

Science for Environment Policy

From the ground up: local knowledge informing agri-environmental policy

Agricultural land use presents a number of environmental challenges, which the European Commission is committed to addressing through a range of agri-environmental policies. A new study points to the importance of aligning agri-environmental policies with farmers' needs and operations. Using the case of land clearing in Finland, the research underlines the importance of incorporating input from grassroots stakeholders into policy design.

When determining a new policy, it is in the interests of the sector responsible to ensure that the proposed policy – and its instruments and implementation – do not conflict with existing policies or regulations. Research has shown that, in Finland, local stakeholders' knowledge is not typically taken into account in the development of agri-environmental policies. Consequently, [farmers](#) feel that many agri-environmental measures are incoherent with their goals and practices. Drawing on this, a study has examined how [policy design](#) could be improved by taking into account the practices and standpoints of the actors who will be impacted by the policy.

Empirical data was gathered over the course of the study via semi-structured, thematic interviews with 10 farmers and 11 agricultural and environmental officials. Two workshops – one on land clearing and manure management, the other on land clearing and long-term grass – facilitated group dialogue.

Discussions centred around the practice of clearing peatland (made of organic soils) to make new arable fields. This has emerged as a significant environmental concern in Finland, as cultivation on organic soils accounts for approximately 50% of all [greenhouse gas \(GHG\) emissions](#) originating from the country's agriculture (including cultivation related emissions from [land use](#) change and the agricultural sector, and energy used in agriculture). In a move to discourage land clearing and thereby mitigate GHG emissions, Finland has introduced a system that does not provide subsidies for agricultural production on land cleared after 2004.

The interviews revealed that, although policies are in place to make land clearing commercially unfavourable, the practice remains a viable option for Finnish farmers. This can be attributed to two factors: firstly, governmental pressure to increase production in light of a growing global population; and secondly, rising land prices – which, for many, renders the acquisition of new arable fields unfeasible.

Furthermore, top-down policies do not always take into account local or socio-cultural factors, such as the prestige associated with landowning, or how the weather and its unpredictability can affect crop yields and farming practices. Farmers expressed frustration that one-size-fits-all regulations, such as those relating to fertilisation, can be counter-productive, as they do not take into account the agricultural properties of specific areas of land. The researchers say farmers can face problems caused by inflexible restrictions on the timing and use of manure and other fertilisers, irrespective of soil quality, field output, and weather. This affects the growth and output of crops, and in poor weather, nutrients may be leached from the soil. Land clearing is also indirectly affected by fertilisation regulations, and by land area requirements for cattle production and manure spreading.

The research highlights how the input of local actors can help identify difficulties linked to existing policy, but also how such challenges can be addressed. For example, farmers were less concerned about GHG emissions from agriculture than policymakers. For better functioning policies related to climate change, the study recommends that policymakers make efforts to ensure that new policies are aligned with the needs, goals and motivations of farmers.

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Contact:
suvi.huttunen@ymparisto.fi

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The author says policymakers should clarify to farmers what their policies set out to achieve from the outset and give more freedom for farmers to design the ways they could best meet the targets. Farmers could then be empowered to adjust their behaviours and practices, in line with their knowledge of the local environment. Experimentation involving farmers, advisory services and scientists could provide fruitful means for the development of local best practices.

