

Science for Environment Policy

'Bridging' organisations increase farmer commitment to Common Agricultural Policy

'Network bridging organisations', such as farmer unions, Regional Nature Parks and Local Action Groups, promote cooperation between farmers, non-state collective actors and state actors under the Common Agricultural Policy. This study finds that farmers who have regular contact with these organisations show a higher commitment to long-term practice change. This could represent an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of payments for environmental services in Europe.

The intensification of agriculture in Western Europe, including mechanisation and vast [chemical](#) inputs, led to a dramatic increase in agricultural output alongside negative consequences for the environment.

In response to this, policymakers have developed and revised a large body of regulations. An important feature of many is 'payments for ecosystem services': financial incentives offered to farmers in exchange for managing their land to provide environmental services. Under the EU [Common Agricultural Policy](#) (CAP), farmers receive compensation for implementing environmental farming services. As the main tool for EU agri-environmental policy, a number of studies have investigated the scheme's environmental impact, but its effect on broader agricultural practice remains poorly understood.

To investigate this, this study interviewed farmers in the Walloon Region of Belgium taking part in a five-year (2007–2013) agri-environmental [scheme](#). The authors were particularly interested in the role of 'network bridging organisations'.

The provision of environmental services in the agricultural landscape involves farmers, government actors, consumers and several other state and non-state stakeholders. Bridging organisations, such as environmental management organisations, research organisations, producer-consumer networks and farmer unions, help to share knowledge in these multi-stakeholder networks.

To assess their contribution to agri-environment policy, the authors conducted 34 in-depth field interviews and a survey of 153 farmers. Interviews explored farmers' decisions to implement agri-environmental measures (such as planting winter catch crops, protecting endangered breeds and maintaining grasslands of high biological value), while a quantitative survey was used to further assess their contact with network organisations.

The results of the field interviews showed a positive role for networking bridging organisations in breeding commitment to environmentally friendly practices. The quantitative survey mirrored these findings. The researchers assessed 10 different categories of organisations with whom farmers are in contact. Only environmental management organisations (such as regional nature parks) and research collaborations with an environmental focus showed a significant link to changes in environmental practices and adoption of demanding measures under the agri-environmental scheme.

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1.Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 on the financing, management and monitoring of the Common Agricultural Policy. See: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32013R1306>

The researchers say that when farmers become involved with social learning processes and the co-production of knowledge, they adhere more to environmental requirements. This holds true for farmers with both high and low levels of concern for biodiversity. Social learning appears to be particularly effective when farmers make regular contact with network bridging organisations. The authors say other factors, such as technical training under the [Rural Development Programmes](#) (RDPs), are less likely to increase adherence to environmental practices as they are not entirely focused on environmental issues. For example, training under the RDP includes modernisation of farms.

The survey showed that organisations strongly involved with 'social learning of environmental issues', such as nature parks, had the greatest impact on practice changes. The researchers say direct government control, without arrangements for social learning and multi-stakeholder cooperation, limits the effectiveness of the CAP compensation scheme. This is partly because follow-up by government is limited. Even farmers who implement the most demanding measures receive little advice, usually just three visits over a five-year contract. Farmers who have regular contact with network bridging organisations show a higher commitment to the scheme.

This has important implications for policy. The authors say agri-environmental payments should be integrated with support for social learning and the co-creation of knowledge via network bridging organisations. There are a wide range of tools that can incorporate social learning on environmental issues and therefore increase the efficiency of agri-environmental schemes. Examples include linking payment schemes with existing tools for social learning, such as the CAP Leader programme of [Local Action Groups](#) (public and private representatives from rural areas who receive financial assistance to implement local development strategies) or more general measures for knowledge transfer and advisory services under the RDPs. Support for network bridging organisations could also be mobilised under existing EU regulation¹ concerning direct payments under CAP, which may increase the effectiveness of the payment scheme.

