wildflowers, which are an important part of farmland biodiversity, but they also pose risks to other wildlife, as well as to humans via drinking water and the food we eat. Some 500 pesticides are licensed for use in the UK alone.

Furthermore, intensive livestock farming and the use/production of inorganic fertilisers are key sources of methane and nitrous oxide gases, which contribute to climate change. In the EU, agriculture is estimated to be responsible for nine per cent of total greenhouse gas emissions. It is a major source of CH<sub>4</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>O, with latest estimates showing that it accounts for 48 per cent of CH<sub>4</sub> emissions and 52 per cent of N<sub>2</sub>O emissions in the EU.

### **The rural economy**

Over-emphasis on intensive agricultural systems has contributed to changing the shape of the wider rural economy.

As agricultural productivity has increased with improved technology, production has tended to be concentrated increasingly in areas where intensive farming produces the greatest returns. Elsewhere, production becomes unprofitable, which threatens to lead to farmers abandoning their farms and seeking employment elsewhere. This not only contributes to rural unemployment, but can also be detrimental to wildlife as many areas depend on low intensity farming to maintain species-rich habitats.

### **THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY (CAP)**

One of the major driving forces behind the intensification of farming in Europe over the last 50 years has been the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

The CAP is an EU policy that provides financial support and incentives to farmers and, under recent reforms, the wider rural community. Introduced in the early 1960s, its objectives were to:

- increase agricultural productivity;
- assure the availability of supplies;
- ensure a fair standard of living for the agricultural community;
- stabilise markets;
- ensure that supplies reached consumers at reasonable prices.

Under the CAP, subsidies have been used to encourage farmers to make fundamental changes to the ways in which their food is produced. Initially, the levels of subsidies paid to farmers were determined by production - the more a farmer produced, the higher the subsidies he would receive. More recently, there has been a shift away from this approach towards payments based on numbers of animals and area of land - the larger the area under cultivation or the more head of livestock on a farm, the higher the subsidies the farmer receives, though the total quantities supported by the EU are limited by quotas.

Both of these subsidy systems tend to provide farmers with an incentive to maximise production through intensive agricultural practices, with negative implications for the environment. Where high production levels are rewarded, farmers will, understandably, use any means at their disposal to raise their outputs.

### **WWF'S VISION FOR A LIVING COUNTRYSIDE**

WWF believes that rural communities can produce healthy food, whilst safeguarding Europe's natural resources, biodiversity and landscapes. The farming of the future should use a minimum of agricultural chemicals, and land use planning should support extensive farming systems that include hedgerows and woodlands (with a minimum specified woodland cover), extensive livestock raising and mixed cultivation. Agriculture can help to maintain landscapes, manage

valuable semi-natural habitats, preserve locally adapted genetic diversity and is an integral element of rural culture.

Farmers and rural communities have an important role to play in managing natural resources and maintaining natural habitats and landscapes. WWF believes that they should be given support for the social and environmental goods and services that they provide, for example, flood water storage.

## **WWF'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy**

Because the Common Agricultural Policy plays a key role in supporting environmentally damaging farming practices, WWF is calling for a fundamental reform by 2004. In particular, WWF would like to see the following measures:

- The progressive and permanent transfer of CAP funds from subsidies that support agriculture production to support for sustainable development
- Reform of the Rural Development Regulation so that it rewards nature conservation, pays for landscape maintenance, creates new farm income outside of agriculture and new non-agricultural jobs in rural economies
- The Removal of subsidies, such as those for olives and maize, that are encouraging environmentally damaging intensification
- The application of environmental conditions to all subsidies

As well as benefiting farm families and the wider rural economy, these measures will also contribute to the recovery of our countryside. For example, they will help:

- **restore habitats and species populations** by encouraging farmers and landowners to manage their land for wildlife;
- **restore forests** by providing incentives for woodland planting and management;
- **reduce habitat fragmentation** by establishing habitat corridors that link major areas of wildlife habitat;
- **reduce pollution** in our rivers and estuaries by reducing the amount of nitrates, phosphates and pesticides that leach into our waterways, largely from agriculture;
- **restore rivers and wetlands**;
- **restore coastal habitats** such as mudflats and saltmarsh that act as a natural buffer to the sea.

Furthermore, by implementing these measures, many of the problems associated with intensive agriculture will be addressed, helping Member States meet their commitments under national and international laws, including the Nitrates Directive, the Water Framework Directive and the Habitats Directive.

For more information on WWF's work on CAP reform see [Cap reform: consultation on the mid-term review of agenda 2000](#)