Integrating Environmental Concerns into EU Agricultural Policy

Environmental efforts pursued through the Common Agriculture Policy need to be better targeted geographically to maximise their effectiveness, according to a new report from the European Environment Agency.

Agriculture has strong impacts on the environment in the European Union, and therefore, the integration of environmental objectives into agricultural policy is a priority. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a key driving force for the agricultural sector, and one of the most important and expensive European policies. This policy provides a major opportunity for improving environmental management in the agriculture sector as farming income depends considerably on CAP support.

A recent report published by the European Environment Agency assessed the progress, achievements and obstacles in the integration of environmental concerns into EU agriculture policy, based on indicators developed within the IRENA project. This project assesses the link between agriculture and environment in the EU-15 on the basis of 35 agri-environment indicators. The current report also tackles limitations to successful policy implementation at member state level and the challenges ahead.

While the report notes considerable progress in terms of integrating environmental protection into the objectives of agriculture policy, it underlines the impact that farming continues to have, particularly on soil and water resources. The main findings of the report are:

- Due to decreased livestock numbers (especially cattle) and mineral fertiliser consumption, greenhouse gases and ammonia emissions into the atmosphere from agriculture have declined by about 9 per cent since 1990. However, the agricultural sector still emits about 94% of total ammonia emissions in the EU-15 and a continuation of current trends will not be enough to meet 2010 ammonia emission reduction targets.

- Soil erosion remains a significant concern in the EU-15 and appears to be concentrated in the Mediterranean region.

- The irrigable area within the EU-12 increased by 12 per cent from 1990 to 2000, mostly in Mediterranean countries where irrigation accounted for about 50 per cent of water use. The figure drops to approximately 7 per cent in Northern Europe.

- The majority of farmland birds suffered a strong decline from 1980 to 2002. This decline levelled off in the 1990s but species diversity remains at a low level in intensively farmed areas.

The CAP’s agri-environment spending could provide more environmental benefits if it were targeted at areas of key importance for biodiversity, such as the Natura 2000 network of protected areas across Europe.

The report stresses that current data and indicators are insufficient to properly assess the environmental effects of the CAP, significant investment is therefore needed for data collection on key environmental issues, farm trends and the spatial distribution of policy measures.

Overall, the report highlights that despite the numerous improvements in integrating environmental concerns into agricultural policy, more efforts are still needed.


Theme(s): Agriculture, sustainable development and policy analysis

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